**Characteristics of Civil Society**

“Civil society” has become a central theme in contemporary thought about philanthropy and civic activity, yet it is difficult to define, inherently complex, and resistant to being categorized or interpreted through a singular theoretical lens. The term is increasingly used to suggest how public life should function within and between societies; at the same time, it provides a way of describing the social action that occurs within the context of voluntary associations or intermediary bodies (Riesman and Glazer, 1950; Van Til, 2000).

Nonprofit organizations, like other groups and institutions in modern societies, operate within and are conditioned by three types of *systems*: economic, political, and social. Nonprofits themselves, in turn, give group members the opportunity to exercise three fundamental civic *principles*: participatory engagement, constitutional authority, and moral responsibility. Matrices (such as the one included in this article) are helpful tools for considering terms such as civil society that contain multiple facets of meaning, characteristics, and relationships. This particular matrix illustrates the unique and specific meaning contained within each characteristic--and the interrelationships that exist between characteristics--of this complex concept.

These systems and principles produce a matrix of nine civil society characteristics that can be used to evaluate and guide the work of various agencies, groups, and organizations. A careful assessment of these characteristics can be useful to nonprofit organizations in identifying the presence of civil society and gauging its strength within a particular social context, and helpful in matching organizational goals to specific civic actions that will encourage positive social change. Widespread and legitimate citizen involvement in this civic context remains a foundation for nurturing and sustaining healthy and productive societies, especially in urban settings.

**Systems of Civil Society**

All societies, whether “civil” or otherwise, contain similar patterns of organized systems of collective human experience, including economic exchange, political governance, and social relationships.

Systems of economic exchange that promote patterns of civil society depend on the sustainable availability and equitable use of natural and social resources necessary for constructing a satisfying and "satisficing" life by present and future generations.**[[i]](http://www.icnl.org/knowledge/ijnl/vol6iss2/art_5.htm" \l "_edn2)** Sustainable economic development is necessary for the health and longevity of any society. It requires a mutually supportive, symbiotic relationship between the natural economy of ecosystems and human social economies, with a particular concern for the poor.

The formation of civil society usually partners with an identifiable system of political governance, characterized by open, public decision-making for all community members through governmental structures that (1) permit legitimate access to and use of civic space and resources, and (2) maintain fairness within the existing political and judicial systems by promoting and protecting the welfare of the people, with particular concern for the disenfranchised.

Social relationships within a civil society are characterized by strong, active, vibrant, diverse community-based groups and networks that (1) facilitate open, voluntary participation; (2) enable community stakeholders to hold economic and political actors accountable for outcomes of policy decisions; (3) provide a context for mutual benefit and exchange; and (4) seek to promote the “common good,” with a particular concern for inclusion of those currently marginalized.

**Principles of Civil Society**

The literature suggests that the three principles--participatory engagement, constitutional authority, and moral responsibility--are found in all civil societies regardless of cultural context.

*Participatory engagement* indicates that members of the society (1) enjoy access to and governance of resources used for the common good, (2) are free to be involved in civic action and social change, and (3) are free to participate in group affiliations that provide a sense of belonging on a community level.

*Constitutional authority* protects the rights and privileges of citizens in a civil society. Under the rule of law, citizens and social groups are constitutionally legitimized and empowered to hold economic and political actors accountable for their work as community servants and trustees. Local and national decision-makers, motivated by the common good rather than self-interest, are expected to design and implement public policies that strengthen the vitality and welfare of the community.

Within this social context, all community members have *moral responsibility* to use their civil liberties in ways that do not violate the human rights of others. The practice of equity, justice, and reciprocity produces social order and stability.

**Characteristics of Civil Society**

These three systems and three principles combine to articulate nine measurable characteristics of civil society.

**“The Commons”**

Civil society is advanced when citizens share a social right of access to the commonwealth of resources produced, used, and exchanged through natural and social economies in a community and through a society. Access, in this context, includes the abilities both to contribute to the resources and to benefit from them. Broad, community-based civic engagement in economic activities occurs in the arena of what is historically called “the Commons,” as in the Greek agora and the English market. As citizens participate in the open exchange of commonwealth resources, they can form and strengthen social connections and networks with others.

