



Introduction: Sustainability, Democracy and the Dark Sides of Civil Society

Amanda Machin¹ · Alexander Ruser¹

Accepted: 12 March 2023 / Published online: 14 April 2023
© The Author(s) 2023

Abstract

Despite widespread acknowledgement of the value of sustainability, the transition towards more sustainable economies and societies remains a challenge around the world. Civil societies play an important role not only in supporting government efforts on sustainability by ‘filling gaps’ and raising social awareness, but also in pioneering new practices and disrupting particular governmental or corporate strategies, as well as engaging and empowering previously marginalised individuals and groups. Yet civil society is not always a champion of sustainability nor of democracy; these actors may of course also destabilise innovations, depoliticise sustainability issues by reifying certain concepts or approaches and reinforce social hierarchies and patterns of exclusion that can undermine any transformative potential and bolster the unsustainable status quo. This Special Issue is therefore dedicated to interrogating what we see as the ambiguous, yet critical, role played by civil societies in sustainability politics. This introductory paper intends not only to draw attention to some of the arguments, theories and challenges found in each of the individual papers collected here, but also to pull on the common threads that run through them, as well as to unpick some of the different uses of the key terminology that they employ. We aim, moreover, to highlight the inevitable tension between the ‘democratic side’ and the ‘dark side’ of civil society and its politics of sustainability.

Keywords Civil society · Sustainability · Democracy · Politics · Dark side

Despite widespread acknowledgement of the value of sustainability, the transition towards more sustainable economies and societies remains a challenge around the world. Climate change, biodiversity loss, sharpening inequality and other interconnected global issues call for a sturdy response, while there is growing recognition that market mechanisms and top-down state governance cannot by themselves

✉ Amanda Machin
amanda.machin@uia.no

¹ Department of Sociology, University of Agder, Postboks 422, 4604 Kristiansand, Norway

drive the requisite structural change (Dirix et al., 2013; Pandey, 2014; Scoones et al., 2015). Civil societies play an important role not only in supporting government efforts on sustainability by ‘filling gaps’ and raising social awareness, but also in pioneering new practices and disrupting particular governmental or corporate strategies, as well as engaging and empowering previously marginalised individuals and groups (Adloff, 2021; Aigner et al., 2001; Frantzeskaki et al., 2016). Social movements, charities, religious groups, cultural associations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) therefore contribute to sustainability politics by building alliances, consolidating networks, prefiguring alternatives, generating knowledge, monitoring strategies and testing different approaches. Yet civil society is not always a champion of sustainability nor of democracy; these actors may of course also destabilise innovations, depoliticise sustainability issues by reifying certain concepts or approaches and reinforce social hierarchies and patterns of exclusion that can undermine any transformative potential and bolster the unsustainable status quo.

This Special Issue is dedicated to interrogating what we see as the ambiguous, yet critical, role played by civil societies in sustainability politics. It aims to expand knowledge about theoretical conceptions of and methodological approaches to civil society, as well as providing case studies from around the world that offer critical insights into this important arena, mediator and driver of the politics of sustainability. This introduction intends not only to draw attention to some of the arguments, theories and challenges found in each of the individual papers collected here, but also to pull on the common threads that run through them, as well as to unpick some of the different uses of the key terminology that they employ. ‘Civil society’, ‘sustainability’ and ‘politics’ are all highly contested concepts so while we do not aim to offer a rigid definition of these terms, we do try to highlight the ways that they are put to work in this Special Issue. We consider this key terminology in the next section, before moving to a more general discussion of some of the possibilities and challenges for civil society in relation to sustainability and democratic politics.

Introducing Contested Concepts: Sustainability, Politics and Civil Society

First, how do we use the term *sustainability*? Sustainability is a widely championed concept, first used in the early eighteenth century by German forester Hans Carl von Carlowitz, who was worried about the ‘sustainable use’ of the forest (2012, p. 105). Sustainability featured prominently in discussions in the 1980s as a response to concerns that traditional models of economic growth and development threatened environmental stability (Shiva, 1992). The model of ‘sustainable development’ that emerged in response to these discussions demands that economic growth is reconciled with environmental protection as well as social progress (Baker, 2006, p. 5). ‘Sustainable development’ has subsequently become a mainstream environmental principle, perhaps its most significant expression coming with the launch of UN’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that range from ending poverty,

hunger and inequality to promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, tackling climate change and halting biodiversity loss.¹ Critics, however, note the underlying, and false, assumption that reconciling environmental sustainability with economic development is straightforward, and argue there are “major tensions” between them (Gibbs et al., 1998). For many, ‘sustainable development’ is simply an oxymoron (Redclift, 2005, p. 225).

