

Berlin, den 30.05.00

## *Working Group: Civil Society and the Role of Politics*

### **Points to Consider: The not so sunny sides of civil society mobilization**

1. The idyllic image of C.S. stems from examples like the voluntary fire brigade or the Red Cross, or mutual aid networks providing social welfare. It envisions the emergence of a public sphere in which people participate and cooperate in the pursuit of the common good. Policies that propose to enhance activities of the C.S. build on instrumental and normative assumptions. They expect that the efficiency of democratic governments can be increased by shifting certain tasks from the state level to social (non-market, non-state, voluntary) institutions. And they expect that the legitimacy of democratic government will be increased through more participation and that the sense of togetherness, mutual respect and tolerance be strengthened among the people will be strengthened, eventually contributing to solidarity and peace in the society.
2. While the idyllic image may hold some truth, it is far from complete. Proposals that envisage a greater role for C.S. actors in politics seem to be biased on the notion that would lead to a kind of "mandated society" where the state entrusts social groups (and their associations/organisations) with certain public tasks, but keeps firm control over the implementation of those tasks. However, this notion misrepresents the degree to which a greater role of the C.S. will release processes of societal self-organisation that develop beyond and outside the confines of substantial state control. The essence of C.S. is the "empowered society" rather than the "mandated society".

3. Actually, the empowerment of social groups may split the society rather than bind it together. While the C.S. is expected to be a public sphere *between* state and market, it may also become a source of revolt *against* state and market. The mobilisation of the C.S. can have uncivil outcomes - by encouraging moral fundamentalism, politics of identity, and radical constitutional revisionism. As a consequence it would add to rather than relieve of the burdens of democratic government.
4. The argument that politicising the society will commit people to co-operate in the provision of the common good, is begging the question. It is true to the extent that people share visions of the common good, that they accept the basic constitution of the society, that there is cultural homogeneity - at least in the sense of an overlapping consensus on the principles of political liberalism (human rights and pluralism), and that the struggle for justice can effectively be channelled into political reformism. While these presumptions may be necessary for the democratic process to operate, they are nevertheless to a certain extent fictions, and the more people become politically empowered, the more likely is it that these presumptions will be revealed as fictions and that latent dissent and contradictions become manifest. Therefore the C.S. may also propel moral conflicts (as in the case of abortion), sharpen issues of ethnic identity (from the head scarf to segregationist demands), and renew antagonistic political battles (like the fight against globalisation and the world trade system in Seattle earlier this year).
5. If governments are to rely more on the C.S. they must empower people (and their organisation or communities) and at the same time keep them to the rules. A political culture of dialogue and deliberation, that involves shifting groups of citizens in a variety of discursive procedures may help to commit people to the norms of pluralism and reformism. But it does not guarantee harmony. It also brings differences to the fore that have the potential to polarise the society. The mobilisation of the people may in fact make conflicts more visible and decision-making in dissent more common in politics. In sum: A greater role for the C.S. may not make democratic government an easier task. This is a price to pay. Return to a political culture of elite activism combined with apathy of the masses seems neither feasible nor desirable.