

Democracy and Not-for-Profit Organizations

Prepared by

Dobrica Savic

1 March 2006
Montreal

ABSTRACT

Achieving democracy is a complex process that requires consistent efforts by the whole population and all participating players and organizations. A special role in building a democratic society, healthy environment and prosperous living conditions belongs to nonprofit organizations. Results achieved by them have a direct impact on each community and have immanent impact on their democratization. The nonprofit organizations can play their catalyst role through becoming delivery agents of public services on behalf of governments; by raising awareness of decision-makers to particular issues; by directly participating in solving specific social problems; by empowering communities and the whole societies; and by increasing local, regional, national, and international cooperation. Additional responsibility remains with nonprofits, their governing boards, and their leaders to make sure that the NPOs themselves are organized in a democratic manner. They need to promote democracy while making sure that they also operate democratically.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Peter Drucker (1990) eloquently pointed out that the main product of work of nonprofit organizations (NPOs), such as churches, schools, hospitals, museums, or social service suppliers, was a changed human being. There are millions and millions of nonprofit organizations around the world today. The United States alone has over 1,6 million registered NPOs. If we are to follow Drucker's definition that all NPOs are trying to change us as human beings, we have to ask ourselves if that change is always done with the best of intentions, with the goal of spreading democratic values, and in democratic manner. This research paper makes an attempt to provide answers to these questions and offer some "food-for-thought" regarding the issues related to democracy and not-for-profit organizations.

After a brief discussion of common terminology identifying not-for-profit organizations and democracy, some space is devoted to the founding blocks, as well as to limitations of democracy in general. Armed with that knowledge, the paper continues with examining two basic NPO related issues: The first one is the role of not-for-profit organizations in building democracy around the world. The second one looks at some of the challenges that nonprofits face in the process of their own democratization.

2. TERMINOLOGY

There are two basic terms that need to be defined in this research in order to make their use easily understood and terms properly applied. They are *not-for-profit organization (NPO)* and *democracy*. Although mentioned as simple terms, both democracy and NPO represent, in fact, complex concepts with a family of related terms and specific definitions. For example, while defining democracy, terms such as democratic government, democratic society and liberal democracy automatically come to mind. Term "not-for-profit organizations" is a similar case with its own related terms, including charities, non-governmental organizations, third sector, or civil-society organizations.

2.1 Not-for-Profit Organization

The term “not-for-profit organization” is most often defined by what it is not (hence the term nonprofit), but we should try to define it in positive terms. Not-for-profit organizations are usually defined as organized, private, non-profit-distributing, self-governing, and voluntary entities. Their primary objective is to support some public issue or interest for non-commercial purposes (Salamon, 1999). The purpose is not to generate profit, but they still have to generate revenue in order to finance their activities. NPOs are usually funded by donations from the private or public sector, and often have tax exempt status. Private donations may sometimes be tax deductible making them charitable organizations. That characteristic is popularly considered to be the defining characteristic of NPOs organizations. However, most experts consider that the defining characteristic is the legal and ethical restriction on the distribution of profits to owners or shareholders, and that that is what fundamentally distinguishes nonprofits from commercial enterprises.

NPOs, sometimes also called foundations or endowments, may be involved in many different areas, such as the arts, education, research, religion, local community services, and others. NPOs also include volunteer organizations, grass-root groups, associations and professional groupings, trade unions, or political parties. Universities, hospitals, documentary film production companies or educational book publishers are also examples of nonprofit organizations.

A charity is a special type of not-for-profit organization usually governed by very strict financial and other rules. They always have very specific tasks of distributing collected funds or goods to people in immediate need of it. Donations given to registered charities often have special tax status.

The term “non-governmental organization (NGO)” is used interchangeably with the not-for-profit organization. It was initially used by the League of Nations and the United Nations and still represents a frequently used term, particularly outside the North America. Today, the difference between NGOs and NPOs is basically in their field of activities. NGOs operate mainly in the field of international relations, environment, human rights, humanitarian assistance and development cooperation.

International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) are NPOs that make significant operating expenditures across national borders and do not identify themselves solely as domestic actors. The term international philanthropy is used in the United States as a synonym for activities of foundations and other NPOs which aim at meeting needs for assistance abroad.