The extent to which sustainability contradicts or complements development arguably hinges on whether it is understood in the ‘strong’ or ‘weak’ sense. Whereas ‘weak sustainability’ tends to emphasise environmental efficiency and the possibility of substituting natural capital with human capital, ‘strong sustainability’ demands that economic growth is constrained (Neumayer, 2013; Gibbs et al., 1998, p. 1,353; Goodland, 1995). As this indicates, there is little agreement over what ‘sustainability’ actually implies. Some make a distinction between ‘social’, ‘economic’ and ‘environmental’ sustainability (Goodland, 1995). ‘Economic sustainability’ can be achieved through the maintenance of capital, whereas ‘social sustainability’ demands population stability and community cohesion (Goodland, 1995, p. 3). Robert Goodland argues however that ‘environmental sustainability’ is a prerequisite for these other two: ‘environmental sustainability or maintenance of life-support systems is a prerequisite for social sustainability’ (1995, p. 2). And yet the papers in this Special Issue reveal that these different dimensions are not easily separated. In particular, the contributions by Maureen Donaghy and Jeffrey Paller and by Chandra Lal Pandey suggest that the connection between social and environmental sustainability works the other way too; strategies to promote environmental sustainability are futile without the provision of basic social goods and services (such as affordable housing and road connectivity) that can build the trust needed to underpin long-term environmental policies (Donaghy & Paller, 2023). Social inequality and exclusion can be drivers of unsustainable practices (Pandey, 2023).

The different dimensions of sustainability and their interconnections can therefore be interpreted in multiple ways, which is why we support the idea that sustainability is an ‘essentially contested concept’ (Ehrenfeld, 2008; Connelly, 2007). As W. B. Gallie explains, rival uses of such a concept are not only likely but are ‘of permanent potential critical value to one’s own use or interpretation of the concept in question’ (Gallie, 1955–6, p. 193). So, although the lack of a clear definition is commonly seen as a problem, by some accounts the inevitable contestation and ongoing discussion over sustainability help to ensure the social learning and inclusive discussions that can challenge the unsustainable status quo *and* enrich democracy (Hammond & Smith, 2017, p. 8; Machin, 2020). This is why we are interested in the *politics* of sustainability; the way sustainability issues are framed and challenged in the public sphere, and how they may provoke individuals and groups to participate in democratic life. Although much of the discussion is focused on the technical aspects of transforming society, in order to grasp the possibilities and implications of environmental policy, it is important to study the politics around it as well. Ian Scoones points out: ‘As the world moves toward implementing the

¹ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

SDGs and realizing the climate agreement – from global to local settings – politics will come to the fore’ (2016, p. 295).

Second, then, how do we use the term *politics*? Politics is also a highly contested concept. Although it is often colloquially understood in terms of the formal institutions, mechanisms and activity of government or ‘the sphere of the state’ (Sartori, 1973, p. 19; Weber, 1946, p. 77), this narrow definition is rejected by those who refuse to reduce politics to a set of institutions and utilise a broader conception of politics as encompassing the ceaseless activity across society that involves ‘expressing and resolving differences and finding ways of cooperating to achieve collective action’ (Stoker, 2006, p. 5). As Gerry Stoker puts it: ‘Politics exists because we do not agree with one another’ (2006, p. 2). Significant political governance, participation and negotiation occurs outside the arena of formal government — as revealed, not least, by the ‘everyday politics’ unfolding at local level in the cities of the Global South (Paller, 2020). It is important to notice that women, frequently excluded from state institutions, have commonly found it easier to be politically active at the local level in community organisations that have provided the possibility to mobilise for equality and enfranchisement (Howell, 2005, p. 5; Bútorová, 2009). A significant amount of political participation is thus located in ‘civil society’ and that participation may be directed at challenging the very boundaries of formal politics. Indeed, for Jacques Rancière, politics does not consist in governing based on sedimented divisions of society, but rather involves questioning, contesting and deciding those very divisions (2004, p. 6). As he writes: ‘All political action presupposes the refutation of a situation’s given assumptions, the introduction of previously uncounted objects and subjects... Politics is a local, precarious, contingent activity’ (2004, pp. 7–8).

