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Deconstructing Civil Society *Actors* and *Functions*: On the Limitations of International Frameworks for Fragile States

Simone Datzberger * and Tam Nguyen

Department of Human Geography, Planning and International Development, Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam 1018 WV, The Netherlands;
tam.nguyen@student.uva.nl

* Correspondence: s.datzberger@uva.nl

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Abstract: Over the past three decades, there has been a steady increase of funds by the international community to support civil society organizations (CSOs) in fragile states. Surprisingly, this growing attention has not strengthened local civil society landscapes in a way that it would lead to processes of social transformation. On the contrary, civic freedom and space is shrinking around the globe. In analyzing prominent international aid-effectiveness frameworks and donor strategies towards civil society, this paper will put forward one central argument. The way in which civil society *actors* and *functions* are currently appropriated threatens deep-rooted social transformation thereby impeding processes of structural and political change—necessary for the transition from conflict to sustainable peace. In delineating, how actors and functional approaches informed peacebuilding and development policy and practice, their strengths and limitations will be examined. Doing so, we draw on different case studies and examples from the literature. We find that existing frameworks for fragile states operate on a presumed model of a public sphere and civil society that may or may not exist. Such an approach disregards an organic formation of a civil society landscape thereby impeding processes of structural, social, and political change in times of fragility.

Keywords: civil society; aid effectiveness; development; fragile states; international frameworks; actors- and functional-approaches

1. Introduction

Civil society in conflict, post-conflict, peacebuilding, and development environments faces a serious crisis. After almost three decades of collaborating with, strengthening of, and increased funding for civil society *actors* and *functions* in fragile states¹, results on the ground are stagnant. According to a recent report by Freedom House ([Freedom in the World 2017](#)), 2016 marked the eleventh consecutive year in which declines in political rights and civil liberties outnumbered improvements. Sub-Saharan Africa serves as a case in point, with 41% (20 countries) ranked as “not free”, 41% (20 countries)

¹ The concept of ‘fragile state’ is a highly contested term and not firmly defined academically or across development agencies. Clearly, labelling a specific country as fragile could reflect a political bias. While there is no commonly accepted global list of fragile states, there is at least a consensus on some clear-cut circumstances. By making use of the OECD’s definition, a fragile region or state will be understood as weak in capacity to carry out basic governance functions and therefore lacking the ability to develop mutually constructive relations with society. A fragile state is vulnerable to internal and external shocks such as economic crises or natural disasters. By contrast, more resilient states exhibit the capacity and legitimacy of governing a population and its territory. They can manage and adapt to changing social needs and expectations, shifts in elite and other political agreements, and growing institutional complexity. Fragility and resilience should be seen as shifting points along a spectrum ([OECD 2011a](#)).

“partly free”, and only 18% (9 countries) “free”. Similarly, the Middle East, North Africa, Eurasia, and Asia-Pacific suffer from civil conflicts and repressive rulers. Many of the “not free” countries endure multiple forms of fragility. According to the Fragility States Index (FFP 2017), sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East host the highest concentration of countries in the “high alert” and “very high alert” state. In addition the World Alliance for Citizen Participation (CIVICUS) refers to a global crisis on freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly that leaves only three percent of the world’s population with fully open civic space (CIVICUS 2017).

Causal explanations and reasons for such phenomenon are as manifold as the complex and context-specific socio-economic, political, cultural, historical, and everyday realities on the ground. Factors such as undemocratic governance, effects and causes of terrorism, a return to cruder autocratic methods, or global and national structural barriers hamper civil agency and voice. However, apart from external and internal structural and/or political barriers, questions about the ability and characteristics of civil society actors themselves to meet their long-term goals of social justice and transformation can no longer be left aside (Banks et al. 2015; Choudry and Kapoor 2013). Instead of empowering individuals and enhancing pro-active participation stemming from below, it is repeatedly argued that rising civil society landscapes² and their respective CSOs (Civil Society Organizations)³ are habitually driven by and dependent on externally funded agendas and policies (AbouAssi 2012; Griffin and Judge 2010; Hearn 2007; Howell and Pearce 2002). In the attempt to strengthen local civil societies and to ensure participatory and communal involvement and voice, ironically, CSOs became the safety net to deal with the casualties of economic liberalization and privatization, complementing services of international aid agencies or the state (Kaldor 2003; Kristoff and Panarelli 2010). Klein (2009) and Loewenstein (2015) further argue that present global economic and corporate structures greatly exacerbate human disaster, which renders the world’s most vulnerable into a valuable commodity and relentlessly attacks and raids their public sphere.

Strikingly, these developments arise at a time when the rhetoric of the “local turn” (Ginty and Richmond 2013) in peacebuilding and development frameworks has reached an unprecedented peak. International frameworks such as the *8 Principles for CSO Development Effectiveness* (2011), the OECD (2005), the OECD (2008), or more recently the *New Deal* (2013) began to acknowledge the vital role played by civil society actors and their functions in developing and fragile environments. In particular, the *New Deal* places a strong emphasis on a “country-led, country-owned” strategy out of fragility, in which civil society forms a major driver alongside government and private sector in setting and implementing the agenda. This trend was further accompanied with a steady increase of funds by the international donor community to support civil society actors since the end of the Cold War, amid the rising wave of neoliberalism worldwide. Local CSOs became to be seen as more efficient and cost-effective than the state in delivering social welfare (e.g., health services or education). Such investment in local CSOs not only fills the vacuum of service provision resulted from state retreat but also advances neoliberal policies of Northern governments abroad. Although there has been a partial shift back toward donor support for state provision, as acknowledged by Edwards and Hulme (1996), this change has not replaced the dominant view of CSOs as efficient service providers.

By 2011, one-fifth (20.5 per cent) of total bilateral ODA (Official Development Assistance) was channeled to or through CSOs (OECD 2013, p. 4). In short, over the past three decades

² In this context, we understand the term “civil society landscape” as the configuration of different civil society actors, dynamics, and functions as the result of specific forces (e.g., foreign funding and agenda setting, legacies of conflict and war, or economic and political conditions) that shape it.

