

The Role of Civil Society in Global Governance and in Climate Change a Theoretical Perspective and an Analysis in BRICS Countries

Francesco Petrone

World History and Philosophy, Italy

Article DOI: 10.48028/iiprds/ijargpgm.v4.i1.17

Abstract

A good functioning of civil society is one of the key points for the future of global governance and cover a central role for the governance of climate change. Nevertheless, according to recent studies, civil society suffers some limitations: a certain fragmentation, lack of accountability and, above all, diverse national interests linked to its participation to Institutions of Global Governance. We are going through a crucial period for many of the problems affecting the planet. At the same time, this moment is a test case also with regard to civil society that should overcome current limitations. In this context, the emergence of BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, China, India and South Africa) represents a new challenge in global governance. But is civil society taken into enough consideration in these countries?

Keywords: *Global Governance, Civil Society, Climate Change, Global Politics, COPs, BRICS*

Corresponding Author: **Francesco Petrone**

First Published: <https://sryahwpublications.com/article/pdf/2642-8245.0102006>

Background to the Study

Last years have been very intense and undoubtedly represent a moment of vital importance in international relations. During this period important meetings have been celebrated about, for example, climate change issues. This is the case of the Conferences of the Parties (COPs), among which COP 21 celebrated in Paris in 2015 covered a key role. At the same time new challenges are appearing and require a different approach in international relations. Specifically, there are issues of vital importance that need "global responses" as rapidly as possible. To borrow the expression used by Kofi Annan¹, we must first give space to the so called "problems without passports": we refer to issues such as climate change, global justice, and international security and so on. These problems require a special interest. In many cases a deep variety of interests (both from public and private stakeholders) obstacle the quick action that should be taken. In fact, to deal with these problems and looking for collective (and global) action, in last decades a paradigm has risen that claims to describe relationships established between different interests: global governance (GG). Thomas Weiss outlines a clear picture of its meaning by describing the complexity of the relations that are at the basis of global decisions. He states that the word "governance" is employed "to connote a complex set of structures and processes, both public and private"². A part of this definition, this word hides some dark spots that reflect an unclear evolution of the concept and its practices. Some said that this is a kind of structured plan inspired by a "neoliberal project" by the "transatlantic civil society"³ that want to impose a new hegemony worldwide. This point of view is partially right, but rather than consider it as a project, it should be considered as the result of an economic and social system that has pushed part of civil society to pursue private interests and maintain the current *status quo*, based on a neoliberal and capitalistic model⁴. However, there is a large part of civil society that fulfills a vital role in the process of global governance, and that is moved by more ethical principles.

Civil Society and Global Governance

In its last "State of Civil Society" reports, CIVICUS⁵ presents results that are not really satisfactory. In fact, even if the Organization of Civil Society (OSC) has an important role in GG, sometimes the picture is of a situation in which civil society appears to be fragmented and unable to find a common ground on which to share interests and common aims of action. More than external problems are inside the OSC that there are divisions: for example, due to the different size and means of organizations and their capacity to receive donations that can lead to important consequences and a polarization between them. At the same time, institutions of GG seem obsolete, not able to absorb demands from a fragmented civil society and dominated by state interests.

"We extensively covered global governance failures in our 2014 report, concluding that global governance institutions cannot address today's major issues because they are out of date, dominated by narrow state interests, and more open to the private sector than civil society. Clearly, no progress has been made: a meaningful deal on climate change is no closer, and dead lock at the UN Security Council has seen people pay the price for sustained failures to resolve conflicts."

Very often the fragmentation of civil society is due both to the difference of objectives pursued, that inevitably cause a dispersion of efforts in different and sometimes opposite fronts, and to a real need from the political power to control these potential "enemies" or, in an opposite side, by using some of them as a mean to project their political view⁷. Practically, the fragmentation of civil society would also imply greater control ability, according to the famous expression used during the Roman Empire: *divide ET impera* (divide and rule).

What is Civil Society?

Since the second part of the twentieth century, new demands have come forward and have changed the shape of civil society. The need, on the one hand, to give greater voice to the rights of minorities who could not express their full participation and who did not find echo in the public sphere, combined with new forms of participation and democracy, have given rise to a new meaning of public space and the role in it of civil society, especially in Western countries (i.e. US and West Europe). More generally, the emergence of new movements claims to certain rights set aside, or not fully taken into consideration in the course of past centuries, has found fertile ground today in those associations, NGOs, organizations of different nature, but also environmental groups that deal instead with bringing at the center of public debate those issues that were often overshadowed. Specifically, we refer, for example, to the birth of the environmental movement, animal rights, rights of ethnic minorities etc. Since the late sixties, these movements have become increasingly insistent and demanded greater visibility and participation. These are the core players of the civil society.