We therefore define the *politics of sustainability* (or what we are calling here ‘sustainability politics’) as activities connected to the emergence and consolidation of political subjects, coalitions and organisations who debate, deliberate, defy and defend the *unsustainable* distribution of resources, boundaries and power. Sustainability politics will certainly not be ‘politics as usual’ (Paterson & Newell, 2010, p. ix) but will ‘play out on a terrain of competing discourses, institutions and material interests in diverse contexts’ (Scoones et al., 2015, p. 24). There is an important role for ‘bottom-up’ mobilisation, outside the formal political arena of the state, often led by local civil society groups occupying ‘invited and existing spaces of participation’ (Newell, 2008, p. 124). These groups might take new forms, as Simone Schiller-Merkens and Amanda Machin show in their contribution on Food Policy Councils as a novel type of alternative food organisation that is working to harness the critical capacity of civil society to make the global food system more sustainable (Schiller-Merkens & Machin, 2023). In short, a key location for the creative and democratic politics of sustainability, as we seek to illustrate in this Special Issue, is civil society.

Yet, just like ‘sustainability’ and ‘politics’, *civil society* is also a contested and ambiguous term (Purdue, 2007, p. 1; Buttigieg, 1995, p. 2; Flyvbjerg, 1998; Jensen, 2006). It has more often been defined by what it is *not* (as an arena that is separate from the state, the family, the clan and the market) than what it actually *is* (Shils, 1991, p. 3; Salamon & Anheier, 1998; Anheier et al., 2019). Some theorists suggest it can be understood more positively as a space of ‘associational life’ (Chambers & Kopstein, 2006, p. 363) in which individuals are free to form and join

voluntary associations and movements; a sphere of ‘willed action’ (Baker, 2002, p. 6) where ‘society is organizing itself’ (Hoelscher et al., 2022, p. 1; Calhoun, 1993; Flyvberg, 1998). For Simone Chambers and Jeffrey Kopstein, civil society is ‘a sphere in which individuals come together and form groups, pursue common enterprises, share interests, communicate over important and sometimes not so important matters’ (2006, p. 364). Others, following Gramsci, see it as a terrain of hegemony or struggle in which the coercive power of the state is both deployed and confronted (Buttigieg, 1995, p. 7).

Civil society has its origins in Europe and can legitimately be accused of being a ‘Eurocentric construct loaded with the individualistic biases of European thought’ (Dutta-Bergman, 2005, p. 268) which was traditionally the order of men (Pateman, 1988). Notwithstanding the historical connections between European civil society and colonisation and patriarchy, a rich and significant body of work interrogates the way that civil societies operate in the global south to represent, connect and empower local communities and residents (Anheier, 1987; Bénit-Gbaffou & Oldfield, 2011; Donaghy, 2013; Habib, 2003; Kamruzzaman, 2018). This is confirmed in this Special Issue: in his contribution, for example, Filipe Mendes Motta highlights the constellation of civil society groups around the damaging practice of iron ore mining in Brazil (Motta, 2023). Donaghy and Paller also highlight the significant activities of civil society in cities in Brazil as well as Ghana, while Pandey attends to the role of local neighbourhood associations as key civil society actors in Nepal (Donaghy & Paller, 2023).

Civil society politics of sustainability can be detected in, and constituted by, the formation and sustaining of groups and movements who might on the one hand stabilise the status quo, but who might on the other resist and challenge it (Kamruzzaman, 2018, p. 2; Habib, 2003, p. 238), and who do not only engage in protest but who create, experiment with and *live* alternatives (Adloff, 2021; Schiller-Merkens, 2020, 2022). NGOs have been shown to have an impact on cancelling environmentally damaging policies and campaigning for environmentally friendly legislation (Neumayer, 2013, p. 92), in setting standards (Lambin & Thorlakson, 2018, p. 371) and in holding governments and organisations at various levels accountable (Newell, 2008). Although their effectiveness will depend upon the extent of networks and institutionalisation, civil society associations can expose corruption and communicate the needs of *local* residents to officials (Donaghy, 2013). As Joanna Flavell shows in her contribution, they can also work at the *global* level to allow women to make collective demands in relation to climate change that might otherwise go unheard (Flavell, 2023; see also Flavell, 2022). Civil society groups are potentially rich sources of imagination and knowledge (Leach & Scoones, 2015, p. 119; see also Schiller-Merkens & Machin, 2023). Helmut Anheier thus attends in his contribution in this Special Issue to the sustainability of civil society *itself*, which he regards as critical in ensuring the possibility of sustainable development (Anheier, 2023). As we will see, however, the claim that civil society works unrelentingly for democracy and sustainability is to romanticise its character and to overlook its ‘dark sides’.

