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Civil society is a distinct realm of modern human experience: family, friends, neighbours and citizens. It is the social glue that holds a country together and includes the strength of families, community voluntarism, interest groups, philanthropic associations, friendships, selflessness, public and civic spirit - the moral elements of society (North-South Institute, 1998). Civil society is the space of uncoerced human association and the set of relational networks formed for the sake of family, faith, interest and ideology that fill the space (Walzer, 1995). Actions taken by citizens to improve their communities and their societies make up what is frequently referred to as civil society. These actions are the basis on which democracy, pluralism, respect for human rights, good governance and the cohesiveness of society rest (Commonwealth Foundation, 1996). Patrick (1996) strongly argues that civil society is a core concept of democracy and that democracy flourishes where civil society flourishes; that is, where there is widespread exercise of social and civic freedom by citizens and a deep rooted establishment of values of freedom and self-reliance. Rather than exalting a singular portrayal of humankind (individual as either producer, consumer, politician or citizen), civil society embodies all of these while preferring none. All aspects of role diversity are necessary in order for society to feel sense of fulfilment (James Wolfe, 1997). When civil society is in decline, there is an imbalance in these roles: too much government, business, and/or consumption and too little citizen.

**The Decline of Social Capital and A Civil Society**

Ironically, civil society is sagging in North America at the very moment it is making a resurgence in the rest of the world, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. This decline in civil society is leading to social disconnectedness, reduced civic engagement and declining civic trust. There is a degeneration of such virtues as leadership, trust, tolerance, civility and self-reliance. This situation does not bode well for civil society since Varga (1998) notes that civil values include loyalty to fellow citizens, respect for the law, fairness, philanthropy, tolerance and voluntarism. Indeed, Bibby (1995) found that the social values of honesty, reliability, politeness (civility) and forgiveness have declined in Canada since 1995. Canadians are now characterized by an increasing emphasis on the individual and the idea that truth is relative. He blames the decline of forgiveness on the emphasis on zero tolerance. Reid (1997) maintains that Canadians still value mutual trust, civility and community responsibility, sharing, inclusiveness, voluntarism, fairness and equality but that these values are being threatened by the dynamics and mean-spiritedness of the new economy. "Self-interest is replacing collective responsibility, mistrust is unseating confidence in public institutions [and authority] and optimism about our collective future is declining" (pp. 323-324).

The dysfunction of today's institutions (government, market, church, education system, judicial system and families) is also leading to a decline in human and social capital. Human capital is the abilities, knowledge and skills each *person* acquires and develops throughout their lifetime. Human capital builds up in the context of social capital. Social capital refers to the features of *communities* which make them more productive and provide more opportunities: trust, communication, teamwork and reciprocity (Burt, 1997; Jerome-Forget, 1997; Putnam, 1996). The concept of *human assets* has recently been introduced as a term which "incorporates both the 'human capital' and the 'social and cultural capital' ideas. It indicates that man, even as an economic factor, is a personal, familial and social being with an inalterable value, with inalienable rights and potential capabilities, independent of the physical, psychological, material,

social and cultural circumstances" (von Schweitzer, 1997, p.3). *Wisdom capital* underlies all communities (it is the community's common ground) and refers to the available store of thought collected over thousands of years that calls us to live in ways that sustain well-being for others. It is handed down through stories retold from age to age, whether written or unwritten (religious texts, constitutions, and codes that have stood the test to time). Wisdom capital reflects calls for justice, honesty, tolerance, compassion, generosity, self-discipline and courage (Gaudiani, 1998).

Human, social and wisdom capital and human assets are also in decline (as is civil society) due to: (a) women moving into the work force (Putnam calls this demographics), (b) a decline in income insecurity and standard of living, (c) the disinclination of young people to engage in civic activity, (d) suburbanization (fragmented and isolated suburbia that is less congenial to social connectedness), (e) fewer yards, balconies and porches conducive to relating and connecting (architecture), (f) government urban renewal policies that destroy well-functioning communities for the sake of newer and better homes but unknown neighbours, (g) changes in the economy, and (h) technology, especially television, the Internet and computers (Putnam, 1995, 1996a). In another article, Putnam (1996b) suggests that: (i) busyness and time pressures, (j) disruption of marriages, family ties and community ties, and (k) the growth of the welfare state and subsequent dependencies and isolation from mainstream society also contribute to a decline in civil society and social connectedness.

What is needed is a renewed commitment to the civic life of the country to overcome the growing sense of alienation, detachment and aimlessness of the nation's people (Karp, 1997). This renewal will be a challenge given that Canadians: (a) feel less in control of their economic destiny, (b) are functioning in an economy that exports 85% of its products to one country (United States) running the chance of economic slowdown contingent on the US economy, (c) have a lowering standard of living due to declining economic productivity and exorbitantly high taxes, (d) are experiencing unemployment or underemployment because demand for products made in Canada is not growing fast enough, and (e) are feeling the impact of a 30% cut in government funding for secondary education leading to an inadequate number of university and college graduates. The latter point is compounded by the reality that almost one third of high school students drop out of school and that the students who do graduate from university move to United States - brain drain (Janigan, 1999). Canadians are becoming demoralized, frightened, frustrated, unwillingly dependent on the United States, and disillusioned with Canadian society. The economic insecurity of Canadian citizens is significant given that Putnam (1995) found that economic performance within a country with a profuse network of associations is consistently higher than areas with negligible levels of civic interaction! We need civic engagement to strengthen our economy!