³ The authors make no distinction between the terms NGO and CSO. This decision was made on the basis of “*A note on NGO-CSO terminology*”, published by the (OECD 2011b), which specifies that: Although DAC members have traditionally used the term NGO, more are now using the term CSO. (. . .) In reporting Official Development Assistance (ODA) provided to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), DAC members use the OECD statistical reporting directive definition of NGOs as ‘any non-profit entity . . . without significant government participation or representation.’ This definition is narrower than the now more commonly used term civil society organization (CSO), which includes non-governmental organizations among a variety of other organizations.

civil society actors have become bigger, are more numerous, sophisticated, and receive the largest slice of foreign aid and other forms of development assistance than ever before (Banks et al. 2015; Edwards and Hulme 1996). Puzzlingly, this growing support did not necessarily translate into social transformation stemming from the wider civil sphere in fragile or developing environments. Instead, we witness processes of instrumentalization (Howell and Pearce 2002; Kaldor 2003), depoliticization (Datzberger 2014; Datzberger 2015b) or technocratization (Choudry and Kapoor 2013; Goetschel and Hagmann 2009) of civil societies in their transition from conflict to development and peace.

While there are many avenues and entry points to examine this phenomenon (see for instance the work of: (AbouAssi 2012; De Weijer and Kilnes 2012; Griffin and Judge 2010; Howell and Pearce 2002; Verkoren and Leeuwen 2012), we still encounter a surprising shortage of literature critically reflecting upon how the most prominent international aid-effectiveness and development frameworks shape civil society landscapes in fragile states. In other words, aid frameworks and consequently donors operate on a presumed model of a public sphere that may or may not exist in the context of a fragile state. What they tend to overlook, however, are the effects of what Klein (2009, p. 6) prominently termed as “orchestrated raids on the public sphere” in an event of emergency. By addressing these issues and gap in the literature, the paper will put forward one central argument: *How civil society actors and functions are currently appropriated in those frameworks threatens deep-rooted social transformation stemming from the civil sphere thereby impeding processes of structural and political change.*

Put differently, in targeting which kind of *functions* specific civil society *actors* are to undertake international frameworks encourage the creation of a specific civil society landscape. As a result, civil society has emerged as an output (= an actor to be strengthened) thereby serving a particular outcome (= function e.g., democratization, mainstreaming gender equality and human rights or sustainable development). The implications of this approach for local civil societies are seldom subject for debate. After a short outline as to how international aid-effectiveness frameworks presently engage with civil society landscapes in fragile states, this paper elaborates on two simple yet essential questions. First, which actors is it exactly who ought to be strengthened, (re-)built, or (re-)constructed based on a mainly Western and liberal notion of civil society? Secondly, what functions, activities, and tasks are these actors usually expected (and funded) to carry out and perform? The concluding discussion reflects upon potential alternatives in the attempt to revisit how externally introduced frameworks increasingly impact and shape the formation of local civil society landscapes in fragile states.

2. International Frameworks to Support Civil Society in Fragile States

There is widespread consensus among the peacebuilding and development (policy and research) community that civil society is an important key actor in the transition from state fragility to prosperity and peace (Berkeley Center 2011; Goodhand 2006; Paffenholz 2010; UNDP 2012; Van Leeuwen 2009). As highlighted in Figure 1, the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) reports in December 2015 that US\$ 19.6 billion of ODA was allocated to and through CSOs by OECD-DAC (Development Assistance Committee) members in the year of 2013,⁴ compared to US\$ 18.1 billion in 2009. In addition, DfID (the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development) reports that it spent at least £ 694 million through CSOs in the period of 2011–2012, out of which a total of £ 154 million went to sub-Saharan Africa alone (Independent Commission for Aid Impact 2013). A review by DfID in 2016 (DfID 2016) shows a continuing trend for increasing funds to CSOs in both

⁴ Seventy-seven percent of the amount was provided by the United States (USD 6.3 billion), United Kingdom (USD 2.1 billion), EU Institutions (USD 2 billion), Netherlands (USD 1.3 billion), and Sweden, Germany and Norway (all around USD 1 billion) (OECD 2015).

the UK Aid Match and UK Aid Direct windows.⁵ Similarly, CSOs were involved in 82 percent of the 1018 new World Bank funded projects and programs in the period of 2010–2012 (World Bank 2013).

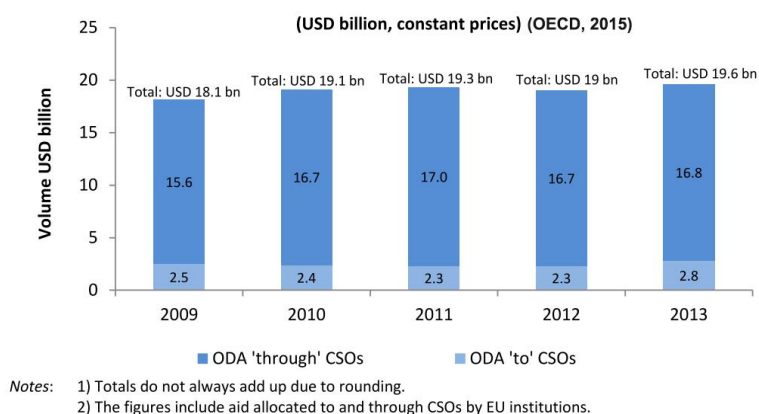


Figure 1. Volume of ODA channeled to and through CSOs by OECD-DAC members, 2009–2013 (USD billion) (OECD 2015).

These trends occurred at a time when the space for civil society in fragile states was widened significantly within donor policy and practice in the scope of the High Level Aid Effectiveness forum in Paris (2005) and subsequent meetings in Accra (2008) and Busan (2011). The first two outcome documents are known as the *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness* (OECD 2005) and the *AAA—Accra Agenda for Action* (OECD 2008). Currently there are 137 countries (incl. territories) and 28 International Organizations⁶ adhering to the *Paris Declaration* and *AAA*. In total, 14 INGOs (International Non-Governmental Organizations) or CSOs were present at the high-level forum in Paris. In the main, these instruments can be seen as guiding principles for the majority of donors and institutions in their peacebuilding and development assistance. Although both instruments stress the need to strengthen the engagement with CSOs, the OECD was not satisfied with this vague approach and further pushed the issue. In critiquing the *Paris Declaration*, as well as the *AAA*, for not fully recognizing the potential of the civil sphere in developmental processes, it responded to this void with an extensive volume entitled *Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness* (OECD 2009). In one of its recommendations, the OECD urges the multi-stakeholder community to ensure that CSOs are as effective as possible at what they do, both as development actors and as aid actors more specifically. To achieve a certain degree of effectiveness it emphasizes the need for “recognition and voice” in the view that CSOs are frequently not perceived as (OECD 2009, p. 13):

(. . .) development actors in their own right, with their own priorities, programs and partnership arrangements. It [the *Paris Declaration* & *AAA*] thus failed to take into account the rich diversity of players in a democratic society and failed to recognize the full range of roles played by CSOs as development actors and change agents.