The Democratic and Dark Sides of Civil Society

Civil society is said to be the ‘cradle of democracy’ (Purdue, 2007, p. 1), and there has been a widespread agreement that its destruction or disappearance ‘signals the demise of democracy’ (Chambers & Kopstein, 2001, p. 838; see also Keane, 1998, p. 114). As we have already indicated, around the world, civil society allows individuals who may have been excluded or alienated from formal politics to become politically active, and it can hold the state to account (Stoker, 2006, p. 29). The ‘grassroots’ participation encouraged by civil society organisations and social movements can be seen as a source of democracy. Yet, the democratic capacity of civil society differs according to its context and character and can be interpreted in opposing ways.

It seems clear to some that civil society is characterised by plurality and is constituted by a diversity of groups with different – and even contradictory – agendas (Habib, 2003, p. 228). In many contexts, such political plurality and diversity can be seen as fostering a vibrant democracy and as serving ‘broad social goals such as growth and equity’ (Ben-Ner, 2022, p. 302; Habib, 2003, p. 239). As Craig Calhoun reminds us, ‘democracy depends not just on the attitudes of individuals but on the social organization of groups’ (1993, p. 268). Yet, while supporting and enriching democracy, such pluralism can at the same time produce fragmentation, polarisation and opposition to others that can destabilise society and preclude cooperation (Ben-Ner, 2022, p. 286). This was the concern of Edward Shils who promoted the virtue of ‘civility’ that he defined as ‘a mode of political action’ (Shils, 1991, p. 13) and ‘an attitude of concern for the good of the entire society’ (1991, p. 11). Civility, according to Shils, protects civil society and ‘limits the intensity of conflict’ (1991, p. 15). The balance between respecting political differences while ensuring respect between them has long concerned scholars of civil society (Gutmann, 1998). Robert Putnam makes a useful distinction between ‘bonding’ that takes place *within* a particular group to bolster exclusive and ‘narrower’ identities and ‘bridging’ that makes connections *across* social cleavages and between different groups and instigates broader identifications (Putnam, 2000, p. 22). For some, the value of civil society comes with its ‘bridging’ capacities (Chambers & Kopstein, 2001). As Adam Seligman explains, civil society can be understood as a normative concept that ‘embodies for many an ethical ideal of the social order, one that, if not overcomes, at least harmonises, the conflicting demands of individual interest and social good’ (1992).

At the same time, this normative ideal of civil society as united around a shared and unitary ‘social good’, is challenged by more critical scholars (Howell, 2005, p. 16; Kamruzzaman, 2018, p. 2). Palash Kamruzzaman argues that this universalising picture ‘shrinks the possibilities of including assorted organizations in understanding civil society in non-Western contexts’ (2018, p. 2). This picture also risks veiling the significant inequalities and exclusions of civil society. Civil society, it must be remembered, is historically *based on* the exclusion of women and everything they symbolised (Pateman, 1988, p. 123). As John Keane admits, ‘civil society cannot be thought of accurately as an inclusive domain in which every citizens

can hope to attain freedom, individuality and social justice' (1988, p. 20). Jude Howell has observed that by placing the family outside civil society, theorists have not only been able to overlook the power relations and conflicts within the family, but also the implications for the gendered construction of civil society (2005, p. 3). While civil society has provided a space for feminist campaigns, 'it can also be an arena where gendered behaviours, norms and practices are acted out and reproduced' (2005, p. 6). To demand homogeneity across civil society is thus to potentially undermine the possibility of challenges to the circulation of powerful discourses and imaginaries that construct its boundaries and possibilities, just as to simply demand the inclusion of women is not enough to ensure a realm of democracy and freedom, which rather depends upon the deconstruction and reassembling of our notions of civil society (Pateman, 1988, p. 123).

For those advocating an agonistic approach to environmental politics, it is precisely the formation and disagreement between distinct groups that allows unsustainable institutions to be disrupted and strong alternatives to be created and asserted (Machin, 2022, p. 309). As Bent Flyvberg notes, feminist and environmentalist civil society actors have managed to push their issues onto the political agenda not by seeking consensus, but through conflict and struggle (1998, p. 226). As he writes, 'strong civil society guarantees the existence of conflict. A strong understanding of civil society and of democracy, must therefore be based on thought that places conflict and power at its centre' (1998, p. 229). The concern that arises here is how the celebration of conflict as enriching for democracy can be balanced with the safeguards that ensure that such conflict does not threaten to destroy democratic life.

