

Civil Society Engagement and the Role of Volunteers

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Abstract

Recent decades have seen growing scholarly and policy interest in civil society organisations as entities which are separate from the state and the market and characterised by their voluntary nature and common concern with welfare provision. On one hand, the size and engagement of civil society organisations is regarded as a sign of a country’s ‘democratic health’. On the other, it is recognised that non-governmental organisations can play a key role in the provision of welfare services in a way that complements and extends the provision by the state. In this paper I provide a brief review of the concept of civil society and the various ways that scholars have understood it. I identify key elements that characterise civil society engagement – notably its reliance on volunteers; its grass-roots approach; concern with welfare, education and advocacy; its responsiveness and flexibility. I then examine the extent to which the use of *kader* in the Indonesian context can be understood as an example of civil society engagement, and what this means for their future potential in the support of older people and their informal carers.

[Link to YouTube Recording of the paper: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qqrKtJNuvY> Presentation starts at 3 hours 28 minutes.]

Overview

Recent decades have seen growing interest in civil society (CS) organisations as entities which are separate from the state and the market. It is recognised that non-governmental organisations can play a key role in the provision of services and support for older people in a way that complements and extends the provision by the state. In this paper I discuss the concept of civil society and relate it to volunteer initiatives in Indonesia. I identify key elements that characterise civil society engagement and the conditions giving rise to such engagement. I then examine the strengths and weaknesses of CS support, drawing on emerging insights from our research in Indonesia. I close by raising questions which I hope the symposium can contribute to.

What is Civil Society?

The term civil society is a ‘broad and fuzzy’ concept. It captures the space ‘between kinship and the state’. So it refers to activities and entities which are **not** family-based **nor** government-based, and **also not** market-based. (cf. Ochiai’s (2009) Care Diamonds)

Here is a definition by the World Bank of civil society.

Civil society refers to the “wide array of nongovernmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations. Civil

society organizations (CSOs) therefore refer to a wide array of organizations: community groups, NGOs, labor unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations.” (World Bank, no date)

What is covered

The quote captures well the diverse nature of CS organisations and activities.¹ They can include ...

- Religious organisations (e.g. Muhammadiyah)
- Scientific and professional associations (e.g. IPEGGERI)
- Think-tanks (e.g. SurveyMeter)
- Non-governmental organisations (e.g. Indonesia Ramah Lansia; YEU, HelpAge International)
- Trade unions
- Small-scale community / neighbourly assistance (e.g. provision of food)
- Social movements, civic activism, indigenous organisations

The following quote captures some of the key elements of CS:

“‘Civil society’ refers broadly to institutional activities, largely or entirely independent of the state, that provides information and enables open discussion of contemporary issues. Civil society often extends to the provision of services where state activities are insufficient. ... The state and civil society are [generally] mutually reinforcing, a flourishing and open civil society depending on a strong democratic state, and vice versa.” (Kreager, 2009: 361)

This definition emphasises civil society’s independence (or partial independence) from the state, but nonetheless important interaction with the state. The two key roles of CS are, first, the provision of welfare services and/or education; and second, advocacy, meaning the influencing of policies and public perceptions through the provision of information and debate.

Key characteristics:

- Independent of the state;
- Aimed at development of individual and collective rights and democratic institutions;
- Generating debate, discussion, evidence;
- Reliant on volunteers and fundraising.

Historical pointers

In Europe, CS started to emerge during the Enlightenment period of the 17th and 18th century. This was a time when the absolute authority of the state began to be questioned. An increasingly scientific understanding of the world prompted the realisation that human conditions are not predestined and immutable. Inequality, poverty, ill health – all these were aspects of human life which before had been taken for granted, but which over time came to be seen as subject to change and intervention (Keane, 2008; Kreager, 2009).