While on the one hand movements were taking more and more ground, on the other hand the "erosion of state sovereignty" has encouraged the emergence of social factors that have accepted these demands and have taken on the burden to give greater participation to those who were put aside earlier. More generally, the process of globalization has generated consequences that have had effects on the life of the new societies and, above all, at the level of participation. In fact, by favoring greater erosion of the state from both top and bottom, globalization has given rise to new forms of participation and the claim of new rights that the "traditional" Nation-state could no longer provide. Regarding the search for a definition of civil society that can serve as a means for evaluating participatory processes, we can already begin to say that today there is still an uncertain definition of it⁸. Rather trying to define the concept of "civil society", we should first of all ask ourselves about the field of action that it has, and what has to deal with. In short: what is its scope?

Broadly speaking, civil society has the task to convey the human rights by promoting social participation in the public sphere of political decision-making, in which human and civil rights can be taken into account in an appropriate way, to allow more debate and visibility to those who haven't had during years. Therefore, we can say that the scope of civil society is primarily tied to the needs of drawing the attention of institutions on the rights of citizenship.

These rights encompass all those platform issues affecting directly or indirectly the citizens and the world around us. What we include in this concept of civil society is the traditional approach to them that includes all organizations that occupy the "social space" between

citizens and the state, excluding political parties and firms. Some definitions of civil society also include certain business, such as the Medias, private schools and for-profit organizations, but we don't include these actors here. We mainly focus on non-profit organizations, social movements, associations and foundations which seek to influence the policy of governments and international organizations and in many cases try to complement government services such as, for example, education, health, environment and so on.

Civil Society, Capitalism and Climate Change

It is important to remember here, that civil society itself plays an important role regarding the possibility of giving a different meaning to the current capitalist system which, in recent times, has reached an uncontrolled level of development. But if this was possible, it is also due to incorrect policies and especially the dependence of politics on economic and financial power. In particular, in recent times an important issue in relation to the question has come forward: if the capitalist system should be rethought. We have witnessed important humanitarian crisis, climatic changes require a different approach, and in general there are lots of issues that invite us to become aware also of how the financial system is so often compelled to follow its rules, which also threat our life.

Naomi Klein, in one of her last books criticizes the capitalist system as such because, according to her, in order to face current problems quickly, the rhetoric of capitalism no longer find a reason. Specifically, she calls into question the issue of climate change and, especially, how policies that have been adopted have only increased the risks for the human race. Now, says the author, facing with these situations implies huge investments in alternative forms of energy, obviously that work better and produce less impact on the lives of individuals. This should be one of the central issues to be put to the future of environment (Annan 2009).

Cop 21 in Paris at the beginning of December 2015, was concluded with vibrant results in theory, but failed in practice¹⁰. In fact, even if a non-binding approach to the argument seemed to work, due to the 195 countries that signed the final agreement and the difference in their development situation, it is certain that while in the international arena there have been important declarations, at a national level there are still “national interests” that prevail. That means that every state, at least during the following years, will pursue its own purposes without concretely collaborating to reduce CO₂¹¹ because even if governments come to an agreement, they are still using fossil fuels that are one of the most responsible causes of climate change. Moreover, there will be serious consequences for future generations.

Global governance has worked by encouraging 195 countries to sign an agreement, trying to (apparently) respect and takes into account every single situation, but this has not worked by seriously giving importance to global civil society demands. At the same time, a divided and fragmented civil society is unable to give virulent contributions to the actual situation if it is not compact, cohesive and ready to address common and effective results. However, what remains unclear and should be defined as well is the role that civil society can play within this new scenario. And especially in developing powers such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, China, India and South Africa), which are gaining an important role in the international framework.

The Rise of the BRICS

In the last decades, BRICS countries have had a very significant economic growth (even if recently they are passing through a recession, as in the case of Brazil). The term BRICS (originally BRIC, when South Africa was not yet part of the group) was coined in 2001 by Jim O'Neill in the report, by the Investment Bank Goldman Sachs, entitled "Building Better Global Economics BRICs", to describe the economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC). Subsequently, with the entry of South Africa (2011) the term officially became BRICS. Since then, their growth has caused great concern in the Western world because the BRICS have started to playing an increasingly important role in the international scenario, both from an economic point of view and from a decision-making one, and causing reactions (for example in terms of protectionism) that can be considered also as an attempt to defend Western countries, and US *in primis*, from this now threatening situation¹². However, this attempt is not only producing a commercial war (and, potentially, not only), but it is also creating a "vacuum of power", fostering greater possibilities for other parts of the world, such as BRICS, leaded by China, to occupy those roles that US, and the West in general, is probably leaving¹³. In fact, despite the above-mentioned gaps, BRICS have fostered cooperation in some important areas, such as energy efficiency, agriculture and development finance, that will give them a growing importance, if coordinated in a correct way¹⁴.