A further important tension in civil society lies in its relation to states and governments. As Donaghy observes, civil society organisations in Brazil may 'be key for making democracy work for the poor' but in order to truly understand that possibility 'we still need more information about how democratic institutions and civil society best hold governments accountable for improving the lives of citizens' (2013, p. 6). While critical actors must communicate with policy-makers, crucially they must also retain their autonomy and avoid their activity being 'captured' by the state (Kover, 2015). For some Management and Public Administration scholars, such a capturing of civil society activity is essential for implementing forms of 'New Public Governance' in which public services are guaranteed (Dickinson, 2016, p. 43). Yet a common concern, appearing in several of the papers in this Special Issue, is the loss of 'critical edge' that may come with 'scaling up and out through networking and alliance-building' (Leach & Scoones, 2015, p. 133). For instance, Schiller-Merkens and Machin describe how Food Policy Councils have to decide whether to include public officials and members of local governments as members, which risks facilitating the disproportionate influence of authoritative discourses, or to remain radical and exclude those who might be able to help translate their proposals into policy (Schiller-Merkens & Machin, 2023). This issue is also highlighted by Motta who observes that while more established Brazilian NGOs more closely connected to the mining industry may 'flirt with the discourse of sustainable development' (Motta, 2023), they refrain from confronting potentially environmentally damaging strategies. Similarly, Flavell highlights in her contribution that feminist civil society organisations must decide whether to work pragmatically in mobilising

rhetorical strategies that get them a ‘seat at the negotiating table’ but which may reinforce patriarchal power structures (Flavell, 2023). For Jonathan Murphy, then, we cannot take for granted that NGOs or other civil society actors ‘always act autonomously from business and government’, are ‘authentically driven by their grassroots constituencies’, are ‘democratic in a meaningful sense’ or ‘support greater economic and social equity’ (2010, p. 254).

Another related concern is that the discourse of civil society at the global level may undermine bottom-up resistance to oppressive political and economic elites (Hearn, 2007). There is a widespread assumption ‘that civil society is the elixir to the problems of the Third World’ (Dutta-Bergman, 2005, p. 269). This assumption underpins and legitimises the rhetoric of ‘civil society building’ that cements new forms of dependency, expanding and consolidating what Firoze Manji and Carl O’Coill call ‘neo-colonialism’ (2002, p. 575) and ultimately ending up ‘stealing the participatory voice of Third World citizens’ (Dutta-Bergman, 2005, p. 274).

Civil societies, in short, have their ‘dark sides’ that appear often only at the edges of theory and hidden behind rhetoric but are nevertheless important and constitutive features. Our point therefore is *not* that there is a problematic ‘bad civil society’ with ‘bad organizations’ (Chambers & Kopstein, 2001, p. 838) but that any ‘good civil society’ comes with potential exclusions, limitations and challenges. In other words, there is an inevitable tension between the ‘democratic side’ and the ‘dark side’ of civil society and its politics of sustainability.

Outline of the Contributions

In this Special Issue, then, we are interested in the way that civil societies operate democratically to allow individuals to seek sustainable alternatives in different geographical, socio-political, economic and cultural contexts and how this reflects, mitigates and exacerbates existing hierarchies and inequalities.

By bringing together studies from European, African, Asian and South American countries in rethinking the meaning of sustainability, politics and civil society, we hope to counter the Euro-centric tendencies of civil society research. These tendencies are exposed, for example, by Kamruzzaman, whose work rejects the idea of a universal form of civil society. He argues that across the contemporary world ‘civil society actors adopt varied institutional formats, defend different political projects, embrace multiple religions and develop distinctive cultural practices’ (Kamruzzaman, 2018, p. 7). We take seriously then the advice to conceive of civil *societies* as distinct (Flanagan et al., 2011, p. 113) and to consider their specific historical patterns of inclusion and exclusion (ibid, p. 116). We highlight and interrogate not only the important role that civil society plays in engaging individuals in sustainability politics, but also the ‘dark sides’ of civil society that appear in various guises and should not be underestimated or under-analysed in any account of sustainability politics.

The issues and questions raised by the contributors offer a rich body of insights into the emerging constellation of actors, institutions, discourses and imaginaries around the politics of sustainability in civil society. Together, they indicate that although civil society actors and organisations can be highly innovative and disruptive in relation

to sustainability transformation and can ‘fill the gaps’ left by governments and states (Lambin & Thorlakson, 2018), they can also be conservative, obstructive and hierarchical (Youngs, 2018). In other words, rather than overburdening civil society actors with expectations to solve sustainability issues by offering bottom-up solutions to problems that cannot be solved by political and economic elites, the Special Issue encourages a comprehensive approach to the role of civil society in sustainability politics.