⁵ According to this review, due to the confusion and duplication resulted from numerous funding streams under DfID for CSOs, these funding streams have been simplified and consolidated to four windows: UK Aid Match, UK Aid Direct, UK Aid Connect, and UK Aid Volunteers.

⁶ These include: African Development Bank, Asian Development Bank, Consultative Group to Assist the Poorest, Economic Commission for Africa, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, GAVI Alliance, International Fund for Agricultural Development, International Organization of the Francophonie, Millennium Campaign, Nordic Development Fund, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, OPEC Fund for International Development, United Nations Development Group, Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa, Commonwealth Secretariat, Council of Europe Development Bank, Education for All Fast Track Initiative, European Investment Bank, Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, Inter-American Development Bank, International Monetary Fund, Islamic Development Bank, New Partnership for Africa’s Development, Organization of American States, Organization of Eastern Caribbean States, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, World Bank.

The OECD report was successful to some extent. Since the last HLF-4 (Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness) in Busan, which took place from 29 November–1 December 2011 in Korea, CSOs are for the first time officially recognized as full and equal participants next to traditional donors, governments or South-South co-operations, or private actors. In particular, paragraph 16 of the *Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation* states (OECD 2011c, p. 4): “A growing range of actors—including middle-income countries, partners of South-South and triangular co-operation and civil society organizations—have joined others to forge a broader, more inclusive agenda since Paris and Accra, embracing their respective and different commitments alongside shared principles.” Besides, the acknowledgment of an increased role for CSOs was also heavily lobbied by civil society itself (De Weijer and Kilnes 2012, p. 4).

The HLF-4 in Busan officially created more potential space for civil society in the context of fragile states. In addition, a new partnership, the *New Deal*, was established by an inclusive coalition of fragile states, donor countries, and civil society (in total over 40 countries and organizations are part of the *New Deal*'s “International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding”). Despite already existing commitments through the OECD (2005) and the OECD (2008), the *New Deal* emerged out of the recognition that current ways of working in the specific context of fragile states need improvement. In 2011, at the time the *New Deal* was launched, one in four people in the world lived in countries affected by conflict, fragility and/or violence.⁷ More recent data from the OECD States of Fragility Report suggests that in 2016 about 1.6 billion people (22 percent of the world population) live in contexts ranging from fragile to extremely fragile (OECD 2016). According to the World Bank, estimates are even higher with about 2 billion people that live in countries affected by fragility and by 2030 even half of the world's poor (World Bank 2017). The initiative's own website describes the *New Deal* as “an innovative framework that identifies key peace- and statebuilding priorities and supports country owned and country led transitions from fragility and conflict to peace and development”.⁸ As for civil society, the *New Deal*'s key document recognizes that “an engaged public and civil society, which constructively monitors decision-making, is important to ensure accountability” (p. 2). It further stresses the need for capacity building of civil society and promotes a country-owned vision and plan in close consultation with civil society actors.⁹ Even though the *New Deal* acknowledges the importance of civil society actors in conflict and post-conflict states, it rather re-invents the wheel as opposed to offering a novel approach towards strengthening the civil sphere in fragile environments. Its specific focus on conflict-affected countries notwithstanding, it does not differ from earlier instruments for engagement with civil societies in peacebuilding and development processes, as promoted *inter alia* by the UN, the OECD, DfID, USAID¹⁰, or the World Bank. To give an example, point II (p. 2) of the key outcome document stipulates that there should be one national vision and one plan to transition out of fragility. “This vision and plan will be country-owned and -led, developed in consultation with civil society and based on inputs from the fragility assessment.”¹¹ Language promoting inclusiveness can also be found in much earlier frameworks such as the IMF's (International Monetary Fund) and World Bank's PRSPs (Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers) or in the strategic frameworks for peacebuilding of the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission. The implementation of the *New Deal* has also seen obstruction against civil society's participation and the meaning of inclusiveness open for interpretation by actors and politics on the ground (Donais and McCandless 2017).

⁷ See: The Washington Communiqué on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding, 19 April 2013, retrieved from <http://www.newdeal4peace.org>, last visit 11 December 2017.

⁸ See: www.newdeal4peace.org, last visit 11 December 2017.

⁹ The document can be downloaded at: <http://www.newdeal4peace.org/wp-content/themes/newdeal/docs/new-deal-for-engagement-in-fragile-states-en.pdf>, last visit 11 December 2017.

¹⁰ See Hearn, 2001 for USAID's engagement with CSOs in Uganda, South Africa, and Ghana.

¹¹ See: <http://www.newdeal4peace.org/wp-content/themes/newdeal/docs/new-deal-for-engagement-in-fragile-states-en.pdf>, last visit 11 December 2017.