Thus, the surprising growth of the BRICS has allowed themselves to have a more authoritarian voice in the global scenario. Furthermore, their economic weight and the achievement of important development have strengthened their partnerships and claimed a more common line to undertake in cooperation, as often declared during the various annual BRICS summits that have taken place.

Among their cooperative purposes, the BRICS have repeatedly claimed to give a contribution to shaping GG¹⁵, above all in financial ways. In fact, among their important steps there has been the creation of the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA). The aim of these institutions is to counterbalance traditional financial institutions of GG such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) which have been accused several times to make the interests of the Western powers¹⁶ and have an unbalanced vote system¹⁷.

Over the year's BRICS voice has been growing more, despite their internal rivalries¹⁸, so much to encourage reactions from Western countries which found themselves fragmented also because of the economic crisis that has struck them, and in which the growth of these countries has certainly had certain influence. In any case, as the BRICS could represent a "threat" to Western predominance, we wonder which the status of civil society in those countries is. If they were becoming key players in the international framework, are they involving civil society in this transformation that they are having?

BRICS Summit in GOA and Civil Society Participation

According to Debidatta 2015 Global Governance as we have seen, pretends to describe a process in which also civil society and social movements gain more participation in global

decisions. At this point, we want to take into consideration the way in which BRICS can shape a different GG, above all from a point of view of civil society inclusion in the policy making process. Furthermore, we also wonder which degree of transparency and accountability BRICS have had in relation to climate change issues and their commitments. To do this, we take into consideration what happened during the VIII BRICS annual meeting that took place in Goa, India (2016). Just before this meeting, a People's Forum on BRICS took place in the same city. The People's Forum aim was to create a debate among civil society, social movements and academia of the five states. Even if an important declaration was also released in the following meeting (2017 in New Delhi¹⁹), the claims of BRICS civil society in Goa started to take an important shape. The final declaration of the forum in Goa moved lots of critics on how NDB and CRA are actually working²⁰.

On the basis of this declaration, it seems that both institutions are not working as an “alternative” to the IMF and the WB, but they are working complementarily to them. At the same time, critics were addressed to transparency and accountability of BRICS, above all due to the extractive policies implemented and the environmental degrade they are creating²¹. Some criticisms were directed to the BRICS²² because of their attitude towards climate change policies, but at the same time, during the last COPs summits celebrated in the last years after Paris 2015, no really step forward were made: basically, countries have just promised to continue to be committed with Paris

Downie & Williams. 2018 Agreements and BASIC countries (BRICS without Russia) underpinned, during COP22 that took place in November 2016 in Marrakesh, the importance to avoid that developed countries changed their commitments taken during COP21²³. That means that during the meeting in Marrakech there were not really decisive commitments, but only debates on challenges to implement Paris Agreements. And, basically, following COPs were the same. Things being like this, we have now to wonder which influence these countries have had and can have in relation to GG and which alternative can propose to climate change. In fact, BRICS countries, and China *in primis*, have affirmed their serious commitment in leading global issues like climate change²⁴.

Even if the BRICS could promote a new model of GG, we can now see how they have limits that are claimed by civil society forum. Some ambiguous attitudes may have occurred because of their recent crisis, or could also be due to different interests in their political and economic aims, and finally they could mean a divergent interest in the governance of climate change. At the same time transparency, accountability and participation of civil society to decision making being so difficult to achieve, it will be difficult to give a different shape to GG as it was in their original purposes²⁵.

Conclusions

In light of what we have been stating, civil society has to play a key role in promoting participation, accountability and transparency in Global Governance.

1. A civil society independent of political influences is required, and it is also important to develop strategy and activities aimed at achieving the objectives of general interest.

2. Global Governance has accountability and transparency gaps that need to be filled in order to face new challenges. These gaps find in civil society one of the main driving forces in order to give the right push. Governance without civil society cannot work.
3. The lack of transparency, accountability and participation has influenced the correct work of BRICS institutional and policy mechanism.

References

- Annan K. (2009). Problems without Passports”, in Foreign Policy, November 9
- Debidatta, A. M. (2015). BRICS to push cooperation on climate change”. April 29. *Russia Beyond*. Available at https://www.rbth.com/economics/2015/04/29/brick_to_push_co-operation_on_climate_change_42893. [Accessed on January 24, 2019].
- Downie, C., & Williams, M. (2018). After the Paris agreement: What role for the BRICS in global climate governance? *Global Policy* 9(3), 398-407. DOI: 10.1111/1758-5899.12550.