

DOES CIVIL SOCIETY CREATE SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS?

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to analyze whether civil society can enhance or stimulate on its own the creation of social entrepreneurs, by studying its traits and the various definitions attributed to it. The main question that the paper wants to answer to is <Does civil society create social entrepreneurs?> and the main approach used in this research paper is the theoretical one. By studying existing articles, research studies and books on the topic, the paper tries to emphasize the various dimensions that civil society can embrace, as pictured by various authors, as well as how these dimensions can relate to social entrepreneurs and the emergence of social businesses. The paper is not meant to be a breakthrough in the field, but rather to launch a question that is related to very important topics these days, social entrepreneurship, social innovation, social businesses and their connection to a very much debated topic-civil society. The paper is a work-in progress and wants to stimulate the research regarding the search of the sources of social entrepreneurship, in order to analyze them and better establish them as incubators for the future studies. It wants to be of use to whoever is researching the concepts illustrated above, as well as for people who want to get in touch with the new buzz words of the academic and entrepreneurial fields. The hereby paper stands, as previously stated, in a theoretical framework and the findings represent a mere analysis of the cause-effect relationship between the characteristics of the civil society and those of social entrepreneurs. However, we are of the opinion that it can be a very good starting point for the ones interested in the domain, to analyze more sources of social entrepreneurship or further refine the answer to the question addressed in this article.*

Keywords: *civil society, social entrepreneur, social change*

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1. The Relation Between Civil Society and Social Entrepreneurs

When talking about the traits of the social entrepreneurs, we cannot stop on wondering what environments are best suitable for fostering these traits, for encouraging the real life person to act as an agent of change, to assume chances and focus his/her attention on the factors that cause a certain social problem and the way in which they can be hindered.

Although these environments can be various, we decided to focus on one specific concept, which has become of utmost importance within the last few years, namely Civil Society. We cannot help on asking if Civil Society, such an omnipresent and under constant development organism, which deals with the needs of the society, fosters or does not foster social entrepreneurs.

However, in order to thoroughly analyse whether Civil Society is an incubator for

social entrepreneurs and social change or whether it raises barriers against it, one must first understand what civil society is and how it acts.

We are not trying to make a case regarding civil society nor do we try to define it, as there are entire articles and research theses that do that. Our intent is to clarify the concept based on specialised literature and different points of view.

Petrova in her quest about the civil society in post-communist countries, makes a very good point regarding the status of the concept in the literature:

" *There is no consensus on what civil society is or what constitutes it (e.g., Hyden, Court and Mease, 2004). Scholarship drawing on various disciplines—political science, sociology, area studies, political philosophy— abounds with definitions and conceptualizations of civil society. They range from the "ether" of participatory citizenship intuitively associated with democracy, to general ideas of "democracy from below," to the "broad base of active citizens able to influence decisions that affect their lives" described by USAID writers, to the space or middle-level organization between the family and the state, independent of the state (e.g., Varshney, 2001; for a review of definitions)*" (Petrova, 2007: 1278)

No matter the disagreement, the concept of civil society has gained a lot of recognition during the last years and is allegedly one of the solutions to balance political governance.

The roots of civil society go as far back as the 18th century, when people tried to redefine their statute in the society and when social order was undergoing a visible decline.

During the following years and centuries, the concept was further refined and enriched, as Anheier (2004) emphasizes, with notions of *civility* (Elias, 1994), *popular participation and civic mindedness* (Verba et al., 1995), *the public sphere* (Habermas, 1992), *social capital* (Putnam, 2000; Coleman 1990) *culture* (Gramsci, 1971) and *community* (Etzioni, 1971).

This concept is a very powerful one in the USA, whereas it has started more recently to gain acknowledgement in Europe. One of the arguments that stands for its increasing power is the recent desire of the EU to include the civil society in the decision making process, regarding it as a powerful source to connect to the citizens of the European Union and of Europe as a whole.

CINEFOGO (Civil Society and New Forms of Governance in Europe) Network of Excellence, which was funded by the EU within the 6th Framework Programs focuses on the importance of improving citizens' participation in governance. This requires new knowledge on the importance of social and cultural diversity, active citizenship, civic participation and organized civil society, all issues that have become more pressing with the on-going enlargement of Europe—a Europe characterized by growing inequality in economic and social conditions of the citizens, including education, but also increased diversity in the perception of how to proceed in the process of economic, social and political integration of the European nation-states (CINEFOGO, 2012).

But we shall leave that aside, for the moment, as it is necessary to understand more of the concept. Helmut Anheier, in his book *Civil society: Measurement, Evaluation, Policy*, regards *civil society as the sphere of institutions, organizations and individuals located between family, the state and the market in which people associate voluntarily to advance common interests* (Anheier, 2004: 46). Though he does not pretend it to be a complete definition and he underlines the fact that it does not encompass all of its aspects, we consider it to be a very simple and clear one.

As such, we can underpin the three main characteristics of this organism, which shall or must be encompassed in any given definition:

- Structure: organizations, individuals and institutions;
- Process: voluntarily association/ networking;
- Objective: advocate common interests of the society.