### **A Civil Society Versus The Civil Society**

Wolfe (1997) proclaims that civil society will not continue to decline because, without a realm of associational and communal life independent of the market and the state, we cannot experience the richness of citizenship and the rewards of personal and group responsibility. Whereas the previous discussion relates more so to "**A civil society**", Wolfe's comments lead us to a discussion of "**THE civil society**". Relative to the public sector and the private sector, the civil society is made up of non-commercial, non-governmental, and public interest organizations all focussed on altering the current social structure to compensate for the centralization of power and to mitigate the shortcomings of markets and the political process on behalf of citizens at large (Consumers International, 1997); *that is, the civil society is comprised of people trying to*

*compensate for a less civil society.* Those working in the civil society are supposed to act as a counterweight to state and market power, opening up channels of communication and participation for marginalized groups, providing training grounds for activists and promoting pluralism and democratic values (Edwards & Hulme, 1995). The civil society provides a collective voice for those who individually have little access to power with policy makers and thereby brings to policy makers the insight and experience of those working with and on behalf of marginalized citizens (Canadian Council for International Co-operation [CCIC], 1995). The players in the civil society share the policy arena with the state and market players. Table 1 integrates CCIC's understanding of the players in the civil society with the Vanier Institute of the Family's (1992) understanding of the fundamental functions performed by the family as a democratic social institution.

**Table 1 Players in Civil Society**

| FAMILY   | CIVIL SOCIETY   | PRIVATE AND STATE SECTORS  |
|--|---|--|
| <p>There are many forms of families but each type of family has six main functions to create <i>human capital and wisdom capital</i>:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>procreation or addition of new members</i></li> <li>2. <i>physical maintenance and care to meet basic needs</i></li> <li>3. <i>socialization of children into adult roles</i></li> <li>4. <i>consumption, production and conservation of goods and services</i></li> <li>5. <i>nurturance, support and love</i></li> <li>6. <i>social control of members</i> (VIF, 1992; CHEA, 1994)</li> </ol> | <p>"the civil society is the social space between families and the private sector and the state where entities address the power relations within the society and work with marginalized citizens to empower them... and help them gain access to material, political, social and cultural resources" (CCIC,1995, pp.11,12)</p> <p>Civil society creates <i>social capital</i>: ethnic, racial, gender relationships and human rights. Members of civil society include entities autonomous from the state and private sectors: NGO's, professional associations, grass roots organizations, labour unions, cooperatives, media, religious assemblages, etc</p> | <p>State must create the necessary <i>policy environment</i></p> <p>Private sector creates <i>financial and physical capital</i></p> |

Foley and Edwards (1996) identify two differing positions on the role of civil society relative to the state. First, they suggest that civil society has to be in partnership with the state and then, second, that civil society has to be a counterweight to the state's power. In the latter instance, it is a autonomous sphere of social power (much like that portrayed in Table 1) within which citizens can pressure authority for change, protect themselves and develop or advocate for democracy from the ground up. In the former situation, the civil society is not anti-political but rather works with the state for the common good.

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## ***Glossary***

**Civil society** is made up of non-commercial, non-governmental, and public interest

organizations all focussed on: altering the current social structure to compensate for the centralization of power and to mitigate the shortcomings of markets and the political process on behalf of citizens at large (Consumers International, 1997).

Those working in the civil society are supposed to act as a counterweight to state power by:

- (a) opening up channels of communication and participation for marginalized groups,
- (b) providing training grounds for activists and
- (c) promoting pluralism (Edwards & Hulme, 1995).

Those working in civil society provide a collective voice for those who individually have little access to power with policy makers and thereby bring to policy makers the insight and experience of those working with and on behalf of marginalized citizens.

**Human capital** is the abilities, knowledge and skills each *person* acquires and develops throughout their lifetime. Human capital builds up in the context of social capital.

**Social capital** refers to the features of *communities* which make them more productive and provide more opportunities: trust, communication, teamwork and reciprocity (Burt, 1997; Jerome-Forget, 1997; Putnam, 1996). Social capital refers to a sense of belonging.

**Wisdom capital** underlies all communities (it is the community's common ground) and refers to the available store of thought collected over thousands of years that calls us to live in ways that sustain well-being for others. It is handed down through stories retold from age to age, whether written or unwritten (religious texts, constitutions, and codes that have stood the test to time). Wisdom capital reflects calls for justice, honesty, tolerance, compassion, generosity, self-discipline and courage (Gaudiani, 1998).

The *civil society* is tasked with strengthening human and social capital and human assets (von Schweitzer, 1997) all of which are in decline due to: demographics, income insecurity, age, suburbanization, architecture, mobility, government policies, the economy and technology (Putnam, 1996). In the civil society, the NGO community strives to redress this imbalance. "The NGO and voluntary sector includes a wide range of community, grassroots and peoples organizations, development and environmental non-governmental organizations, churches, labour unions, **professional associations** and cooperatives" (CIDA, 1995, p.3). NGO and voluntary organizations "comprise an important part of *civil society*, the web of organizations and **associations outside the realm of the family** that are autonomous of government and not-for-profit in their orientation (CIDA, 1995, p.3). NGOs "act in the name of memberships as well as the global common good" (Spiro, 1994, p.47).