Civil society refers to voluntary associations and informal networks in which individuals and groups engage in activities of public consequence. It is distinguished from the public activities of government because it is voluntary, and from the private activities of markets because it deals with common or public goods. Since there is a private sector, a public sector, nonprofit sector is often described as the "third sector". For democratic societies, it provides a link between citizens and the state by attempting to synthesize public and private good (Civil Dictionary).

2.2 Democracy

The term democracy comes from the Greek term δημοκρατία (demokratia), which is a combination of words δημοσ (demos) *the common people*, the word κρατειν (kratein) *to rule*, and the suffix ία (ia). Its literal translation would be "the common people rule", or in more modern terms, the system where the population of a society controls the government.

The term was coined in ancient Athens in the 5th century BC. Athenian democracy is generally seen as one of the earliest examples of a system corresponding to *some* of the modern notions of democratic rule. Only a quarter of the whole adult male population of Athens could vote and speak in the Assembly. However, what was more important was a fact that they were able to do that however poor they were and that they were making decisions directly, rather than through voting for representatives (Wikipedia).

Over centuries, the meaning of democracy has changed, and the modern definition has largely evolved since the 18th century. Today, it describes a type of government where, if democratic, government serves the people, rather than ruling over them. It usually involves free elections and voting for some kind of representations, which by definition becomes indirect representation.

Democracy is often regarded as a form of government in which policy is decided by the preference of the real majority. It is usually done through elections or referenda which are open to all or most citizens. Democratic government and democratic society usually go hand in hand,

but not necessarily all the time. It is possible to have a democratically elected and generally democratic government, but not really a democratic society. This can be demonstrated through weak protection of minorities or mistreatment of immigrants.

Liberal democracy, as a related term, implies individual liberty and individual responsibility of citizens. Its founding blocks are constitutional liberalism, personal sovereignty and private property. In liberal democracy societies, sovereignty originates in the people and is delegated by them to the government. Most liberal-democracies are parliamentary representative democracies.

Economic systems are in theory distinct from political systems. The centrally planned economy, for example is regarded as incompatible with democracy. All modern democratic societies have a free-market economy, although not in the sense that pure liberal economists would accept. Theoretically speaking, it is possible for a democratic electorate to vote for a centrally planned economy what would be regarded as an absurd.

The term democratization is used in the contents of the replacement of non-democratic forms by a democracy. Some political thinkers believe that the process of democratization will make the liberal-democratic nation-states the standard form of human society.

The term 'democratic' is also used in a looser sense, to describe participatory decision-making in groups or organizations, such as the decision-making in not-for-profit organizations.

3. FOUNDATIONS OF DEMOCRACY

Real democracy, particularly as a form of government, consists of a number of building blocks. All of the blocks need to be present and properly combined to provide the foundation for successful democracy. The main building blocks of democracy are:

- ***Population or demos.*** A group of people that needs to make a decision, and does that through a process of collective decision-making. The demos can be a nation, citizenship, or, as it is the case of NPOs - the membership.
- ***Territory.*** The locality where the decisions is being applied, and where the demos reside. The territory is usually the nation-state and in that case the demos and the reach of the democracy coincide. However, in some cases, like with colonies or protectorates, demos

and territory do not coincide, so there is no real democracy. Similar conclusion can be made also about the international not-for-profit organizations that go outside “their own territory” and make decision or take actions without proper legitimacy.