The Civil Society is thus represented by all non-governmental institutions or networks that are a separate entity from the government and they act with the purpose of social wellbeing. It can be comprised of people, NGOs or even the business world.

When talking about so many units, each with its own dimension and specific characteristics, with a set of values and individual activities, it is obvious that the interaction among them and the activity of civil society affects these sets of values. Just like Tonkiss, Passey, Hems and Fenton observed in *Trust and Civil Society*, the latter may have a strong impact upon culture, religion, behaviour of individuals, the economy or the government.

This is an extremely important aspect which is at the grounds of our quest about civil society being an environment of development for the people it works with.

Michael Edwards (2009) as cited by Vaduva (2012) states in his 2009 book, *The Civil Society*, that “the civil society is much talked about but rarely understood(...) It is impossible to have a conversation about politics or public policy these days without mentioning the magic words *civil society*” (Vaduva, 2012:222). Is this true? Is civil society only a buzz word or is it “our last best hope?”(Rifkin, 1995: 106), as Rifkin says?

Some argue that while government institutions are poorly organized to tackle with complex problems, it is in the responsibility and in the power of the civil society to take the ideas to another scale (Murray, Caulier-Grice and Mulgan, 2010). The problem is whether the civil society has the resources, the capital and knowledge to do so. Is it powerful enough to handle these complex problems? More importantly, is it capable enough to gather the people necessary to do so or educate them, empower them to do so? We posit that even though quantitative measurements are not yet demonstrating this, there is evidence throughout the world that the answer to these questions is at least partially, yes.

In fact, civil society acts like a link between all the characteristics previously mentioned and has a very important role due to the fact that it builds a sense of community and is able to share resources and connect networks in order to achieve certain goals. A very nice phrase of Alexis de Tocqueville used in his book *Democracy in America*, when he referred to the ability of a nation to voluntarily solve their common social problems was “the art of association”. This completely underlines the key feature of the Civil Society, which is association in order to create value for a common purpose.

This brings us closer to how the civil society creates value. Though a difficult and very important aspect, we shall but merely analyse it, as it directs us to the answer of our question. Does civil society create social entrepreneurs?

One of the answers could be that civil society creates civic entrepreneurs. Well, this is rather wrong from one strong point of view, namely the fact that civic entrepreneurs are economic entrepreneurs, who deal with economic assets for economic purposes, with the distinction that they believe success can be achieved only through collaboration - they know how to work with people.

As Henton, Melville and Walesh (1997) see it, they are involved in their community

out of enlightened, long-term self-interest. They believe that their personal long-term interests and those of their organization are to some extent tied to the health of the local economy and community. They view it as being in their best interest to work towards a long-term positive interconnectedness between business vitality, schools and universities, physical infrastructure, natural environment, and tax base. (Henton, Melville and Walesh, 1997: 4)

On the other hand, social entrepreneurs act with a social purpose, with and for the interest of the community and of the social wellbeing, leaving aside economic benefits for self-interest.

In order to see if social entrepreneurs can be born from the environment that civil society creates, we have to start from the dimensions of the civil society concept. According to Anheier (2004), the dimensions to be measurable and assessed, in order to conclude what value can be created, are:

- Structural dimension: composition and sources of support of the civil society;
- Legal dimension: the regulatory environment in which it operates;
- Impact dimension: contributions of the civil society;
- Value dimension: norms and cultural elements.

The last two are the dimensions that are of an utmost importance in our analysis, as they emphasize the contribution that civil society has with his actions, the purpose of its actions and the added value it wants to bring.

We believe that by understanding this, we come to the functions of the civil society, which may be divided as follows:

- To create social capital;
- To find solutions to social problems through collaboration between various entities but by preserving a high degree of independence to the state;
- To engage motivated people voluntarily to act on common purpose;
- To raise capital from various sources in order to sustain itself.

By watching all these functions, it comes naturally to find the link between each and everyone one of them with the traits of the civil entrepreneur and of his/her actions. Let us start with the creation of social capital, another ambiguous term.

For the sake of simplicity, we shall consider that social capital is about the value of social networks, bonding similar people and bridging between diverse people, with norms of reciprocity (Dekker and Uslaner, 2001). Therefore, social capital is the power of networks, of people working together and sharing information.

The fact that civil society creates networks through collaboration of various units is easily understood. Which is almost as simple to depict is the fact that social entrepreneurs use networks in social ventures, in order to add more value to the sustainability of the innovative solution. A very good example is Grameen-Danone venture, started by Muhamad Yunus together with Danone, in order to offer enriched yogurt with 30% of the necessary vitamins to people in Bangladesh.

This venture was built on an existing infrastructure of social network, upon collaboration and information sharing.

Therefore, we want to underline the fact that the creation of network, lessens the activity or the possible future activity of a social entrepreneur, by offering a vast infrastructure of connections that a future social entrepreneur can and will use in his activity. Moreover, the future social entrepreneur will enrich the existing network by supplementing with other sources and creating thus, more social capital.

Further, the second characteristic is finding solutions to social problems which is

also nascent to social entrepreneurial activity. Why?