3. Measuring Civil Society's Effectiveness in Peacebuilding and Development Processes

Taken as a whole, international frameworks engaging with civil society in fragile states are generally occupied with three main aspects: inclusiveness, capacity building, and effectiveness. While operating on a liberal paradigm as to how civil societies ought to be (re-)constructed and strengthened, all three aspects are also deeply intertwined. Inclusiveness (or as the OECD put it “recognition and voice”) depends largely on the capacity of civil society thereby impinging on the effectiveness of these actors on the ground. Peacebuilding and development practice of the past three decades has shown, however, that this is much easier said than done. Despite international aid-effectiveness frameworks, experts within and outside the development community are still frequently complaining about how inefficiently and inadequately donor money is eventually spent (e.g.,: [Easterly 2007](#); [Hanlon et al. 2010](#); [Moyo 2009](#); [Polman 2011](#)). The Busan HLF-4 talks partly addressed these criticisms and focused, in one of their numerous thematic issue sessions, exclusively on accountability and ownership. However, the devil often lies in the detail and in the particular case of the HLFs (from Paris to Accra and Busan) the detail is in the word “effectiveness”. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term effectiveness as “the degree to which something is successful in producing a desired result”.¹² The crunch question, though, is: what is a desired result and for whom? As for now, almost all Western donors, institutions or agencies measure effectiveness through key variables relating to outputs and outcomes which are expected to lead to a desired impact (again, mainly based on a liberal agenda). UNDEF (United Nations Democracy Fund), for instance, operates with a logical framework mapping the logical path from activities (= outputs) through intended objectives (= outcomes) to anticipated impacts (medium and long term). Their approach is similar to other UN funds (e.g., United Nation Peacebuilding Fund) and leading development assistance institutions or INGOs who collaborate with local CSOs. In the realm of civil society in fragile states, the outputs (meaning project or program activities) can range from capacity building to various training sessions or in-country consultation events, among others. It is noteworthy that M&E frameworks already surfaced long before the Busan HLF-4. M&E was promoted since the early 1990s, as a new domain and toolkit to measure the effectiveness of donors, their implementation partners and beneficiaries' activities alike. According to the UNDP *Handbook for Planning, Monitoring and Evaluating for Development Results* ([UNDP 2009](#), p. 181):

Each monitoring and evaluation activity has a purpose. UNDP places great importance on monitoring and evaluation because, when done and used correctly, they strengthen the basis for **managing for results**, foster **learning** and **knowledge generation** in the organization as well as the broader development and evaluation community, and support the public **accountability** of UNDP. (Emphasis in original).

In this light, civil society in fragile states has turned into a project, to be subjected to the log-frame with precise timeframe and budget, and its “effectiveness” succinctly measured based on predetermined outputs, outcomes, and impacts. After the HLF-3 in Accra, an *Open Forum for CSO Development Effectiveness* was set up in September 2010 with the intention to create a shared framework of principles that defines effective CSO development practice and elaborates the minimum standards for an enabling environment for CSOs, while at the same time promoting civil society's essential role in the international development system ([OECD 2011c](#), p. 2). The final version, officially known as *The 8 Principles for CSO Development Effectiveness*, provides the foundation for the *International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness*, which was endorsed in June 2011 at the 2nd Global Assembly of the Open Forum in Siem Reap, Cambodia. The *8 Principles* are the result of an extensive worldwide consultation process with thousands of civil society organizations (national, regional, and

¹² See: <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/effectiveness>, last visit 11 December 2017.

thematic consultations), undertaken by civil society itself.¹³ According to the *Istanbul Principles for CSO development effectiveness* (2010), CSOs are effective in their functions as development actors when they:

- a. Respect and promote human rights and social justice
- b. Embody gender equality and equity while promoting women's and girls' rights
- c. Focus on people's empowerment, democratic ownership, and participation
- d. Promote environmental sustainability
- e. Practice transparency and accountability
- f. Pursue equitable partnerships and solidarity
- g. Create and share knowledge and commit to mutual learning
- h. Commit to realizing positive sustainable change

The *Istanbul Principles* as well as the OECD (2009, p. 16) further hold that the effectiveness of civil society depends largely on the enabling environment and policies.¹⁴ For the OECD, particular elements worthy of attention include: the regulatory and legislative environment, the openness of government and donors to engaging with CSOs, the transparency and accountability with which information is shared, and the CSO community's own collective mechanisms for self-monitoring, accountability, and collaboration (ibid., p. 16).

Reflecting on the above listed civil society functions, we observe that the *Istanbul Principles* as well as the OECD plainly operate on a Western and liberal notion of civil society¹⁵, thereby disregarding the multiple cultural and social particularisms of non-Western states. In other words, external funding and support mainly targets formally registered civil society organizations as opposed to non-formal or home-grown actors from the civil sphere. This, according to Pant (2017), is an incentive for many grassroots organizations to become gradually professionalized to meet donors' expectations as opposed to advocating for social and political change.

The authors cast no doubt that M&E frameworks or principles to measure and define the effectiveness of civil society enhance the transparency of interventions to re-build or strengthen the civil sphere, as well as the accountability of donors and the civil society actors that they fund. What is probably even more important for researchers, analysts, donors, and grantees alike, they also enhance institutional memory and generate new knowledge about peacebuilding and development processes as well as the role of civil society therein. Greater transparency and accountability in the form of M&E frameworks or principles of effectiveness comes at a price, however.

First, in the case of peacebuilding and development assistance the costs are amplified technocracy and bureaucracy. To give an example, field research and interviews with 41 local CSOs in Sierra Leone (conducted in 2011 and in 2012) revealed that local civil society actors felt repeatedly challenged by external bureaucratic structures, log-frames and administrative procedures during collaborations with aid agencies, governments, or INGOs (Datzberger 2014). The majority of interviewees listed the following aspects: too rigid funding criteria, too high expectations of donors, unrealistic timeframes, difficulties in adapting external management systems (e.g., format of project proposals or other documents), or lack of ownership (ibid., pp. 167–207).

Besides, at the EU Partnership Forum in 2017, the representative from Central Republic of Africa voiced the concern about rigid requirements by donors (e.g., CSOs have to present Bank Guarantee if they want to access funding for civil society, and none of the local CSOs could meet these conditions)

¹³ For more detailed information access the Open Forum for CSO Development Effectiveness website: <http://cso-effectiveness.org/istanbul-principles>, 067, last visit 16 December 2017.

¹⁴ This point was also made by (Paffenholz 2010).

¹⁵ As discussed by Datzberger (2015a) liberal, or western conceptualizations commonly embrace civil society as independent from the state, political, private, and economic spheres but in close interaction with them, as well as a domain of social life in which public opinion can be formed.

and tools that are available but not accessible (CSPPS 2017). What makes matters even more challenging is that in most cases M&E frameworks differ from donor to donor.