- ***Freedom.*** Presence of collective and individual freedoms, including the right for self expression, free speech, free choice, free election, the right to belong to or form a political or other organization, and many other freedoms characteristic for modern times, are required to have a democratic society.
- ***Sovereignty.*** This is directly related to both territory and the general concept of freedom. The state must be sovereign and the elections must be recognized. Otherwise, democratic elections are pointless if an outside authority can overrule the result (e.g. recent case with Palestinian Parliamentary elections).
- ***Decision-making procedure.*** Decisions can be made through direct decision-making procedures (e.g. a referendum); or indirect (e.g. election of a parliament). The procedure has to be legitimate, meaning that the demos is willing to accept the decision which can go against personal choices or interests. It also has to be effective, meaning that the governing structure can be changed if there is a sufficient support for that change.
- ***Free market economy.*** Modern Western understanding of democracy includes also free market economy.
- ***Political pluralism.*** It is usually defined as the presence of multiple and distinct political parties.
- ***Existence of constitution.*** Existence of constitution which defines the democratic character of the state.
- ***Separation of executive,*** legislative and independent judiciary powers. This is required to provide a system of checks and balances between branches of government
- ***Rule of law.*** Once passed through democratically elected parliament, whatever the law might be, it must be applied and obeyed. Equality before the law and due process under the rule of law are also considered characteristics of liberal democracy
- ***Universal suffrage.*** Democracy also requires granting all citizens the right to vote regardless of race, gender or property ownership. However, the universality is relative. Many countries regarded as democratic have practiced various forms of exclusion from suffrage, or demand further qualifications (except for being a citizen), like a registration procedure to be allowed to vote. Voting rights are limited to those who are above a

certain age, typically 18. In any case, decisions taken through elections are taken not by *all* of the citizens, but rather by those who choose to participate by voting.

- ***Human rights and freedoms.*** The most often quoted criteria for liberal democracy is existence of individual human rights and freedoms. They were originally considered essential for the *functioning* of a liberal democracy, but they have acquired such prominence in its definition, that many people now think they *are* democracy.

Among political theorists, there are at least four major concepts of democracy:

- ***Minimalist democracy.*** A system in which citizens give political leaders the right to rule during the periods between elections. Citizens cannot and should not rule directly because on most issues, most of the time, they have no clear views (Schumpeter, 1950).
- ***Aggregative democracy.*** A system that produces laws and policies that conform to the vector-sum of citizens' preferences. A good democratic government is the one that produces laws and policies that are close to the views of the median voter - with half to his left and the other half to his right (Downs, 1997).
- ***Deliberate democracy.*** A system based on the notion that laws and policies should be based upon reasons that all citizens can accept. That is achieved through discussions where leaders and citizens make arguments, listen, and change their minds. Political thinkers dating back to ancient Athens have stressed the importance of public discourse and debate (Aristotle, Thucydides), as well as more modern ones (Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill).
- ***Participatory democracy.*** A system which holds that in making decisions citizens should participate directly, not through their representatives. Proponents of participatory democracy offer varied reasons to support this view, such as, political activity can be valuable in itself, it socializes and educates citizens, and popular participation can check powerful elites. Most importantly, citizens do not really rule themselves unless they directly decide laws and policies (Roussopoulos & Benello, 2004).

4. LIMITATIONS OF DEMOCRACY

By its definition, democracy has a number of limitations. The most famous is probably the one noted by Thomas Jefferson, who said that "a democracy is nothing more than mob rule, where fifty-one percent of the people may take away the rights of the other forty-nine".

'Tyranny of the majority' implies that a government reflecting the majority view can take action that oppresses a particular minority. In theory, the majority might decide that a certain minority benefits, characteristics, or privileges (e.g. religion, political belief, cultural right, or economic status) should be taken away or minimized. This undermines the idea of democracy as an empowerment of the demos as a whole.

The best known case of the 'tyranny of the majority' is that of Adolf Hitler who came to power by legitimate democratic procedures. The Nazi party gained the largest share of votes in the democratic Weimar republic in 1933. However, his regime's large-scale human rights violations took place after the democratic system had been abolished.

Democracy, and especially liberal democracy, requires a sense of shared values in the demos. It requires the demos to act as a unit. However, many states lack the cultural and ethnic unity of the ideal nation-state because of ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural divisions. On the other hand, some of democracy limits are related to specific individual freedoms. Democratic theory explains these limits as a necessity to guarantee the existence of democracy, or the existence of the freedoms themselves. For example, should free speech opponents have a freedom to attack free speech? Or, should the enemies of democracy be given full freedom and their “democratic rights” to go against democracy?