What contributed to the development of civil society was the emergence of an educated middle class which engaged in open discussion of politics, science, philosophy – for example via the newly-invented daily newspapers. Scientific understanding of how diseases spread

¹ Recent scholarship has argued against equating civil society purely with organised forms of non-state activity, arguing that much of what happens in the ‘space between the family and the state’ is spontaneous but no less effective. “the focus on organizations misses the crucial role played by people, by ordinary citizens, who form the heart and soul of civil society. In other words, an NGO can set up a fax machine and a website, but without members ... it has very little to do with civil society.” (Fioramonti and Kononykhina, 2015: 472)

developed at this time. It was often pressure from the educated public which contributed to the implementation of public health measures, such as separation of drinking- from wastewater.

Yet despite being at some distance from the state, civil society has always to some extent depended on the state. Where governments have been authoritarian, CS has not been able to flourish. Take the example of current developments in Russia, where public protest carries a 15-year prison sentence (cf. Harris, 2018). At key historical periods, CS in the form of activism and protest, has played a role in over-throwing undemocratic regimes. We can see that for example in the recent Arab Spring movements; in the overthrow of the New Order regime in Indonesia; or in the collapse of communism in Eastern and Central Europe in 1989.

Most of the time, however, CS organisations have been most successful and active where they have been encouraged by the state without being completely taken over by the state.

What stimulates the emergence of CS organisations?

- 1) Demographic pressure from population ageing: The needs of a rapidly ageing population cannot be met by the efforts of families or the state alone; requires input from community organisations like religious institutions or NGOs.
- 2) Democratic structures which allow the flourishing of independent organisations (which may be critical of the state); decentralisation of governance can be helpful?
- 3) Emergence of an educated middle class: CS activities depend on the availability of people with certain technical and administrative skills, interest in other people's welfare, and energy and time to devote to unpaid work (NB: In situations of widespread poverty, people cannot afford to engage in voluntary activities. At same time, if women's labour force participation goes up, the potential pool of volunteers can shrink. The gap can sometimes be met through involvement of retired people – will come back to this point.)
- 4) Information and information technology: to aid the spread of information; identify areas of need; mobilise and support volunteers; organisation actions. The key role of information technology became clear during the COVID pandemic.

Key strengths of CS organisations

In the next part of my presentation, I want to run through the key strengths of civil society involvement, particularly in the area of support and care for older people. I will be drawing on some of the emerging insights from our data on care networks in Indonesia.

- 1) Grassroots basis
- 2) Tailored and flexible approach
- 3) At a distance from the state
- 4) Challenging perceptions and empowering people

Local rootedness

A key advantage of CS organisations is that they have their roots in local communities, even if they are linked to regional, national or even international organisations. This entails several advantages:

- 1) The involvement of people from the community in the provision of services means that there is often a potentially large pool of volunteers, and efficiency because of lack of distance and therefore travel costs. For example, our interviews with one NGO revealed that the organisation was able to allocate a handful of older people from the

immediate neighbourhood to each volunteer, which made it easier for them to make visits and keep an eye on their situation.

- 2) Social and cultural acceptability: Because the services and activities are developed at a local level, they are often considered more acceptable by the beneficiaries. For example, older people often emphasised the approachability of *kader*, seeing them as ‘one of us’. This was in contrast with professional healthcare providers, which people often felt shy to approach.
- 3) Access to local knowledge: For the purpose of directing support at those who most need it, it’s important to understand who is vulnerable. This requires understanding of local socio-economic differences and markers of vulnerability. We found that grassroots organisations often collect their own data on the circumstances of households in their community. This then helped them with the targeting of support.

Flexibility and acceptability

A key advantage of CS organisations is that they can complement (rather than replicate) the provision of services by the state. So they can be more flexible than the state. As Wong and Jun (2006: 231) put it, “The importance of welfare NGOs lies in their contribution to pluralistic forms of welfare provision which strengthen active citizenship and develop social capital. They correct deficits of the state as well as failures of markets.”

For example, one of the organisations we interviewed explained how their priorities had changed with the changing demographic composition of their members. In the past they provided childcare; now they were developing day-care centres for older people.