The interplay of top-down and bottom-up initiatives to develop and implement sustainability politics at the local level is at the centre of the first contribution of this special issue. In their article *Knowing Food: Food Policy Councils and the Challenges of Co-Producing Knowledge*, Machin and Schiller-Merkens explore Food Policy Councils’ role in co-producing knowledge to provide more inclusive, less hierarchical arenas for the production, exchange and transmission of knowledge about sustainable food. The second article of the Special Issue, by Donaghy and Paller, deals with *Sustainability Politics and Housing Development in Urban Brazil and Ghana*. The article adds to the exploration of the promises and potentials of problems of local civil society involvement but shifts the focus to sustainable urban development in two countries from the Global South. Focusing on community organisations in both São Paulo, Brazil and Accra, Ghana, the authors investigate the relations, resources, ideologies and ‘pathways of engagement’ of these organisations and consider whether and how they can contribute to navigate the fault lines between long-term urban sustainable development plans and the short-term needs of residents.

The third paper shifts the focus to the Himalayan region and invites the reader to consider the sustainability politics of urbanisation in Nepal. In his article *Capturing the Role of Civil Society for Urban Sustainability in Nepal*, Pandey provides original data from a qualitative research project and asks if local neighbourhood associations can help to close the accountability gap left by government organisations and so build trust in sustainable urban development in one of the fastest urbanising countries of the world. Pandey paints a fairly positive picture of the role of local civil society actors for both democracy and sustainability, yet also points to their ‘dark side’ in the form of corruption. Similarly, in the fourth article *Struggles Against Mining in Brazil: Articulations and Tensions in Civil Society*, Mendes Motta assesses the array of civil society actors involved in resisting the expansion of mining in Brazil and highlights the tension and conflict within and between civil society actors which, he argues, hampers the success of environmental movements and organisations.

The fifth contribution, by Flavell, changes perspective from the local to the global and outlines *Lessons from the Women and Gender Constituency: Interrogating Civil Society Strategies for Organising in the UNFCCC*. Drawing on original data, the article shows the potentials and the constraints of working within institutionalised structures for civil society engagements and demonstrates how these structures ‘pigeonhole different identities’. The sixth and final contribution, by the celebrated civil society scholar Helmut Anheier, takes the relations between civil society and sustainability to an even higher level by reversing the question. In his *Civil Society and Sustainability: An Essay on the Long View*, Anheier dares to look ahead and probes the challenges and contingencies of the sustainability of civil society itself.

To summarise, this Special Issue aims at widening the scope for research on the intersection between sustainability politics and civil society. The contributions

collected in this issue provide valuable insights and original data from a variety of geographical and political contexts and shed light on selected sustainability challenges. While each article presents a theoretical and empirically interesting case, we also intend to show how a more comprehensive analysis of the roles played by civil societies is crucial in understanding sustainability politics. By bringing both the democratic and dark sides of civil society to light, scholarly debate about the promises and pathologies of civil society engagement with sustainability politics can be freed from naïve normative expectations and narrow cultural definitions, enabling a more comprehensive discussion about the sustainable transition of economies, politics and societies.

Funding Open access funding provided by University of Agder.

Declarations

Ethics Approval The research did not involve human or animal participants.

Consent to Participate Informed consent is not relevant.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Adloff, F. (2021). Capitalism and civil society revisited or: Conceptualizing a civil, sustainable and solidary economy. *International Journal of Politics Culture and Society*, 34, 149–159.
- Anheier, H. K. (1987). Vergleichende Aspekte zur Rolle von Nicht- Regierungsorganisationen in Afrika. *Internationales Afrika-Forum*, 23(2), 183–190.
- Anheier, H. K. (2023). Civil society and sustainability: An essay on the long view. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 0(0), 0–0.
- Anheier, H. K., Toepler, S., & Lang, M. (2019). Civil society in times of change: Shrinking, changing and expanding spaces and the need for new regulatory approaches. *Economics: The Open-Access. Open-Assessment E-Journal*, 13, 1–27.
- Aigner, S. M., Flora, C. B., & Hernandez, J. M. (2001). Empowering sustainable communities: The premise and promise of the empowerment zone/enterprise community initiative. *Sociological Inquiry*, 71(4), 493–507.
- Baker, G. (2002). *Civil society and democratic theory: Alternative voices*. Routledge.
- Baker, S. (2006). *Sustainable development*. Routledge.
- Ben-Ner, A. (2022). The dark side of the nonprofit sector: Polarization in contemporary society. In M. Hoelscher, R. A. List, A. Ruser, & S. Toepler (Eds.), *Civil Society: Concepts, Challenges, Contexts* (pp.285–308). Cham: Springer.