General limitations or restrictions of democracy can be grouped in the following manner:

- ***Free speech, organization, assembly and protest.*** Restrictions can target anti-democratic organizations, gatherings and speech that attempts to undermine human rights, promotion or justification of terrorism. Recent examples include the Cold War restrictions which targeted communists, or restrictions now applied to radical Islamists. Several European countries have introduced bans even on personal religious symbols.
- ***Free press.*** Press censorship, satellite denial services, and website restrictions are just some of the examples of democracy limitations imposed in this area. Ownership of the media by the few may lead to more specific distortion of the electoral process and freedom of speech, since the media are themselves a vital element of that.
- ***Rule of law.*** Rule of international law was blatantly ignored in cases such as attacks on Iraq or Serbia. Very questionable justifications were given in the form of “existence” of weapons of mass destruction or “humanitarian war”. Possibility for a similar

“justification for energy war” is also increasing now. Equality before the law and due process under the rule of law are considered characteristics of liberal democracy, but the United States holds certain categories of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, and possibly in other secret prisons, without trial, and without any specific grounds in domestic or international law. The prisoners are also excluded from any legal protection.

- ***Fair representation.*** Due to various difficulties some electoral systems do not offer proportional representation to all political, or minority groups in the nation's legislative bodies. Instead they go for majoritarian representation. Democracy is costly affair requiring substantial sums of money for elections and its functioning in general. The cost of political campaigning in representative democracies may mean that the system favors the rich, who may be a very small minority of the voters.

Democracies are criticized for their tendency to brew bureaucracy, as well as for inefficient and sometimes ineffective decision-making, particularly in wartime. Regular, election-based, changes of government are also sometimes seen as a problem due to their short-term focus. However, such a system is still preferable to a system where political change takes place through violence.

Special lobby and other interest groups promote their own ideas and can spread propaganda winning some part of demos to vote for their cause, therefore gaining subsidies and benefits to them which might be harmful to society.

5. THE ROLE OF NPOs IN BUILDING DEMOCRACY

Today, nonprofit organizations face increasing demands for their service in promoting civil society and supporting democracy. There are undoubtedly many areas, roles and tasks for NPOs that, if properly conducted, can help with building a more democratic society. Areas like education, health, environment, and poverty elimination, are just some of the obvious candidates that offer a fertile ground for activities of NPOs. Results achieved in those areas have direct impact on the life and prosperity of each community and have immanent implications on their democratization.

Nonprofit organizations can spread their activities in different areas of social and community life, as already mentioned. However, in order to better understand their role in building democracy, it is necessary to categorize these different types of activities that take place and bring necessary democratic changes. From the aspect of their purpose and aims, these activities can be grouped in the following manner:

- ***Become delivery agents.*** Assist governments in fulfilling their duties in a more efficient and effective manner by taking over some of the outsourced public activities.
- ***Raise awareness.*** It is an important task to raise awareness of politicians and decision-makers by bringing social problems and demands to their attention and offer possible solutions. This could be done at all levels, starting from the local one and going all the way to the global level.
- ***Solve social problems.*** Cover some of the existing discrepancies between offered public services and existing social demands. These gaps are usually created by decreased public budgets and increased social demands (e.g. population aging, environmental problems, natural disasters).
- ***Empower communities/societies.*** Educate population about various issues and offer them ways for self-organization and action taking. Bringing power back to the people makes them active and offers hope for coming out of something that might look as a desperate situation (e.g. poverty, depressed neighborhood).
- ***Improve cooperation.*** NPOs can help increase and improve local, regional, national, and international cooperation bringing together available expertise, know-how, financial and other required resources.

A simple fact that existence of NPOs offers an alternative way for organization and social mobilization is a powerful sign of its potential for building better societies. Some oppressive regimes try to minimize the value of those organizations mainly because they fear for their own status and privileges. Establishment and development of non-profit organizations becomes a real threat for such a regime, since these organizations promote the ideas of having own opinion, asserting the rights, improving quality of life, and influencing state policies. As a result, the “third sector” or its formation is assumed to be an important indicator of degree of the state’s democracy and the level of its openness.

