

The relations between the civil society, state and business



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Within the acute angle

Regardless of the numerous mid- and long-term projects aimed at the development of civil society implemented during the previous decade or even more, the prestigious sources continue to rank the development level of the Armenian civil society, including those of the non-governmental organizations, rather low. Actually, the institutes of the civil society at present play no decisive role in the political-public life of the country. The dynamics of the public relations, institutional metamorphoses and the inconsistent and differential development of the major players – the state, business sector and civil society – irrevocably and unresponsively devoured the accords of the public awakening of the mighty 1988. In an ideal world the state, business sector and civil society, each at one of the vertices of the equilateral triangle, guarantee the sustainability of an effective governance system, aimed at the human development. During the Soviet times these three institutes were almost merged into one. It seemed that the transitional transformations and democratic reforms should have ensured the miracle of the Armenian 'equilateral triangle'. However, at the dawn of the 21st century these players in Armenia are absolutely far from being equally distant or equally close: the state-civil society distance is perhaps ten times more than the civil society-business sector distance and even hundred times more than the state-business sector distance.

Interests, interests and once again interests...

Obviously, the role of the state, its formal participation and direct involvement in the economy, have been significantly restricted, which perhaps explains the unprecedented economic growth in the past. However, the state's real, informal participation in the economy is incomparably larger. The economic activity of civil servants and the consequent conflict of interests have become the characteristic features of our times. At the same time, almost all the big businessmen and their relatives are directly involved in the legislative or executive governance bodies. The tangible sum of these two phenomena is the so-called 'state capture', the nature of which is the domination of the private interest over the public one in the process of the regulation of relevant relations. Civil society, which has the most important functions of synthesizing democracy in Armenia, and which should have been the intermediary between the state and the private sector, monitoring the state and restricting its inadequate influence over the private sector; which should have promoted public participation and created paths for the development, definition and expression of the interests of various social groups, in the result of transitional transformations has appeared in the margin. The present balance of the relations between the private sector and civil society on one hand and the state and civil society on the other, allows no one to gain anything: not the state, nor the private sector and especially not the civil society.

Is he at least Armenian?

Everybody suffers within the asymmetric governance system. Everyone shares the blame for the development of such a system, including the supporters of the institutionalization and development of civil society organizations, especially the forefathers of the concept of non-governmentalism, which developed during the early phases of the civil society transformations. Alas, the non-governmentalism approach has become central in civil society

19 Sayat Nova
Yerevan 0001
Armenia

Tel.: +374 10 582638
Fax: +374 10 527082

mail@ichd.org
www.ichd.org

support strategies and projects, whereas the other measurements of the institute of civil society, such as participation, membership and advocacy, remained in the shadow. Such an approach, which perhaps was justified in the early 90s, stayed on the agenda of the development partners and donors for much longer. In the result of this inflexible and short-sighted solutions to the support of the democratic reforms, the process of the institutionalization of civil society lagged behind the pace and direction of the development of the state and the private sector. Indeed, the number of NGOs increased significantly. However, the number of their members and supporters remained insignificant, almost equal to the number of the organizations. The best time for the synthesis of civil society was lost and in the result, the huge army of the NGOs currently has a meager social power. These organizations remain dependent both financially and ethically. Dependent and more often supervised by the state, and even more often, by other players. It is typical that many NGOs are more aware of the policies of various donors, than those of the state; the priorities of the donors, than the needs of people. Their capacities of addressing people's needs are quite limited. Consequently, their leverages and possibilities of affecting the decision making process addressing these needs is also limited. The parade of the current issues, which the civil society institutions are facing nowadays, continues emphasizing the competition among them over the cooperation and representation. Moreover, the civil society institutions often neglect to use the principles of democratic governance themselves. They are not enough transparent or open, their accountability and sometimes integrity are far from being perfect. Therefore, it is not surprising that in such circumstances the civil society organizations face great difficulties in promoting and disseminating democratic values. In general, civil society and its institutions have not developed as independent players. In this regard, it is typical that the comparatively independent institutions often find themselves at the two-way fire line. It is also not surprising that such a development of civil society has transformed the media and placed it almost exclusively within the business sector. Obviously, the cooperation between the various sectors of civil society, the NGOs, academe, various foundations, religious organizations, professional communities, and media is quite poor.

From which end should the weight be lifted?

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The representatives of civil society clearly understand the present challenges and sometimes they offer certain solutions. "Our capacities keep growing, whereas the influence keeps decreasing." "It seems that we have what we should have. However, we do not have any influence, any real role whatsoever in the public life". "We need to change the pattern of relations between the decision makers and us, and even between ourselves. We need new approaches." The issues are indeed numerous. The key to their solutions has previously been sought in the support to the capacity building for civil society. However, the nature of the equilateral triangle of the democratic governance is not in the measure of the triangle's vertices, but in their distance, i. e. their relations. Actually it is necessary to develop and strengthen on one hand, the state-civil society and on the other hand, the private sector- civil society relations. In other words, bring the vertex of the civil society closer to the other two, which are currently languishing in an ecstatic embrace. Is it possible at all? Perhaps. There are real leverages for such a possibility. For instance, the professional capacities of certain NGOs have had an unprecedented increase, in some cases becoming equal to the relevant capacities of the state and the private sector, and in some other cases, even exceeding those. A number of civil society organizations continue to appear in the list of big taxpayers and the impact of some institutions is quite tangible on the public and political life of the country. From now on this very factor and the positive experience based on it, the developed trust and the established relations should become the foundation for the development of the state-civil society relations, since the weight can be lifted only from the middle...

The paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the discussion "State – Civil Society: Establishing Sustainable Relations", which took place on April 2, 2009. The roundtable discussion was attended by independent analysts, government officials, and representatives of the international organizations. The round table was organized with the support of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.