- Bénit-Gbaffou, C. & Oldfield, S. (2011). Accessing the state: Everyday practices and politics in cities of the south. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 46(5), 445–452.
- Bútorová, Z. (2009). Twenty years of maturing: Slovak women exploring the frontiers of democracy. *International Journal of Politics Culture and Society*, 22, 557.
- Buttigieg, J. A. (1995). Gramsci on civil society. *Boundary 2*, 22(3), 1–32.
- Calhoun, C. (1993). Civil society and the public sphere. *Public Culture*, 5, 267–328.
- Carlowitz, H. C. V. ([1713] 2012). *Sylvicultura Oeconomica, oder Haußwirthliche Nachricht und Naturmäßige Anweisung zur Wilden Baum Zucht*. Mit einer Einführung von Jürgen Huss & Friederike von Gadow, Remagen-Oberwinter: Verlag Kessel.
- Chambers, S., & Kopstein, J. (2001). Bad civil society. *Political Theory*, 29(6), 837–865.
- Chambers, S., & Kopstein, J. (2006). Civil society and the state. In J. Dryzek, B Honig, & A. Phillips (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory* (pp. 363–381). Oxford University Press.
- Connelly, S. (2007). Mapping sustainable development as a contested concept. *Local Environment*, 12(3), 259–278.
- Dickinson, H. (2016). From new public management to new public governance: The implications for a `new public service´. In J. R. Butcher & D. J. Gilchrist (Eds.), *The Three Sector Solution* (pp. 41–60). Australian National University Press.
- Dirix, Jo., Peeters, W., Johan, E., Jones, P. T., & Sterckx, S. (2013). Strengthening bottom-up and top-down climate governance. *Climate Policy*, 13(3), 363–383.
- Donaghy, M. (2013). *Civil society and participatory governance municipal councils and social housing programs in Brazil*. Routledge.
- Donaghy, M. & Paller, J. (2023). Sustainability politics and housing development in urban Brazil and Ghana. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 0(0), 0–0.
- Dutta-Bergman, M. J. (2005). Civil society and public relations: Not so civil after all. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 17(3), 267–289.
- Ehrenfeld, J. R. (2008). Sustainability needs to be attained, not managed. *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, 4(2), 1–3.
- Flanagan, C., Loreto, M. M., & Cumsille, P. (2011). Civil societies as cultural and developmental contexts for civic identity formation. In L. A. Jensen (Ed.), *Bridging Cultural And Developmental Approaches to Psychology* (pp. 113–137). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Flavell, J. (2022). *Mainstreaming gender in global climate governance: Women and gender constituency in the UNFCCC*. Routledge.
- Flavell, J. (2023). Lessons from the women and gender constituency: Interrogating civil society strategies for organising in the UNFCCC. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 0(0), 0–0.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (1998). Habermas and Foucault: Thinkers for civil society? *The British Journal of Sociology*, 49(2), 210–233.
- Frantzeskaki, N., et al. (2016). Elucidating the changing roles of civil society in urban sustainability transitions. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 22, 41–50.
- Gallie, W. B. (1955–6). Essentially contested concepts. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56, 167–198.
- Gibbs, et al. (1998). Struggling with sustainability: Weak and strong interpretations of sustainable development within local authority policy. *Environment and Planning A*, 30, 1351–1365.
- Goodland, R. (1995). The concept of environmental sustainability. *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics*, 26, 1–24.
- Gutmann, A. (1998). Freedom of association: An introductory essay. In A. Gutman (Ed.), *Freedom of Association* (pp. 3–33). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Habib, A. (2003). State-civil society relations in post-apartheid South Africa. In J. Daniel, A. Habib & R. Southall (Eds.), *State of the Nation South Africa 2003–2004* (pp. 227–241). Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Hammond, M., & Graham, S. (2017). Sustainable prosperity and democracy: A research agenda. *CUSP Working Paper*. No 8. Guildford: University of Surrey. Online at: www.cusp.ac.uk/publications
- Hearn, J. (2007). African NGO's: The new compradors? *Development and Change*, 38(6), 1095–1110.
- Hoelscher, M., List, R. A., Ruser, A., & Toepfer, S. (2022). Civil society concepts, challenges, and contexts: An introduction to Helmut Anheier's Festschrift. In Hoelscher et al (Ed.), *Civil Society: Concepts, Challenges, Contexts*, (pp. 1–12). Cham: Springer.
- Howell, J. (2005). Introduction. In J. Howell & D. Mulligan (Eds.), *Gender and Civil Society: Transcending Boundaries* (pp.1–22). London and NY: Routledge.
- Jensen, M. N. (2006). Concepts and conceptions of civil society. *Journal of Civil Society*, 2(1), 39–56.