Secondly, measuring the effectiveness of CSOs through M&E and other frameworks with measurable, quantifiable, immediate outputs, and specific, pre-determined outcomes (and timeframes) inevitably leads to the promotion of a specific landscape of and for civil society with little leeway for a more organic, socio-historic, and culturally embedded progression stemming from the society as a whole. To ensure their very own survival and continued existence, local CSOs are tied to specific outcomes in order to obtain funding for future projects. The result of this is not only a great deal of pressure on aid-reliant CSOs towards a more strategic approach in their activities and areas of engagement in order to ensure their very survival, but also enticement for other civil society actors to adopt the same strategy in order to reap the benefits of aid (see for instance the cases of Nicaragua (Chahim and Prakash 2014), Palestine (Jad 2007), and Russia (Hemment 2004)). Frequently, this occurs at the cost of greater flexibility in their agenda setting, local political culture and daily procedures. Resistance from the civil sphere, nevertheless, exists, but it remains an exception rather than a force large enough for counteraction. For example, a human rights network in Nepal rejected such practices with a critical view—“At that time there was a big project on peace activism and we found that it was contradiction. Peace couldn’t be a project”, said its representative as the country was going through a period of political turmoil and violence in the mid-2000s (Shrestha and Adhikari 2011, p. 53).¹⁶ Viewed in this light, projectization and log-frames alter civil society landscapes and make peacebuilding—through civil society engagement—not only ineffective but also impossible. Such effect is especially profound in contexts where predictability is low and there is a wide array of competing interests.

Thirdly, the contradiction is revealed even further upon a closer look at the issue of accountability. M&E mechanisms are in place for the purpose of enhancing accountability, yet in reality aid-funded CSOs’ functional accountability to donors is high, while functional accountability to beneficiary communities and within the organization is low, and strategic accountability¹⁷ is weak on all fronts (Najam 1996, p. 351). The last observation refers to the overwhelming focus on short-term results than long-term impacts. In addition, many existing mechanisms aimed at holding local grantees accountable, with logical frameworks being a typical example, amount to accountancy rather than accountability (Edwards and Hulme 1996).

Consequently, civil society actors have become a means to an end, in that they are bound to fulfil certain functions and in auditable ways, in order to meet “effectiveness” benchmarks, be that service delivery, humanitarian assistance or democratization—rather than an end in itself. Even though one might argue that donors are not monolithic actors, principles and guidelines such as the *New Deal* are widely adopted across the international community, hence leaving not a large margin of differences in the way donors engage with civil society.¹⁸ Even when funds are channeled through Western CSOs, INGOs, and in-country diplomatic missions who then fund local civil society actors, the former

¹⁶ UK aid for civil society in Syria stands in great contrast to such statement: in 2014, amidst the critical condition of Syria, Syria Conflict Pool issued a call for proposals with a focus on “capacity support to Syrian civil society in order to amplify their voice, increase their impact and bring about the development of a diverse, vibrant, vocal and free civil society at local, regional and national level”. The bidding process consisted of two rounds of application and the proposed project should last for a maximum of 10 months, targeting primarily “more established Syrian civil society organizations” who would then (be expected to) partner with “a variety of smaller civil society organizations active inside Syria”.

¹⁷ Functional accountability pertains to being accountable for resources, resource use, and immediate impacts, while strategic accountability concerns the impacts on the actions of other organizations and the wider environment (Najam 1996). The latter is necessary for lasting social and political change (see (Ebrahim 2003) for a more elaborated discussion on NGO’s accountability deficit and other accountability frameworks).

¹⁸ For instance, see (Cornwall 2009): The Paris Agenda, in particular, raised significant concern among Sida staff—“Folkligt deltagande [popular participation] was about mobilization; now it is all aid effectiveness”, Sida desk officers lamented at the transition of Swedish aid away from its distinctive approach in the 1970s to conform to the Paris Agenda (p. 20). The conclusion at the end of the day was to follow current donor rhetoric and play along, instead of defying it and dealing directly with the messy realities of aid.

are expected to adhere to the same frameworks as they report to their back donors in the West. Against this background, the ensuing sections elaborate on the origins of actors- and function- oriented approaches in order to critically discuss the implications of their (mis-) appropriation perpetuated through international frameworks for fragile states.

4. Civil Society Actors and Functions in Peacebuilding and Development Practice and Research

In the following we discuss how civil society actors and their specific functions are currently (de-)constructed and (re-)configured, if not manufactured, in fragile states, and to what kind of unintended consequences this may lead. We begin with a short reflection on how actor-oriented and functional approaches emerged in sociology and then continue to elaborate on how these approaches influenced peacebuilding and development practice while highlighting their strengths and weaknesses.

4.1. An Actor-Oriented Perspective of Civil Society in Peacebuilding and Development Processes

The roots of an *actor-oriented* approach stretch back to Max Weber's characterization of social action examining smaller groups within society. The utilization of actor-oriented frameworks is applied in a diverse range of fields, including anthropology, sociology, psychology, literary criticism, political science, or international relations. In development research, proponents (Biggs and Matsuert 1999; Long 2001, 2004) of an actor-oriented approach perceive society as a product of human agency, human activity, and self-organizing processes. It is concerned principally with social action and how social action is generated, hindered, or constrained. There is a wide array as to how actor-oriented approaches are applied in social sciences, ranging from anthropological-ethnographic to economic input and output models to stakeholder analysis or behavioral research.

Within a civil society or sphere, actors can be individuals but also formal (such as CSOs, community-based or faith-based organizations) or informal collectives such as: clubs, secret societies, sodalities, associations, or communities—to give a few examples. In this regard, actor-oriented approaches can help us to determine the degree to which specific actors' life worlds, organizing practices, and cultural perceptions are relatively autonomous of or "colonized" by wider ideological, institutional, and power frames (Long 2001, p. 16). Methodologically, this requires an ethnographic understanding of their "everyday life" (De Certeau 1984) and the processes by which, according to Long (2004, p. 16), images, identities, and social practices are shared, contested, negotiated, and sometimes rejected by the various actors involved. Accordingly, social realities are individual and collective perceptions informed by processes of negotiation at several levels and stages in history and time. In addition, it is precisely here where actor-oriented approaches can become "battlefields of knowledge" (ibid., p. 15) in that contested understandings, interests, and values are pitched against each other.

