17. Civil Society

Key definitions: who are civil society and what role do they play in security?

Civil society refers to individuals and groups who have a vision for an aspect of society or politics that they wish to promote in what they consider the public interest. Civil society takes many forms: for example, civil society advocacy might focus on solutions to certain policy issues, a commitment to values-driven political decisions, or representation of the rights or interests of a people who share an identity, a set of concerns or an experience. Civil society actors may be individuals or groups who agree on an issue, but they differ from political parties because they seek to influence government without holding office or political power.

Civil society, especially interest-based civil society organizations, plays a positive role in security when their views and aspirations align with the principles of respect for rule of law, protection of human rights, and a commitment to non-violent democratic politics. Civil society's engagement with security issues is likely to include individual actors or advocates who argue for the protection of human rights or policy changes on certain issues or experiences (such as police brutality, women's representation, survivors' rights). They may also be people who share an advocacy position based on a common interest or identity (women's groups, community groups, faith-based or religious groups). Some base their advocacy on professional affiliation (such as associations for police, veterans or lawyers), or subject area expertise (such as academics and think tanks). While many of the most well organized civil societies take the form of not-for-profit non-governmental organizations, some may be membership-funded or volunteer-based.

Journalists are sometimes considered part of civil society because their work also concerns the public interest. However, it is useful to separate media and journalism from civil society, because journalists maintain a professional commitment to neutrality and to represent all views fairly in the service of the public interest. Civil society in contrast exists to advocate for a particular set of values, a specific vision of public life, or a change in government position on a particular issue.

The variety of security issues around which civil society advocates and the way they organize their advocacy affects how journalists engage with them. Civil society can be a powerful source of public accountability by drawing public attention to security issues that affect the lives of many people and demanding higher standards of service from security providers. Yet civil society can also adopt advocacy positions that do not ensure the security of everyone equally or become co-opted by political or commercial interests.

Key issues for reporting on civil society

The voice of the people? Civil society actors demanding accountability from government for the conduct and standards of security providers is one of the most powerful forces for promoting protection of human rights and respect for rule of law. Part of the reason this so-called "watchdog function" is so effective for security sector accountability is that civil society actors working on security tend to deal with the concerns that directly reflect large segments of the population: this makes their demands especially relevant. At the same time, the fact that these demands for accountability come from people directly affected makes them especially legitimate.

→ Journalists can ask:

✓ What does civil society see as the most relevant security issues?

✓ What arguments are civil society making on an issue concerning the security sector?

✓ Is the evidence credible?

✓ What counterarguments or rebuttals come from the point of view of authorities?

✓ What aspects of civil society's work enhance their credibility or reveal room for improvement?

✓ What is the relationship between civil society and populations whose interests they claim to advocate for or represent?

✓ What is the point of view of the populations affected by civil society efforts?

✓ Can the sources and arguments behind the views that civil society present be verified?

A force for peace and security? Civil society sometimes argues for policies or issues that may be beneficial to those whose interests they represent, while harmful to the interests of others. Civil society advocacy around sensitive topics, such as resource distribution, access, or rights, can inflame tensions and escalate into violence, especially in contexts affected by conflict. At the same time, civil society might be a key actor in peace and reconciliation by creating a space for public discussion and non-violent resolution of conflict.

→ Journalists can ask:

✓ Whose interests are served by the advocacy agenda a civil society actor is promoting?

✓ Who would be harmed by its implementation, and would those interests be taken into account?

✓ What do alternative points of view reveal about the situation?

✓ How do government policy positions fare against alternative proposals from civil society?

✓ Has government attempted to limit civic space available to civil society and how has the security sector been implicated in these limitations? How are these efforts justified?

✓ Is civil society the target of violence? Why and by whom?

✓ Is civil society subject to abuses and repression? Is it recorded?

✓ Are all civil society actors targeted equally or are there discernable patterns to repression that reveal something about political agendas?

✓ What action is necessary to help protect freedom of expression?

✓ What can be done against official harassment of civil society?

✓ What proposals for constructive engagement with the security sector can civil society bring?

A source of credible, independent information? Civil society organizations can become experts on any aspect of security and may become invaluable sources of credible authoritative information. This is especially true of civil society organizations whose advocacy is rooted in their professional knowledge, such as former service careers in the security sector, or academics who specialize in a subject. Civil society organizations that specialize in security-relevant issues can also develop a deep knowledge of their focus area. The level of expertise of civil society can make them useful sources for journalists but does not change the fact that their advocacy position may or may not align with the value of protecting human rights, respecting the rule of law, and strengthening democracy.

→ Journalists can ask:

- ✓ Is information provided by civil society organizations reliable?

- ✓ Does information provided by civil society debunk disinformation?

- ✓ What is the history, context, and track record of civil society experts and organizations with strong views about security?

- ✓ What biases, interests or conflicts of interest shape certain positions, or opinions about civil society actors?

- ✓ What biases, interests or conflicts of interest shape the positions, or opinions of civil society actors?

- ✓ How is civil society funded and how does this affect their independence or advocacy strategy?

- ✓ How does civil society source the information cited in its reports?

- ✓ What do the methods civil society uses in investigation or advocacy say about the objectives or values they claim to support?

Box 32 Practical example: "Tripoli government aligned forces violently quell peaceful protests, arbitrarily detain and torture: HRW"

In September 2020, the Libya Herald reported accusations against security forces associated with Libya's internationally recognized government of excessive violence, lethal force, and arbitrary detentions targeting protesters. The accusations were made by the international civil society organization, Human Rights Watch, which had issued a report following an investigation of events. The article detailed the accusations contained in the report as well as the evidence presented by Human Rights Watch to substantiate its claims. The article recounted witness testimonies gathered in interviews with people who were present and relayed accounts provided by other local media, and on social media, as well as the assessments of international experts with knowledge of the situation. The report also dove deep into the origins of the crisis to give context to the protest at the center of the accusations, and detailed relevant international standards and legal norms against which the actions of security forces should be judged. Responses from officials, including statements from the interior ministry, were also provided to cover both sides of the story. This is an example of how civil society advocacy for human rights can catalyze public attention and provide both a source and a focal point for reporting on the security sector. It also demonstrates how high quality reporting does not take any claim at face value (even those from a reputable source), but instead guarantees fair and balanced reporting by providing context, verification, and a variety of sources that reflect the views of all sides.

Source: Tripoli government aligned forces violently quell peaceful protests, arbitrarily detain and torture: HRW", September 2020, https://www.libyaherald.com/2020/09/11/tripoli-government-aligned-forces-violently-quell-peaceful-protests-arbitrarily-detain-and-torture-hrw/