- Kamruzzaman, P. (2018). Introduction – Civil society in the global South. In P. Kamruzzaman (Ed.), *Civil Society in the Global South* (pp. 1–24). London and NY: Routledge.
- Keane, J. (1988). Introduction. In J. Keane (Ed.), *Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives* (pp. 1–31). London: Verso.
- Keane, J. (1998). *Civil Society: Old Images, New Visions*. Cambridge, Oxford: Polity.
- Kover, A. (2015). Captured by state and church: Concerns about civil society in democratic Hungary *Nonprofit Policy Forum*, 6(2), 187–212.
- Lambin, E. F., & Thorlakson, T. (2018). Sustainability standards: Interactions between private actors, civil society, and governments. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 43, 369–393.
- Leach, M., & Scoones, I. (2015). Mobilizing for green transformations. In I. Scoones, M. Leach & P. Newell (Eds.), *The Politics of Green Transformations* (pp. 119–133). London and New York: Routledge.
- Machin, A. (2020). Democracy, disagreement, disruption: Agonism and the environmental state. *Environmental Politics*, 29(1), 155–172.
- Machin, A. (2022). Climate change and green democratic transformations. In B. Bornemann, H. Knappe & P. Nanz (Eds.), *The Handbook of Democracy and Sustainability* (pp. 301–312). London and New York: Routledge.
- Manji, F., & O’Coill, C. (2002). The missionary position: NGO’s and development in Africa. *International Affairs*, 78(3), 567–583.
- Motta, F. M. (2023). Struggles against mining in Brazil: framing disputes and tensions in civil society. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 0(0), 0–0.
- Murphy, J. (2010). The dark side. In R. Taylor (Ed), *Third Sector Research* (pp.253–268). Dordrecht, Heidelberg: Springer.
- Neumayer, E. (2013). *Weak versus strong sustainability: Exploring the limits of two opposing paradigms* (4th ed.). Edward Elgar.
- Newell, P. (2008). Civil society, corporate accountability and the politics of climate change. *Global Environmental Politics*, 8(3), 122–153.
- Paller, J. W. (2020). Everyday politics and sustainable urban development in the Global South. *Area Development and Policy*, 6(3), 319–336.
- Pandey, C. L. (2014). The limits of climate change agreements: From past to present. *International Journal of Climate Change Strategies and Management*, 6(4), 376–390.
- Pandey, C. L. (2023). Capturing the role of civil society for urban sustainability in Nepal. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 0(0), 0–0.
- Pateman, C. (1988). The Fraternal social contract. In J. Keane (Ed.), *Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives* (pp. 101–127). London: Verso.
- Paterson, M., & Newell, P. (2010). *Climate capitalism: Global warming and the transformation of the global economy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Purdue, D. (2007). Introduction: Dimensions of civil society. In D. Purdue (Ed.), *Civil societies and social movements: Potentials and Problems*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon and Schuster.
- Rancière, J. (2004). Introducing Disagreement. *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 9(3), 3–9.
- Redclift, M. (2005). Sustainable development (1987–2005): An oxymoron comes of age. *Sustainable Development*, 13, 212–227.
- Salamon, L. M., Anheier, H. K. (1998). Social origins of civil society: Explaining the nonprofit sector cross-nationally. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 9, 213–248.
- Sartori, G. (1973). What is “politics.” *Political Theory*, 1(1), 5–26.
- Schiller-Merkens, S. (2020). *Scaling up alternatives to capitalism: A social movement approach to alternative organizing (in) the economy*. MPIfG Discussion Paper 20/11.
- Schiller-Merkens, S. (2022). Prefiguring an alternative economy: Understanding prefigurative organizing and its struggles. *Organization*, 0(0).
- Schiller-Merkens, S. & Machin, A. (2023.) Knowing food: sustainability politics, food policy councils and the co-production of knowledge. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 0(0), 0–0.
- Scoones, I. (2016). The politics of sustainability and development. *Annual Review of Environmental Resources*, 41, 293–319.

- Scoones, I., Leach, M., & Newell, P. (Eds.). (2015). *The politics of green transformations*. Routledge.
- Seligman, A. B. (1992). *The idea of civil society*. Princeton University Press.
- Shils, E. (1991). The virtue of civil society. *Government and Opposition*, 26(1), 3–20.
- Shiva, V. (1992). Recovering the real meaning of sustainability. In D. E. Cooper & Joy A. (Ed.), *The Environment in Question*. Palmer. Routledge.
- Stoker, G. (2006). *Why politics matters: Making democracy work*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Weber, M. (1946). *Essays in Sociology*. Translated, edited and with an introduction by H.H. Gerth and C.Wright Mills. Oxford University Press.
- Youngs, R. (2018). Overview: Conservative civil society on the rise. In *The Mobilization of Conservative Civil Society* (pp. 7–12). Washington D.C: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.