On the Limitations of the Actor-Oriented Approach

In reflection of the above, it is worth asking: What happens when a public sphere is paralyzed through conflict, natural disasters, or severe poverty and infrastructure constraints (Klein 2009)? Do donors create a public sphere for civil society actors where they can challenge or contest donor actions which may either ease or fortify a state's fragility? And what constitute as "civil society" in the perception of donors who are themselves actors shaped by the specific social, cultural, and political locations where they come from? One of the main challenges for donors and, simultaneously, limitations of an actor-oriented approach is that it is of course impossible to capture and match the voices of all actors from the wider civil sphere. In a sense, all of us are civil society and the boundaries between the state, society, and the market are hazy and blurred. All the same, a classical Western liberal-individualist model of civil society is continuously challenged by the cultural and historical particularisms of states outside the Western world. Actor-centered approaches within international frameworks targeting civil societies in fragile and developing states seem to be frequently detached from a considerable body of (predominantly postcolonial) literature that questions the usefulness of a

Eurocentric deployment of civil society in non-Western environments (e.g.,: [Chabal and Daloz 1999](#); [Comaroff and Comaroff 1999](#); [Ferguson 2006](#); [Khilnani 2001](#); [Mamdani 1996](#)). Put simply, civil society as it evolved as an intellectual construct of the Western world, never really matched the realities of social and political life in non-Western environments.

Against this backdrop and in particular the non-existence of a universal approach to civil society, international frameworks yet undermine the idea of promoting and strengthening universal standards of an active and influential civil society landscape on the ground ([Biekart 2008](#)). Hardly any framework or agenda for measuring the effectiveness of civil society actors allows for a socio-historical analysis of how a country's history of state formation has shaped civil society actors, and how they contributed to or are affected by the root causes of a conflict. Only a few leading development institutions started to at least rhetorically acknowledge the different genetics and fabrics of civil society actors in their respective country studies (see, for instance, the World Bank's very useful study "The Civil Society Landscape in Sierra Leone", 2007). Strikingly, in their peacebuilding and development practice and implementation, it is still the formal Western type of civil society actor which gets the most attention. Besides, considering the multitude of actors involved, supporting civil society has become more and more complex due to the ever-increasing number and type of donors and civil society initiatives ([De Weijer and Kilnes 2012](#)). Bearing in mind the earlier-depicted assessment mechanisms and M&E instruments on the effectiveness of civil society as well as the growing pressure with regards to accountability, it is apparent why donors generally prefer to support or assess the voices of more organized and formalized versions of civil society actors. Loose, non-registered, or local and traditional forms of civil society are, in the main, the beneficiaries of the work done by those officially registered and M&E checked and audited CSOs. This clearly fosters the creation of an externally manufactured rather than a more organic formation of a civil society landscape—a condition which may breed the ground for new tensions if not civil unrest as certain groups are marginalized and the legitimacy of civil society actors are challenged.

Consequently, civil society as constructed by Western donors is faced with a myriad of problems and questions on legitimacy, cohesion, and inclusivity, as well as collective power necessary for social and political transformation in the context of fragility. For instance, the targeting of only professionalized civil society actors in Palestine in the 1990s led to significant friction between the foreign-funded NGOs and the traditional grassroots mobilization groups in the women's movement, as well as the erosion of legitimacy of civil society actors and depoliticization of the movement. This consequently contributes to the rise of the militancy of the Islamic Movement Hamas ([Jad 2007](#)). Not only giving way to future conflicts and instability, the practices of recognizing and supporting selectively certain types of civil society actors also create economic grievances and power differentials. In the case of Nicaragua, the civil society of the 1990s was remarkably stratified, with professionalized, non-membership-based CSOs holding almost exclusive access to resources, thus granting them dominant voices and decision-making power in national CSO networks, and enticing grassroots organizations to convert themselves into the former type in order to acquire a share in foreign aid ([Chahim and Prakash 2014](#)). This bears important implications for the aim of the *New Deal* to foster "one vision, one plan" that is owned and led by country towards peace and prosperity. Is it truly the vision and plan legitimately constituted by a diversity of voices, or only/mostly by the top resourceful CSOs who can present neat auditing and registration certificates, close to the donors, and well-versed in donors' agenda and language?

Against this backdrop, our argument is not that frameworks should refrain from an actor-centered approach. Rather, the ways in which actor-centered approaches are currently applied, or misused, are subject of critique. Following [Long \(2001, 2004\)](#), an actor-centered approach could be of tremendous value if the aim is to contextualize the characteristics and cultural particularism of a civil society, or more broadly civil sphere, in fragile and consequently also developing states. This further implies to also give voice and reach out to actors that are not part of formalized civil society settings including marginalized groups.

4.2. Civil Society from a Function-Oriented Perspective in Peacebuilding and Development Frameworks

Functional approaches find their origins in the thought and work of Comte, Spencer and Durkheim, as well as in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century anthropology, notably the writings of Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955) and Malinowski (1884–1942) (Swingewood 2000, pp. 137–60). It is Durkheim, however, who is generally cited as the founding father of sociological functionalism. Society is defined by Durkheim as a social fact, an organic whole which is at the same time also moral reality. In its function as a moral structure, society dominates the individual and consequently its various parts function in relation to the whole and not the individual (Swingewood 2000, p. 77). In studying social phenomena, Durkheim was in particular interested in two questions. Firstly, why do societies remain relatively stable? Secondly, how is or can we make social order possible? His way of tackling these issues was to analyze social processes and institutions in terms of their relevant functions for the needs of the system.

Influenced by Durkheim, subsequent writings of Talcott Parsons or his student and later colleague Robert K. Merton, led to an immense popularity of functionalist approaches among American sociologists in the 1940s and 1950s. Functionalism simply emerged as *the* sociological method. Its critics, such as Alvin Ward Gouldner or Charles Wright Mills, accuse sociological functionalism for being an expression of conservative ideology which fails to provide adequate analysis of social change and social conflict. A functionalist perspective, it is argued, disregards society as a historical and ever progressing process. Social structure, it is further critiqued, is assimilated to a static concept of social solidarity and social consensus. It is precisely this stagnant view of society which probably challenges ongoing discourses on the value of sociological functionalism the most.

On the Limitations of the Functional Approach

Civil society is not a static phenomenon but much more a constantly evolving and ever changing societal progression. Yet, it is exactly this aspect of a function-oriented approach which indirectly shaped and influenced policy-oriented research as well as various M&E frameworks, studies, and practices. As outlined earlier, to measure the effectiveness of civil society, its “functions” (outputs) are usually matched against a broader outcome. Pre-determined outcomes or impacts in M&E frameworks have to rely on fixed indicators and a more or less static perception, if the ultimate objective is to measure a project’s or program’s failure or success. To give an example, if the outcome is to enhance gender equality in fragile states, one can potentially measure this objective by means of indicators such as the number of workshops conducted, campaigns launched, or females in parliament, schools, or other institutions. Now the challenge for achieving a long-term impact lies in the extent to which these norms or standards are really engrained in all of the people’s minds and hearts (c.f.: Datzberger and Le Mat 2018). Instituting gender equality is a long-term goal (or impact) requiring societal progression that can turn in one direction or another at any time, caused by various scenarios or circumstances (e.g., sudden re-emergence of religious fundamentalism). Moreover, functionalist approaches are indisputably useful in determining current gaps or immediate as well as long-term needs, but they still fall short in examining how other aspects such as political will, political culture, cultural particularism, or any other internal and external influences can potentially affect long-term impacts and developments.

