CIVIL SOCIETY

Why read this text …

Civil society refers to a network of self-organized collective entities, such as public associations and organizations that operate outside the direct control of the state and rely on the voluntary actions of their members. Membership extends beyond intimate relationships of families and friends, and these entities are ideally independent of the state and without interest in economic profit (Diamond, 1994). In the realm of education, civil society describes grassroots activities that introduce and monitor the implementation of educational policies pursued by associations, NGOs, institutions and more, either in opposition to or in collaboration with state, regional and local policy-makers. These activities may focus on educational provision or reform, improving education services, guaranteeing universal access to education and educational facilities, representing disempowered groups.

The concept of civil society draws on visions of a self-governing, democratic society. It is associated with moral principles of pluralism, tolerance, and non-violence and with civil rights of freedom of expression and association. Proponents advocating civil society see it as an ideal form of human society denoting areas of social consensus based on agreements about norms and values. Some see civil society as a political project for generating civility, social cohesion, morality, and economic stability (Armony 2004, Edwards, 2009).

Anthropologists study civil society as a set of practices and discourses through which locally established movements participate in global political processes. These processes involve systems of values and rules, institutions and bureaucratic procedures, and various forms of individual and collective social action (Lashaw, Vannier & Sampson 2017). The study of civil society in sociocultural anthropology has focused on voluntary associations in the public sphere (Eidson 1990) and, in the last decades, forms of political institutions, commonly referred to as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (Sampson 2003).

Historical Context

The concept of civil society has a rich genealogy. In classical Greek and Roman thought the term points to a politically organized commonwealth. In medieval Europe, the term describes a society organized around the primacy of religion. In the 18th century, civil society was conceived of as an arena of economic relations and institutions. In the 19th century, civil society was described as a sphere of voluntary intermediate organizations that stand between the state and the individual citizen (Seligman 1992).

Civil society gained prominence in anthropology towards the end of the 20th century. In the last years of the socialist era, dissidents in Eastern Europe deployed civil society to address failures of development in post-Soviet states and the increasing significance of the 'voluntary sector' in the western world.

In these contexts, civil society was defined, primarily, in opposition to the state. Standard definitions refer to all human social organization between the state and the family or household, while narrower definitions exclude markets and commercial life (Layton 2006). Anthropologists have examined how an idea originating in pre-Enlightenment Europe has been introduced into and become operative in non-European societies. Anthropological research of civil society has documented how the rhetoric of civil society is being invoked in relation to other modern terms, such as citizenship. It has also investigated whether particular local institutions might function as the non-Western equivalents of a free, tolerant civil society (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999). A large body of research has focused on the study of formal non-governmental organizations and their relation with notions of democracy and human rights. Various studies have shown that these new forms of civil society can be artificial, inefficient and the opposite of civil (Elyachar 2005, Lashaw, Vannier & Sampson 2017).

Anthropology has adopted a critical approach to normative definitions of civil society, and the phenomena and institutions linked with. An ongoing question is whether a concept so closely tied to Western models of voluntary association and individual membership can be generalized to other parts of the world. Following this perspective, anthropologists study the ways civil society actors and activities attempt to fulfil their role (which role?) by integrating global discourses (about what?) and modes of conduct to locally existing rooted forms of association and norms of responsibility and social accountability (Hann & Dunn 1996, Lashaw, Vannier & Sampson 2017, Sampson 1996).

a) Discussion

Civil society organizations and educational practices intersect in domains of educational governance, policy planning and implementation. As a policy framework that favors the participation of civil society in educational matters, the notion of civil society may include diverse educational stakeholders such as government, markets, families, voluntary organizations, public-private partnerships, and churches. This draws on the idea that cooperation between state institutions and private bodies can create policy frameworks that accommodate diverse student populations and generate public educational benefits in for all (Meyer & Boyd 2001). In this perspective, civic engagement and collaboration in educational matters are perceived as necessary steps to strengthening local democracy and supporting equal access to education by un- or underprivileged groups and minorities. Members of civil society organizations are thought to enhance the capacity of educational practices by volunteering their time in schools, tutoring students, donating materials, helping with management issues, and among other things, organizing fundraising events and after-school programs (Reimers 1997, Sullivan 2003).

Educational anthropology approaches civil society as a dynamic dimension of citizenship, pointing to forms of social action and social movements. Civil society is often understood as a space where dispossessed groups may resist state hegemony and discriminatory educational policies. The international aid industry brings together local meanings and global discourses of civil society and employs these in negotiations with citizens, the state, markets and various other bodies and institutions at local, regional, national and

supranational levels.

b) Practical Example

Mehtta (2008) explored the role civil society organizations played in improving access and quality of elementary education for low-income groups in the Indian education system. She examined the involvement of civil society organizations in the field of education in the state of Delhi for a period of 20 years. She conducted 30 interviews with academics, activists, heads of NGOs and government officials working in the field of education. She examined three cases of education policy reforms: 1) The Universal Elementary Education Programme, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), 2) the State Council for Education and Research Training (SCERT) textbook case, 3) the Mid-Day Meal Scheme. Through these three cases, she demonstrated that the involvement of civil society organizations in policy processes contributed to the creation of more realistic and effective education services. As legitimate educational planners and providers, civil society organizations were in a position to hold the state accountable for policy formulation and implementation.

In the first case, civil society organizations cooperated with the government to design an inclusive education programme that brought children previously excluded from schools into specially designed Learning Centers. In the second case, civil society bodies collaborated with the government to design new textbooks. The involvement of civil society organizations and the engagement of academics resulted in textbooks that were easier to understand with more relevant and appropriate content. In the third case, civil society organizations played a pivotal role in the conception, implementation, and monitoring of a Mid-Day Meal Scheme created by the government to include more children in the education system. Here NGOs became the primary producers and distributors of school meals.

In another study, Astiz (2012) studied policy challenges related to promoting civil society involvement in education, between 1998 and 2001, in two districts of Greater Buenos Aires. La Matanza was a relatively low socio-economic district and Vicente L´opez a middle-to-upper class district. Empirical data were gathered through a survey of civil society organizations and 25 interviews with teachers, education officials, national, provincial and local administrative officials, local party representatives, and community leaders. The study Adopting a critical approach to civil society, the study focused on provincial and local factors that shaped the nature of state-society relationships, as well as the social and economic conditions across districts that reveal civil society organizations' involvement in education.

The study concluded that the presence of active voluntary associations in the districts under study did not necessarily increase their level of participation in education. Either through the local clientelistic networks (La Matanza) or the Mayor's leadership in establishing state-society relationships (Vicente L´opez), state institutions (formal and informal) appropriated public space, which might otherwise have been filled by voluntary associations, with the intention to fulfill the leader's political aspirations. Thus, civic engagement became a vehicle for asserting political capital and reducing civil society participation to a limited collection of disjointed service delivery efforts with a mere

instrumental purpose.

Thinking further:
- Is there a civil society sector related to educational practices in your country/region/city/school?
- If yes, what kind of associations and organizations does it include? Who is eligible for membership? If no, what kind of institutions could be part of it?
- What forms of cooperation between teachers and civil society representatives could be designed and/or developed? For what aims/ends?

KEY-WORDS/ CROSS-REFERENCES
Policy, Non-Governmental Organizations, democracy, politics, reform, institutions.

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