However, existence of many nonprofit organizations does not necessarily mean that that society is more democratic, or that it will become more democratic than some other one. The expansion of NPO and NGO sector, for example in Eastern European countries since the late 1980s, surely has practical significance both for public-policy making and for theories of democratization, civil society, and the post-communist transformation. This sector's activities and growth underpin the now-mainstream argument that growth in the number, size, and diversity of NGOs and NPOs is an unmistakable and characteristic corollary of democratization in the former communist states of Eastern Europe. This argument usually takes the form of claims that NGOs are a sort of "index" of the development of civil society that is, in turn a critical element of the democratization process (Massam and Earl-Goulet, 1997). Cellarius and Staddon (2002) scrutinized and challenged that popular neo-liberal argument and view. They have uncovered some serious flaws lurking within western scholarly theorizations. In their view, such simple equation obscures critical layers of empirical complexity in the relations between state and society, such as preexisting and complex historical geographies of social self-organization around issues ranging from the environment to human rights, and religious and intellectual freedom. Mere possibility of participation is not enough to prompt existential will to engage in such activities. They concluded, in fact, that there is no proven relationship between the rise of NPOs/NGOs and the democratization.

Literature on social capital claims that civic engagement leads to democratic values such as trust and tolerance. Bădescu, Sum and Uslaner (2004) found low levels of civic engagement, trust, and tolerance for the mass public in their surveys of the public and organizational activists in Romania and Moldova. They also found little support for the argument that participation leads to greater trust and tolerance among the mass public. However, they found considerably higher levels of trust, tolerance, and engagement among organizational activists and suggest that this elite may help transfer democratic values to the larger population. It was disconcerting that such activists constitute minuscule proportions of the population in both countries.

6. DEMOCRATIZATION OF NPOs

Nonprofit organizations have a great role to play in bringing and enhancing democracy around the world. However, they should never forget that they need to be democratic themselves. Due to mere number of NPOs around the world and their inherent differences, it is very difficult to make comprehensive and generally acceptable observations. However, it is important to bring to our attention at least some of the major challenges that NPOs are faced with while carrying out their activities in local communities, as well as in international environment.

The basic challenges of NPO democratization are the following:

- ***Lack or real demos.*** In the nonprofit milieu, demos would mean Organizational membership base. Many NPO organizations, especially the ones outside the so called “developed world”, are created thanks to enthusiasm and efforts of few people. Their population is either a very small or often non-existent. As Ruslan Sadirkhanov (2001) in his article on third sector formation in Azerbaijan noted, majority of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations have 2-3 leaders who represent the whole organization. According to him, those organizations are basically authoritarian organizations and such a low lever of participation creates other problems, such as, ethical problems, corruption and absence of transparency, unclear mission purpose and lack of clear action tasks.
- ***NPO’s role and mission.*** Issues present here relate to two questions: Who is the one to set the mission, and under what circumstances can the mission be changed? Kanter and Summers (1987) argued that NPO missions are notoriously difficult to measure. This is true because NPO missions are usually focused on services and values, and various constituencies set by different communities, clients, volunteers, donators, governments, and boards who view these outcomes very differently. An additional constraint on many mission-driven NPOs concerns their flexibility of action. Businesses can find many ways to make money, while NPOs do not have the freedom to cast aside a mission and move to something that is more financially secure or easier to accomplish.
- ***Dependency on government donations.*** Large proportion of funding for work of NPOs comes from various levels of governments through subsidies, grants, donations, or special outsourcing arrangements. Increased level of government donations unquestionably increases government influence on the work and goals of NPOs. This is particularly

“undemocratic” when some of those organizations get involved in other countries on politically sensitive issues. There are accounts of foreign involvement in some of the more recent “color revolutions” that happened in some of the East European countries. Promotion of someone else’s political agenda presents a serious danger for democratic work of NPOs.