Although functional models facilitate needs-based assessments for short- and long-term needs, epistemologically, they cannot explain how and why moral values or norms, which supposedly hold society together, are created and by whom. Instead, it is the analytical aspect that is of value in the attempt to assess what kind of role specific civil society actors play in peacebuilding and development processes. As a result, however, current practices and frameworks rendered civil society actors into contractors to implement specific functions if not to monitor the implementation of projects and programs. In many instances local CSOs substitute for government agents in fragile states as a way to broaden participation in national development planning (c.f. De Weijer and Kilnes 2012; Griffin and Judge 2010). In addition, the majority of fragile states are marked by abject poverty

and underdevelopment. Not surprisingly a big chunk of aid money for the civil sphere flows into humanitarian assistance, poverty alleviation, sustainable development projects, or service delivery. Figure 2 illustrates, that the sector “social infrastructure and services” continued to be the main sector of intervention for ODA channeled through CSOs in 2011, followed by humanitarian assistance (OECD 2013, p. 11). The same patterned was observed in funding allocations in 2013, with “social infrastructure and services” not only being the leading sector of intervention for ODA channeled through CSOs, but also receiving a rise in the amount—from 51 percent (US\$ 8.7 billion) in 2011 to 57 per cent (US\$ 9.6 billion) of bilateral ODA in 2013 (OECD 2015, p. 10). More recently, the end of DfID’s Program Partnership Arrangements and introduction of UK aid’s new funding schemes have generated significant concerns, with civil society in fragile states being potentially the most impacted (Anders 2016). In the new funding schemes, UK aid will prioritize issues of nutrition, family planning, and ending modern slavery. Flexibility—arguably the most highly praised characteristic of the Program Partnership Arrangements which allows for risk-taking initiatives especially in fragile contexts—will also not anymore be a strong feature of the new funding schemes.

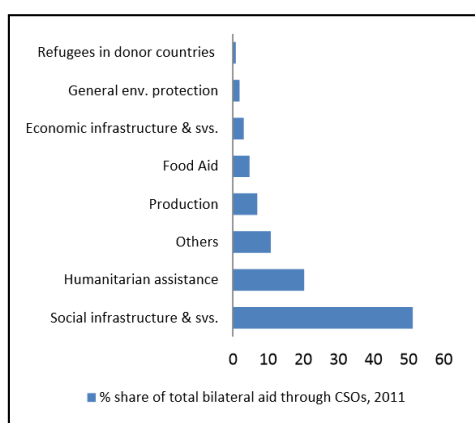


Figure 2. Sectors of bilateral ODA channeled through CSOs in 2011 by the OECD (OECD 2013).

One explanation can be found in the fact that donors are usually required to be neutral actors in their efforts to bring about peace and foster development. Funding allocations for political activities or confrontational movements (e.g., opposition to a corrupt government) clearly risk supporting potential peace and development spoilers. As a result, however, frameworks and their concomitant funding streams de-link a country’s civil sphere from influencing processes of social transformation, which is a “function” of any society too. Ironically, donors’ rhetoric still acknowledges, supports, and perceives civil society as *the* democratizing force necessary for prosperity and peace. To give a few examples, being one of the leading institutions advocating for the effectiveness of CSOs, the OECD (2009, p. 18) lists the following main functions of civil society actors in the development process of a (fragile) country: the creation of space for civil engagement through democratization, social mobilization, advocacy, public education, and research, service delivery, self-help, and innovation, humanitarian assistance; and the roles that they play as aid donors, channels, and recipients. Similarly, though a bit more elaborately, the World Bank (2013) highlights the following benefits (or functions) that civil society can bring to development efforts:¹⁹

- Give voice to stakeholders—particularly poor and marginalized populations—and help ensure that their views are factored into policy and program decisions.

¹⁹ The WB’s approaches towards civil society are summarized at: <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/CSO/0,,contentMDK:20093200~menuPK:220424~pagePK:220503~piPK:220476~theSitePK:228717,00.html>, last visit 12 December 2017.

- Promote public sector transparency and accountability as well as contributing to the enabling environment for good governance.
- Promote public consensus and local ownership for reforms, national poverty reduction, and development strategies by building common ground for understanding and encouraging public-private cooperation.
- Bring innovative ideas and solutions, as well as participatory approaches to solve local problems.
- Strengthen and leverage development programs by providing local knowledge, targeting assistance, and generating social capital at the community level.
- Provide professional expertise and increasing capacity for effective service delivery, especially in environments with weak public-sector capacity or in post-conflict contexts

The UNDP (2012) correspondingly identifies collaborating with civil society, at the global, regional, and local levels with regards to fighting poverty, building democratic societies, preventing crisis and enabling recovery, protecting the environment, halting and reversing HIV/AIDS, empowering women, fostering knowledge, innovation and capacity development.²⁰ Broadly speaking, all three organizations—OECD, World Bank, and UNDP—put emphasis on service delivery, social development, and poverty alleviation while simultaneously stressing political emancipation as well as strengthening the political influence and voice of the civil sphere. Yet, in practice, funding allocations transformed the civil sphere into a service provider as opposed to an actor whose function is to inform an environment which allows them to address the root-causes of structural violence or conflict, or debate and argue about possible solutions or alternatives. In short, a space in which agency and voice can be socially-engineered. The case of Uganda serves as a specific example. USAID had a strong focus on bringing Ugandan civil society actors to the table with the government on poverty reduction policies and implementation in the 2000s, prescribing them the function of “accountability” i.e., ensuring that these policies are implemented in an inclusive manner. This function ascribed to CSOs, however, was in fact expected by both international and national governments to be in the nature of legitimating and assisting the state, not to critique it. Meanwhile, segments that engaged in more political or confrontational issues, such as land rights, debts, and political systems, were perceived as a threat (Hearn 2001). The latter reflects both a tendency of donors to refrain from civil society initiatives with the potential of effecting political change, but also the difficulty to engage with or support such work within the challenging context of fragile states.