**“Office”**

Civil society is advanced when citizens can exercise their civic duty of self-governance by participating in political structures that exhibit decentralized power and authority. Community-based civic engagement in political governance exists when community members have the opportunity to hold positions or “offices” of public decision-making and leadership.

**Associations**

Civil society is advanced when citizens can openly and voluntarily participate in diverse social affiliations, groups, networks, and structures for self-governance and social transformation. “Association” refers to those social places where people gather and interact with others to exchange ideas, offer support, and receive a sense of belonging. Community-based civic engagement in systems of social exchange exists when diverse social groups and gatherings are present and permeable.

**Trusteeship**

Civil society is advanced when citizens hold decision-making power, work to strengthen and improve local and regional economies, and exercise sustainable and socially transparent stewardship of societal resources (e.g., human, social, material, and ecological) on behalf of the “common good.” Community-based activities of civic responsibility in systems of economic development exist when citizens enjoy the legitimate authority of resource trusteeship.

**Sovereignty**

Civil society is advanced when citizens have the right to be involved in all aspects of political governance and the authority to make decisions and perform actions affecting all levels of public life, without the institutions of public life being “captured” by the interests of specific groups or individuals. The presence and legitimacy of community-based civic authority through systems of political governance increase the ability of citizens to exercise sovereignty over policies and programs that can positively affect their lives and the quality of life in their community.

**Accountability**

Civil society is advanced when citizens, acting through community-based groups and associations, are able to use basic civic freedoms and rights (e.g., fair elections, free speech, a free press providing access to information, freedom to organize in groups) to hold economic and political actors responsible for the outcomes of policies, programs and patterns of resource distribution, and the exercise of political power.

**Equity**

Civil society is advanced when each citizen is given equitable access to and use of resources required for constructing a satisfying and satisficing life. A moral condition of equity forms the foundation of activities that expand and strengthen economic conditions for all community members. Economic equity of resources is necessary for producing and sustaining an improved quality of life for all people, especially the poor.

**Justice**

Civil society is advanced when citizens pursue social justice by (1) consistently and compassionately using the “rule of law” in fulfillment of their civic obligations, and (2) advocating for those excluded from the political process and harmed by unjust laws.

In classical Greek thought, justice was accomplished by having people serve the city-state according to their status by birth. Gender, merit, rank, and wealth all were criteria for the role one was expected to play in the society, whether citizen or non-citizen. If the social order became disrupted, "justice" was accomplished by restoring people to their former positions of power and status. Unfortunately, the practice of justice according to this particular "rule of law" allowed previous inequalities to continue. The disenfranchised remained excluded after the work of justice.

Contemporary views of citizenship and justice reflect these classical ideas in their adherence to a rule of law that is based on the ethical norms of society, but the particular ethical norms have largely shifted. In the United States, the bases of citizenship and political participation have changed. Heredity, wealth, and social position have given way to the unalienable right of common citizenship legitimized by the Constitution. A law or policy is considered unjust if it is unconstitutional or contrary to the democratically formed rule of law.

**Reciprocity**

Civil society is advanced when citizens (1) pursue social transformation through reciprocal, mutually dependent collaboration with others, and (2) negotiate, mediate, and resolve conflict through peaceful, nonviolent means. The nature of civic environments requires that social relationships in communities be limited and conditional. Not everyone in a society is invariably viewed as a legitimate member and given equal access to its resources. The term *reciprocity*highlights two interrelated moral issues of social relationships: how people to treat one another, especially when conflict exists; and how group boundaries are defined and transcended.

**Conclusion**

As we continue through the 21st century, the principles and systems of civil society must move beyond the nation-state to include a global political economy of relations and groups. Everyone is to be viewed as one another's neighbor; we are mutually responsible for everyone's opportunity to experience a satisfying and satisficing life. Our global economy, having brought us together, pushes us to develop appropriate political and social systems through which participation, authority, and responsibility can be just, equitable, and nonviolent--responding with concern for the disenfranchised, marginalized, and impoverished.