Several of the religious-based organisations combined the provision of health services with religious activities (e.g. *pengajian*, teaching on the Quran), because this is what was important to the people they serve.

Distance from the state

The fact that civil society organisations operate – to differing degrees – at some distance from the state, gives them a level of autonomy. This means not only that they can tailor what they provide to the local conditions and needs. They are also able to translate or adapt programmes and messages from the state. In the literature, this is sometimes referred to as ‘brokerage’ (cf. Berenschot *et al.*, 2018; Jakimow, 2018). In our data this aspect of civil society engagement was manifested in the role of local healthcare volunteers (*kader*) as translators and facilitators. By this we mean that *kader*, even if they were working under a local health centre, often played a crucial role in explaining in accessible terms what, for example, the regulations about COVID were. If they knew that an older person did not have access to a mobile phone, they would visit the house to make sure they had access to the information. They also often acted as a bridge between families and health facilities, for example, by encouraging older people to seek medical advice, by accompanying people to the puskesmas or hospital, or by helping them with arranging the paperwork for BPJS or a subsidy. This bridging aspect helps people to make use of their citizen’s rights, because on their own they perhaps lack the confidence to access state support.

Challenging the status quo

The last point I want to make concerns CS organisations’ ability to challenge existing conditions and ways of thinking. This is part of the advocacy role of CS organisations. Because CS organisations often focus on a particular social issue and target population, they are in a unique position to give voice to that sub-group, to bring it to the attention of policy

makers or donors, and to challenge stereotypes about the target population (HelpAge International, 2020).

A repeated theme in our interviews was how leaders and volunteers recognised the potential of older people: that they did not wish to sit at home, that instead they still had skills to contribute, that they wanted to learn new things and play a role in their families and communities. CS organisations have thus been instrumental in beginning to challenge perceptions about later life as a period of decline and need. Many of the NGOs we encountered focus on empowering aspects like education for older people; sports and music activities, livelihood activities as well as spiritual activities. The extent to which they can be equally successful in serving older people who are frail and care dependent, remains an open question.

Vulnerabilities and weaknesses of CS organisations

I hope I have been able to show the many ways in which CS organisations, most of whom use volunteers to implement their activities, are suited to collaborate with families and the state in the provision of services in an ageing population.

I now briefly consider some of the challenges that CS organisations face, and some of the drawbacks of relying on non-state provision of services.

Reliance on volunteers

One of the key strengths of CS organisations is also their key weakness: their reliance on volunteers. Any CS organisation is only as strong as its membership base. Wherever there are challenges of recruiting and retaining volunteers to support the activities of the organisation, the support provided to older people will suffer (Gadsden *et al.*, 2021; Jagri and Yeboah, 2016). As women's labour force participation rises, this both increases the need for care provision by people other than family members, but it also reduces the pool of volunteers. Not surprisingly, many volunteers are *lansia* (older people) themselves.

For example, we found significant differences between our study communities in terms of how strong *kader* activities for older people were. Sometimes the presence of a charismatic and committed leader raises the profile of ageing issues and mobilises volunteers; from that, donations and collaboration with local government then follow. In other cases, other population groups were regarded as having greater needs (e.g. mothers and young children); dedicated support for older people was then weaker. [A problem that has been observed in the literature is that communities with low levels of social capital or communities in which most of the population is quite poor find it difficult to mobilise support from volunteers (Gough and Wood, 2004).]

An important challenge, especially for the topic of this symposium, is the fact that the provision of care for older people is very time-consuming. You easily can bring together lots of older people to conduct a health check-up or a sports session. However, older people who are bed-bound or house-bound cannot access these services, and they often need support on a daily basis (e.g., with washing, taking medicine, going to the toilet). The demands on volunteers' time are therefore huge when it comes to long-term care provision.

We have not encountered many examples of civil society organisations providing home care or day care for older people. We hope that this symposium will provide examples, and also address the question of how to motivate and incentivise volunteers.