- ***Composition of the Governing Boards.*** It has been shown many times that nonprofit organizations’ effectiveness is related to the effectiveness of their Boards of directors. In the United States, the law ultimately holds the Board of a nonprofit organization responsible for the affairs and conduct of the organization. The moral assumption is that a Board will conduct the affairs of the charity as a public steward and will ensure that the organization serves the interests of the larger community (Herman & Renz 2000). It is assumed that the Board’s structure, at least to some extent, represents the structure of the community. However, that is rarely the case. The Board is almost always composed of largest donors and influential individuals regarded as “elite”. There is no democratic control or influence on the Board composition or on their election since all of the Board members are chosen through a process of selection, not election.
- ***Tax exemptions.*** This is regarded as one of the founding blocks for existence and work of NPOs. It would be probably impossible for most of them to operate without this government provision. However, some critics argue that paying taxes is an act of democratic responsibility that NPOs avoid. While avoiding it, at the same time, they benefit from the taxes collected and given to them by various government departments at different levels.
- ***Influence of big business.*** According to Sadirkhanov (2001), many of the Azerbaijan NPOs can operate only because of generous assistance received from large petroleum organizations such as Agip, BP, Exxon, Pennzoil, Statoil, UNOCAL, and LUCOIL. It is not surprising having in mind that Azerbaijan is oil-rich country with considerable natural reserves. This, unfortunately, can bring to question their objectivity in dealing with environmental issues immanent to oil exploration and exploitation.
- ***Flattening of NPO internal structure.*** As pointed out by Peter Drucker (1990), a NGO or NPO is usually organized around information and communication instead of around hierarchy. This means that its structure should be much flatter with fewer layers which might threaten to distort the flow of information.

- ***Accountability and transparency.*** NPOs need to be accountable for their decisions and actions, and their work has to be transparent to their constituents and to the public in general. There are two sides of accountability requirement. The first one is the question of securing accountability to whom? Are NPOs accountable only to their Governing Boards, or they are accountable to the community and society? The second one is the question of establishment of proper internal procedures required for achieving required accountability level. Ways to improve services to the public need to be properly established and improved over time. Key stakeholders are expected to determine responsibilities, authorize discretion, establish reporting procedures, and create a review practice. This requires additional time and effort but is necessary in order to achieve expected accountability. Control, particularly financial control, is another necessary element of the accountability. There are, unfortunately, still a number of cases of power and financial abuse.
- ***Formation of social network.*** Third sector organizations are very fragmented, with very little cooperation among them. In fact, sometimes, they even compete against each other. In order to assure its role in a democratic society and gain power necessary for confronting both, government and for-profit private corporations, NPOs and NGOs must form and join a social network (Kataoka, 2004). By forming a social network, they can bring together their resources and can gain what Chris Huxham (1996) calls a collaborative advantage. Social capital for them is, however, too fragmented and dispersed.
- ***Commercialization.*** It is unfortunate that in some of the “newer democracies” the concept of nonprofit organizations is misunderstood. For some NG/NPOs earning money became the main goal of their activity (Sadirkhanov, 2001). Generally speaking, lack of appropriate legislation or personal greed is often the main reason for such deviation.
- ***Equality in international roles.*** Many of the NPOs are involved with cross-border activities. Often, those activities are geared towards “less-developed”, poor countries. If an NPO becomes a donor to another NPO in a developing country, due to their difference in size, it is possible to experience unfair and unequal treatment. In order to avoid this undemocratic trap, it is important for both sides to pay special attention to this possibility and do their best to aim for equality in their international relations.

7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Democracy is a complex endeavor. It has many faces and requires consistent efforts by the whole population and all participating organizations and players in the process of social development. Whether minimalist, aggregative, deliberate or participatory form of democracy is taking place, its outcome is a more open and free society. Various political, economic, cultural and social factors have different influence and impact on achieving a democratic society, healthy environment and prosperous living conditions. Special role belongs to nonprofit organizations.

There are many areas, roles and tasks for NPOs that can help with building a more democratic society. Areas like education, health, environment, poverty elimination are just some of the obvious candidates. Results achieved in those areas have direct impact on the life and prosperity of each community and have immanent implications on their democratization. All that can be achieved through NPOs becoming delivery agents of public services on behalf of governments; they can raise awareness; directly participate in solving specific social problems; empower communities and the whole societies; and increase local, regional, national, and international cooperation.

Importance of nonprofit organizations is already substantial and can become even greater, but rise in their number and spread of activities does not necessarily mean the increase of democracy. Considerable, conscious and well organized effort needs to be made by NPOs and by the societies to make sure that their role leads towards improved democratic conditions. Additional responsibility remains with nonprofits and their leaders to make sure that the NPOs themselves are organized in a democratic manner. They need to promote democracy while making sure that they also operate democratically.

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