We posit that, by offering the process of defining and understanding a problem, analyzing the main possibilities in which it can be solved and finding the way of implementation empowers all the units involved in the process (including the possible future entrepreneurs) with the knowledge of problem identification and finding the solution.

Moreover, it empowers them with the confidence that if they see a problem and put an effort into finding a solution, the problem will be solved in the end. Thus, a powerful motivation is triggered, motivation that is the most important pillar of the entrepreneurial activity.

Furthermore, this process is an important one in the entire entrepreneurial activity and may constitute the difference between success and failure.

Thirdly, we come to the voluntarily engaging people to do something for the purpose of the social wellbeing, with a strong sense of community and with desire to perceive this as a common goal.

Willingness and motivation are strong characteristics of any kind of entrepreneurs, whether they are social, business or other types. Determination to involve yourself in a problem, to fight for it and to continue no matter the impediments and the problems you might face, these are the characteristics we want an environment to foster.

Humans usually need reasons, whether sentimental or ration, to selflessly engage in an initiative of civic nature.

Civil society does that, as it encourages people to take a stand for what they believe in, to roll up their sleeves and fight for it, to overcome the barriers of the government, of the gravity of the problems and of the lack of interest of others.

Therefore, in this regard, civil society is for sure, not only an environment that fosters social entrepreneurship, but it also gathers together people that have the opportunity to transform themselves in social entrepreneurs, encourages them to become agents of change.

Civil society seems to create a *Do It Yourself* rule...if you see a gap (a problem), fill it in. Find that one service/solution that offers the necessary items for the problem to be solved. Be yourself the one to act for a purpose you believe in!

It is important to take a note that this characteristic is rather unique from all other environments. On the issue of "participation" non-profits have a voluntary system whereas government has an automatic/coercive one and business a quasi-voluntary, based on economic needs. (Gidron, 2010: 405)

On the issue of "motivation" Anheier characterized business organizations as having material motivation, government as purposive and non-profits as solidary. (Gidron, 2010: 405)

Last but not least, we reach the final characteristic, that of raising capital for the sustainability of its actions. We perceive this to be, in an equal manner, a source for social entrepreneurship, as well as a barrier to it.

Sustainability of a social venture is one of the most important aspects, one deeply explained and emphasized by Muhamad Yunus in his book, *Social Business*. Without the aspect of economic sustainability, a social venture would become a charity.

Therefore, the source for fostering social entrepreneurship comes from providing its users with the infrastructure needed for finding the suitable funds of capital, the right philanthropists or government funding.

However, it also sustains a barrier - that of raising capital from other independent units-, which might hurt the independence of the social venture and is not for sure desirable.

More often we relate the growth of social entrepreneurship with existing trends in the market such as the growth of consumer awareness, sustainable business practices, the ridiculous economic gap between business leaders and the rest of humanity. Furthermore, democracy tends to be the most proper environment to foster social entrepreneurship; this means that even the political regime can be a barrier to this kinds of endeavours. So there are better chances of success if we are on the same barricade with the system, and not against it.

The limitation of the civil society concept as an aggregation of institutions, organizations and individuals specifically, is the lack of recognition *that the organizational reality of civil society requires more than individual trust and willingness to participate in various forms of action. Factors like funding, managerial experience, media coverage, and the like—or in general resources—do not figure in individual level accounts of civil society* (Petrova, 2007: 1282)

Therefore, this seems to be vicious circle, as Civil Society needs people with certain knowledge but also empowers them with multiple knowledge and know-how, in order to become, on their turn, agents for the society, entrepreneurs with the same common purpose, social wellbeing.

2. Conclusion

We posit that, the analysis of the concept as well as of the objective of the civil society leads us to a favourable answer regarding the question addressed in the beginning of the paper.

The environment of the civil society is for sure an incubator for social entrepreneurs and social ventures. It offers infrastructure for social capital, teaches self-reliance and efficiency, advocates for sustainability and more importantly, militates for social wellbeing and self-implication in obtaining it.

We share the point of view of some scientists who are of the opinion that of crucial importance is the fact that universities have the moral obligation to produce not only innovative and entrepreneurial graduates (Kwong, Brooksbank, and Jones-Evans, 2006; Thompson, Kwong, and Jones-Evans, 2012), but also civically aware and socially responsible citizens (Steiner and Watson, 2006). The society in which we are living experiences a kaleidoscope of persistent problems which now are actually on the rise more than ever, and the ones who can alleviate them are the social entrepreneurs. Therefore, by means of this article we try to suggest the premises of our next article “Universities have the moral obligation to foster, enable and create social entrepreneurs” in which we argue for the duty of universities and society as a whole to support and promote social entrepreneurs. Besides, we argue in favour of the shift from the traditional businesses towards the social businesses which are more than an adequate solution for the current economic, political and social situation the world is facing. As a concluding remark, we adhere to the opinion of Alex Nicholls (2011) that social entrepreneurs represent a new generation of civil society actors who are driven to address the systemic problems facing the world today.

We look forward to reading other papers that would address this question as well as emphasize other sources for the creation of social entrepreneurs.

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