Incompleteness of cover

Related to the previous point is the challenge that CS support is often implemented patchily. A key difference between state support and CS support is that the latter is a privilege, not a right or an entitlement. Having said that, CS organisations can play an important role in raising the profile of an issue like LTC, so that the government over time adopts it as an area of responsibility. This can be seen in Indonesia's recent adoption of the *Strategi Nasional Kelanjutusiaan* (National Strategy on Ageing).

Training and skills

Finally, the strong reliance of CS organisations on volunteers creates huge demands for training and capacity building. Volunteers need knowledge of the particular needs and health problems of older people, of how to interact with a person who has dementia or other cognitive and mental problems, of how to provide physical and psychological care. It is in this area that organisations like *Indonesia Ramah Lansia* have an important role, because they have particular skills and expertise in training older people, informal and formal carers.

Final questions

I will end my presentation by raising 3 questions which I hope we can begin to address together in this symposium and as part of the research on Care Networks in Indonesia.

- How can civil society engagement, and the use of local volunteers, become a sustainable component of long-term care provision in Indonesia? (Put differently, how can volunteers be mobilised, trained and retained to assist with the time consuming and challenging work of care provision?)
- How can the activities of the state, civil society and families in the area of long-term care be co-ordinated, so that the various efforts complement each other, fill gaps and meet the needs of older people?
- How can civil society organisations raise the profile of older people, their contributions and their needs, so that ageing issues become a local and national priority, and support for older people becomes a right, rather than a privilege?

I look forward to your thoughts on these questions and to a thought-provoking symposium!

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Civil Society Engagement and the Role of Volunteers

Online Symposium: The Role of Community-based Volunteers for Older People's Care in Indonesia

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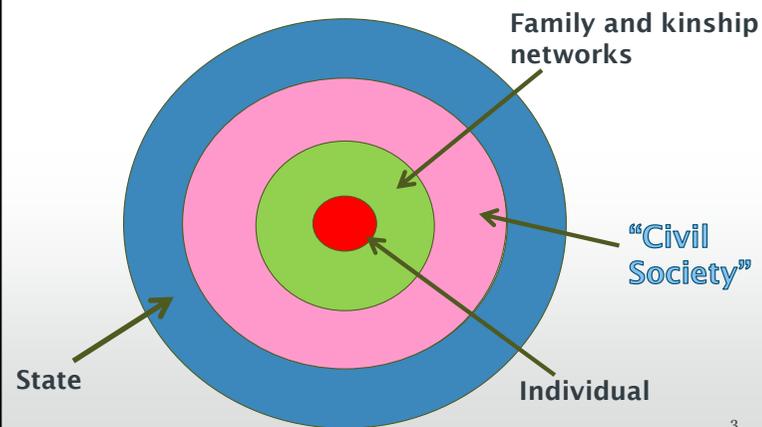
Outline

1. What is civil society?
 - Key characteristics
 - Historical developments
2. Strengths of civil society and volunteer engagement in the area of old-age support and care
3. Challenges for civil society engagement
4. Key questions remaining

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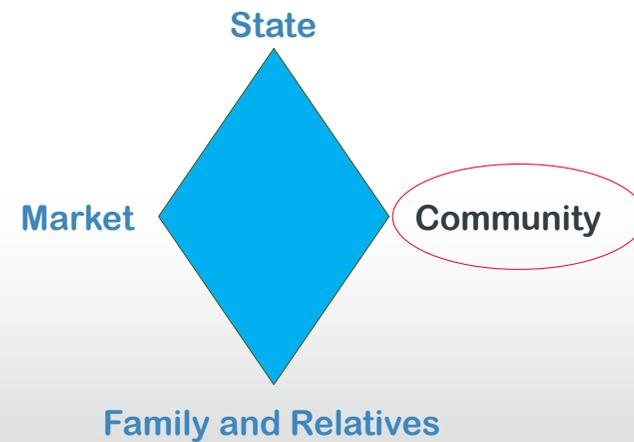
The space 'between kinship and the state'



Source: von Benda-Beckmann et al. (1998) 3

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One angle of a 'Care Diamond' Southampton



Source: Ochiai 2009 4

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Civil Society: Variety of Forms

Civil society refers to the “wide array of nongovernmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations. Civil society organizations (CSOs) therefore refer to ... community groups, NGOs, labor unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations.”