5. Concluding Discussion

As the first two sections on international aid effectiveness frameworks have shown, civil societies in fragile states have been gradually converted into an operational baseline for externally steered objectives and interventions. Undeniably, assessments of the outputs and outcomes of civil society do enhance the transparency of interventions, the accountability of the actors along the aid chain, and also generate new knowledge about peacebuilding and development processes and the role of civil society therein. On the downside, highly technocratic M&E mechanisms accompanied with foreign aid have become a de-personalized and de-contextualized set of indicators thereby pushing civil society actors towards a more strategic approach in their functions and areas of engagement. This has led to the instrumentalization of local civil spheres, if not to the creation of civil society landscapes not attuned to cultural particularisms or the socio-historical fabrics and political culture of the society in question. In this regard, international frameworks tend to overlook how multifaceted transitional societies are in their claims, needs and idea(l)s—especially in the context of fragility.

The paradox is especially striking since civil society is frequently recognized, at least on paper, as an independent (and necessary) political actor in the reconstruction process of a fragile and

²⁰ The UNDP’s approaches towards civil society are summarized at: http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/corporate/fast-facts/english/FF-Civil-Society_EN_2013.pdf, last visit 15 December 2017.

developing state. In the same vein, the international donor community as well as research repeatedly ascribes political functions to local civil society actors, such as: promoting democracy, fostering conflict resolution and political dialogue, enhancing participatory approaches, or promoting public consensus and local ownership for reforms. Yet in reality, funding allocations usually do not risk supporting local political activism and grassroots mobilization. Instead donors tend to provide most of their resources for service provision or humanitarian aid.²¹ Such an approach does not come as a surprise. Clearly, backing local political activities of any kind could potentially threaten the peacebuilding and development process of a fragile state. Likewise, donors ought to be neutral actors in their attempt to strengthen the civil sphere. The prospect of “positive peace” (Galtung 1964, 1969) in such dilemma remains in question, especially in the recent years when many African governments are also increasingly restraining CSOs and constricting civic space, rendering them a threat to “national interests” (Oxfam & CCP-AU 2016).

The answers to these problems, first of all, require alternative approaches towards strengthening civil society in fragile states. Despite several international and local frameworks and evaluations of civil society actors and their functions, we have limited knowledge about how the political culture of a civil society is de- and re-constructed in the transition from peacebuilding towards development and to what kind of long-term consequences (such as depoliticization or instrumentalization) this may lead to. Accordingly, we put forward the argument that if applied in a distinct way, both actor- and functional approaches may potentially lead to a more thorough and holistic understanding of the complex process in rebuilding and strengthening conflict-shattered civil societies. Such understanding will as well add significant substances to both the meaning and implementation of the *inclusivity* norm in the particular case of the *New Deal*. For instance, an actor-oriented approach allows opening up of the question of who it actually is that comprises civil society (formally and informally) in non-Western environments. This knowledge provides the basis for an analysis of the characteristics of civil society in fragile states, while simultaneously gaining insights from these actors as to whether and how a society widens the space for voices from below and the way in which agency is socially engineered. Functional approaches, on the other hand, can be applied to not only classify the various areas of engagement of civil society actors, but also to analyze how these activities have evolved over history and time. In fact, how history has shaped identities and societal configurations is critical to understand current social developments and how they affect state fragility. The combination of both approaches thus would have the potential to examine the characteristics and structures of local civil societies rather than prescribing them or externally creating them.²² Seen from this angle, a mixture of both constitutes a powerful methodological tool to assess and explain why and what kind of civil society actors lack agency and voice through the functions they carry out. All the same, they can also illuminate what kind of civil society landscape donors implicitly and explicitly strengthen and co-create.

Along those lines, it is also of utmost importance that aid practices with the aim to empower organic civil societies in fragile states take full consideration for and understanding of the conflict-prone nature and low predictability of the local contexts within which civil society actors operate and work towards rebuilding societies and peace. Efforts to empower them without sensitivity of the very nature of the environment they have to navigate may end up being rather disempowering and potentially resulting in a “manufactured” (Howell and Pearce 2002) civil society with insufficient local legitimacy and low effectiveness. To that end, a paradigm shift is required in which donors must view their intervention as a political act as it inherently is (c.f.: De Weijer and Kilnes 2012). Furthermore,

²¹ In these areas of service provision and humanitarian aid, donors also encounter a range of problems, though in a different nature, which has resulted in numerous arguments against foreign aid (e.g.,: Easterly 2007; Polman 2011). For example, Dambisa Moyo, author of the famous book *Dead Aid* (Moyo 2009), strongly advocates against foreign aid for it has not only not alleviated poverty but also created aid-dependency in African recipient countries.

²² Examples of good practices for identifying partners and ways of partnership can be found in INTRAC’s “UK Government support for civil society in 2015 and beyond” report (2015) and CIVICUS’s “Keeping up the pressure: Enhancing the sustainability of protest movements” report (2017).

donors working with fragile states also need to be reflective of the unintended consequences of their interventions on society in the longer term, rather than only the immediate delivery of certain purportedly desirable outcomes.

In the present days, a revisit to and rethink of actor-oriented and functional approaches is not only timely but also necessary amid the current worsening of civil liberties and political rights worldwide. The “shrinking (civil society) space” has been as much widely discussed as it has generated global concerns (Doane 2016; Hayes et al. 2017; Houghton 2016; Green 2017; Lentfer 2017; Sriskandarajah 2017; Oxfam & CCP-AU 2016). The response to this problem requires a critical and difficult look: for whom exactly is the space shrinking, how, and why? The tightening regulations around registration and operation are certainly creating multiple challenges and even closure for many formal CSOs, but how does it affect grassroots groups and social movements—from #FeesMustFall to #UmbrellaRevolution—that operate on a very different mode? It is also time to reconceptualize the functions of civil society space and actors. Are they merely delivery of development outcomes and “neutral”, apolitical, or are they the constant struggle to negotiate the balance of social and political power, a space for contestation and dissent and re-invigorating popular participation and solidarity?

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