

Who and what is 'civil society?'



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It is a phrase that is much bandied about in media and by politicians but if you were to stop and ask a casual passer-by what is meant by “civil society” it is unlikely many people could give an in-depth answer.

According to the World Bank: “Civil society ... refers to a wide array of organizations: community groups, non-governmental organizations [NGOs], labour unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations.”

The term became popular in political and economic discussions in the 1980s, when it started to be identified with non-state movements that were defying authoritarian regimes, especially in central and eastern Europe and Latin America.

When mobilized, civil society - sometimes called the “third sector” (after government and commerce) - has the power to influence the actions of elected policy-makers and businesses. But the nature of civil society - what it is and what it does - is evolving, in response to both technological developments and more nuanced changes within societies.

Welcome to Volunteerland

It is hard to quantify just how big the sector is globally. However, [one study](#) says that NGOs across 40 countries represent \$2.2 trillion in operating expenditures. That figure is larger than the gross domestic product of all but six countries. For the sake of comparing the scale of the sector with nations, it has been described as "Volunteerland" by academics. This land also employs around 54 million full-time equivalent workers and has a global volunteer workforce of over 350 million.

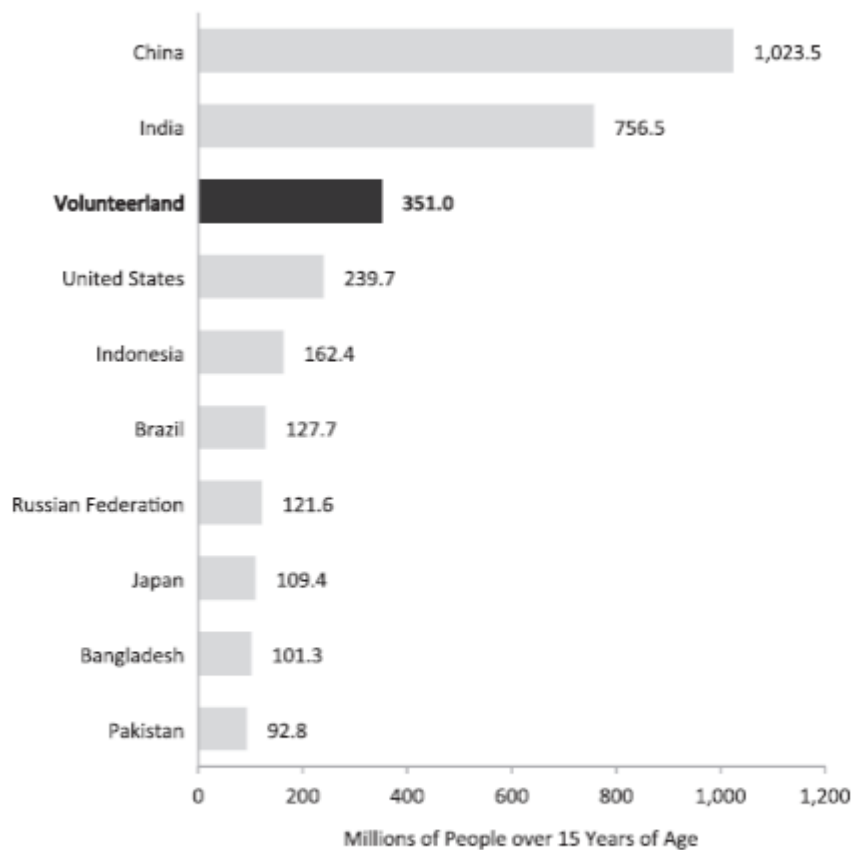


FIGURE 2.2. “Volunteerland” population vs. adult population of selected countries, ca. 2005. *Source:* Salamon, Sokolowski, and Haddock 2011. *Note:* Includes only volunteering through civil society organizations.

Image: Salamon, Sokolowski, and Haddock (2011)

Klaus Schwab, founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, wrote in the preface to a 2013 report, [The Future Role of Civil Society](#): “NGOs, labour leaders, faith-based organizations, religious leaders and other civil society representatives play a critical and diverse set of roles in societal development. In the last two decades these roles have shifted as the external environment for civil society has changed.”

He added that a “renewed focus on the essential contribution of civil society to a resilient global system alongside government and business has emerged”.

The report adds: “The definitions are changing as civil society is recognized as encompassing far more than a mere ‘sector’ dominated by the NGO community: civil society today includes an ever wider and more vibrant range of organized and unorganized groups, as new civil-society actors blur the boundaries between sectors and experiment with new organizational forms, both online and off.”

It lists of some of the activities civil society organizations are involved in, to demonstrate why governments frequently seem to court them in one breath and vilify them in another.

These include: holding institutions to account and promoting transparency; raising awareness of societal issues; delivering services to meet education, health, food and security needs; implementing disaster management, preparedness and emergency response; bringing expert knowledge and experience to shape policy and strategy; giving power to the marginalized; and encouraging citizen engagement.

## Leading civil society brands

Examples of well-known civil society organizations include Amnesty International, the International Trade Union Confederation, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Greenpeace and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

The story of why some of these organizations were founded gives some insight into their motives and *raison d'être*. The DRC, for example, is a humanitarian, non-profit organization that came into being following the devastation of World War II and the European refugee crises triggered by the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. It provides assistance to refugees, displaced people and their host communities in conflict zones around the world.

## The tech revolution

Civil society groups are becoming more tech savvy as they use social media platforms and formats such as video and podcasts to raise awareness about their causes and charitable donations.

But they are also using technology in ways that are more directly linked to improving the efficacy of their work. Human rights group [Amnesty International](#), for example, is experimenting with a form of artificial intelligence known as machine learning to see what influence it could have in areas such as policing, criminal justice, the development of autonomous weapons and its possible impacts on our rights to work and earn a living.

The WWF, on the other hand, is harnessing aerial drone technology, animal tracking devices and infrared cameras in its battle against the illegal poaching of [endangered species](#).

## New ways to campaign

Others have developed new partnerships, for example with UNICEF, to create bot software to engage with young people on social media platforms. UNICEF's U-Report bot is a free SMS social monitoring tool. It assesses how young people feel about important issues based on responses to SMS polls and alerts.

In 2015, working with government ministries in Liberia, [U-Report](#) helped to uncover a scandal in which teachers were found to be exploiting children by awarding grades and pass marks in return for sex. In under 24 hours, 13,000 people had responded and were provided with counselling and a support helpline.

People often wonder who can participate in “civic society”. For those living in democracies, the answer is all of us.

Have you read?

[5 challenges for civil society in the Fourth Industrial Revolution](#)

[Civil society is absent from the AI debate. This has to change](#)

[How civil society must adapt to survive its greatest challenges](#)

The era of social media, big data, analytics and artificial intelligence is likely to give a further spur to groups and organizations that campaign on issues like civil liberties, better education systems, and combat climate change or raise money to fight diseases.

The ability to raise concerns, influence government policy and create meaningful dialogue between policy-makers and the public will not be relinquished lightly.

Thanks to technology, more of us than ever before are able to inform our governments about what we think is wrong with the world - and what is right.

Perhaps instead of asking “who does civil society include”, it is time for more of us to take part in it