(World Bank n.d.)

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Examples of Civil Society Organisations

- ✓ Religious organisations (e.g. Muhammadiyah);
- ✓ Scientific and professional associations (e.g. IPEGRI);
- ✓ Think-tanks / research institutions (e.g. SurveyMeter);
- ✓ Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (e.g. Indonesia Ramah Lansia, YAKKUM Emergency Unit, HelpAge International);
- ✓ Trade unions;
- ✓ Small-scale community assistance (e.g. provision of food);
- ✓ Social movements and activism



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Civil Society: Characteristics

“Civil society’ refers broadly to institutional activities, largely or entirely independent of the state, that provide information and enable open discussion of contemporary issues. Civil society often extends to the provision of services where state activities are insufficient. ... The state and civil society are [generally] mutually reinforcing, a flourishing and open civil society depending on a strong democratic state, and vice versa.”

(Kreager 2009: 361)

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Key Roles of Civil Society Organisations

1. Welfare and/or educational programmes;
2. Advocacy: efforts to influence government policy; shape public perceptions and priorities; provide information.

Key characteristics

- Independent of the state;
- Aimed at development of individual and collective rights and democratic institutions;
- Generating debate, discussion, evidence;
- Reliant on volunteers and fundraising.

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Historical development

- European Enlightenment (17-18th century): changing authority of the state; growth of scientific thinking; questioning of the status quo.
- Emergence of educated middle class
- Exchange and discussion of information (e.g. through print newspapers);
- Suppressed or enabled by the state;
- Key moments: collapse of communism and dismantling of Apartheid; end of New Order regime; Arab Spring; COVID pandemic.

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What stimulates civil society engagement in ageing societies?

- Demographic pressure leading to rapid expansion of needs (for support and care) which families and governments cannot meet on their own;
- Democratic and decentralised structures of governance;
- Emergence of educated middle class;
- Information technology.



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Key strengths of civil society organisations

1. Grassroots basis
2. Tailored and flexible approach
3. At a distance from the state
4. Challenging and empowering

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1. Local rootedness

- Efficiency in terms of distance and regularity of contact;
- Recruitment of volunteers from the community → approachable, trusted, encountered in daily life;
- Excellent local knowledge of conditions and vulnerable groups;



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2. Flexibility and acceptability

- Complementarity to state provision: “The importance of welfare NGOs lies in their contribution to pluralistic forms of welfare provision which strengthen active citizenship and develop social capital. They correct deficits of the state as well as failures of markets.” (Wong and Jun 2006: 231)
- Tailoring of services that meet the needs of local population.



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3. Distance from the state

- (Degree of) autonomy
- ‘Translation’ of government messages
- ‘Brokerage’ → assisting people so that they can access services and support provided by the state;
- Realising citizenship rights;



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4. Challenging and empowering

- Giving voice to neglected groups;
- Challenging stereotypes and providing alternative representations of older people;
- Promoting social and economic participation of older people.



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Weaknesses and challenges of civil society organisations

1. Reliance on volunteers: recruitment, training, retention; time consuming nature of care provision.
2. Incompleteness of cover: dependence on local economic and social capital; local priorities; privilege rather than right.
3. Training and skills

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Key questions remaining

- How can civil society engagement and the use of volunteers become a sustainable component of long-term care provision in Indonesia? How can volunteers be mobilised, trained and retained to assist with the time consuming long-term care?
- How can activities of state, civil society and families in long-term care be co-ordinated to complement each other, fill gaps and meet older people's needs?
- How can civil society organisations raise the profile of older people (their contributions and needs) so that ageing issues become a priority and support for older people a right?

THANK YOU!