The politics of civil society building: European private aid agencies and democratic transitions in Central America
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PART I

CIVIL SOCIETY BUILDING
Crisis and Building

The main part of this book is entirely devoted to the complex issues of Central American politics, the post-elections and the procedural reform, and the role of different actors. The first part of the book examines the role of private forces and the consequences of the reform. Chapter 2 provides a conceptual frame to understand the shifting dynamics between the state and civil society in these countries and to analyze key changes in the way to the process of democratic transition. Chapter 3 examines the role of political parties and the importance of institutional change and international pressure on these processes. The book concludes with the importance of political and institutional change in Central America. The purpose of this book is to analyze the complex issues of Central American politics and to understand the role of different actors. The book is divided into three main parts: the first part examines the role of private forces and the consequences of the reform, the second part provides a conceptual frame to understand the shifting dynamics between the state and civil society, and the third part examines the role of political parties and the importance of institutional change and international pressure on these processes. The book concludes with the importance of political and institutional change in Central America.
1 MIXING POVERTY AND DEMOCRACY

Democratic Transition, Civil Society and the International Context

There are two potential problems with democracy in Latin America, according to Jorge Castañeda (1993: 338). Democracy is either meaningless as a result of electoral fraud and massive manipulation, or it is explosive: 'Giving the poor the vote, and allowing their votes to be counted when they represent the majority of a society's inhabitants, leads to demands, policies and ruptures that in Latin America have historically tended to provoke military coups and the end of representative democracy.' The lesson from Latin America appears to be that 'poverty and democracy do not mix easily', and that, more generally, the 'Western' notion of democracy apparently does not work in countries in which the majority of the population lives under the poverty line. It is useful to start an examination of democratic transitions in Latin America with Castañeda's provocative observation for it raises the question whether democracy is at all viable in poor societies. What does democracy mean in these societies that have been ruled, and sometimes are still ruled, by authoritarian regimes?

The present chapter discusses the 'problem' of democratic transition in Latin America and the meaning of democracy in order to provide an analytical framework for understanding the dynamics of democratisation in Central America. Several key concepts - such as democracy, citizenship and civil society - are explored and explained to avoid the semantic confusion that often dominates debates on democratisation. Especially the concept 'civil society' has been explained in so many ways, and for different purposes, that it often becomes a meaningless concept and part of the 'problem' it is supposed to tackle. While trying to avoid this caveat, civil society is critically analysed in its various dimensions and in its historically changing balance with the state. At the end of the chapter, the analysis focuses on the role of the international context for democratic transitions, as the ultimate purpose of this book is to examine the interaction between transnational private aid agencies and key domestic actors during democratic transitions.

1.1 Democratic transition in Latin America

One of the central topics in recent debates about political transformations is the concept of democratic transition. As this will be one of the key issues in the present study on Central America, the concept will be further examined in the following pages. Democratic transition could be defined as a complex process of shifting relations between the state and civil society, in which authoritarian rule is gradually
replaced by political democracy. However, this definition is hardly satisfactory without explaining what is meant by 'civil society' and 'democracy'. To start with the latter: few concepts have been more contested in political science theory than the concept of democracy. Outsiders would be surprised to learn that there is virtually no discussion about its meaning: democracy simply means 'rule by the people'. However, as this could be explained in many different ways, a clear working definition is needed. In contemporary debates two theoretical approaches to the concept of democracy can be identified, a narrow and a comprehensive approach.

The most important representative of the narrow approach is Joseph Schumpeter, who proposes a very practical understanding of democracy. In his critique of classical democracy doctrine, Schumpeter (1943: 269) suggests a definition of 'modern' democracy, which is still very popular with (North American) political scientists: 'The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote.' In its many variations, this represents the liberal (or pluralist-elitist) tradition of democratic thought, in which public accountability of rulers by citizens through regular competitive elections has become the central characteristic of a system for organising relations between the rulers and the ruled. As there are many types of democracy, depending on socio-economic conditions and state structures, several scholars have tried to expand the definition by capturing all those elements that might affect a democratic outcome. In the Latin American discussion, baroque definitions have emerged – generally inspired by Schumpeter and Dahl (1971) – trying to incorporate this rich variety of democratic practices into an all-embracing one-liner. For instance, Diamond, Linz and Lipset (1989: xvi) define democracy as 'a system of government that meets three essential conditions: meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and organised groups (especially political parties) for all effective positions of government power, at regular intervals and excluding the use of force; a highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies, at least through regular and fair elections, such that no major (adult) social group is excluded; and a level of civil and political liberties – freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom to form and join organisation – sufficient to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation.' The merit of this approach is that the pluralist-elitist conceptualisation of democracy often has been abused to legitimise authoritarian regimes which properly organised fair elections, but simultaneously obstructed processes of democratic transition. Although understandable, adding these properties to the definition of democracy could make the definition unwieldy (Karl 1990).

The more comprehensive approach to the concept of democracy prefers to stick closer to its classical meaning of 'rule by the people' in which not elections but 'political participation' is the central focus. Out of its many variations, the definition by Schmitter and Karl (1993: 40) is particularly useful: 'Modern political
democracy is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives. The advantage of such a comprehensive approach is that it contains all necessary concepts required to discuss democratic transitions in Latin America. The system of governance points at the regime type, which determines the way in which access to public offices is organised, who is included or excluded, which strategies are applied to get access, and what the rules of decision-making are. Most Latin American countries have experienced either oligarchic, dictatorial or authoritarian regimes, preceding democratic ones. Regimes have rulers, those who have the authority to give legitimate commands over others. The public realm is the sphere where collective norms are exhibited and choices are made, which are binding for society and guaranteed by the state.

One of the key concepts in this definition is that of citizens: 'All regimes have rulers and a public realm, but only to the extent that they are democratic do they have citizens' (Schmitter and Karl 1993: 41). In the Athenian city-state, citizens were at one and the same time subjects of political authority and the creators of public rules. As citizen-governors they made no distinction between the state and society. In modern 'liberal' (representative) democracy, citizens have been granted rights and duties by the nation state. Citizenship is therefore a key concept to explore, as it refers to the membership of the political community: the organic link between the state and its citizens. Citizenship as it is known today is a product of struggle: 'Throughout the formative phase of the modern state, the struggle for membership in the political community has largely been synonymous with the attempt to establish a form of popular sovereignty through the entrenchment of civil and political rights' (Held 1995: 67).

Civil rights guarantee individual autonomy of citizens, such as freedom of speech and thought, or the right to be treated equally to others before the law. The struggle for civil rights starting in eighteenth century Britain and the United States preceded the struggle for political rights of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Only after decades of struggle and pressure from excluded sectors of the population (because of race, gender, age, class or literacy) political rights — basically the right to vote and to run for public office — were granted to all native-born adults. By the second half of this century, European and Latin American democracies formally had abolished all restrictions to citizenship. However, in Latin America this often did not lead to the effective protection and full exercise of citizens’ rights. Therefore, another dimension should be added to understand democratic transition in Latin America: a variety of implicit restrictions have been posed upon the full exercise of citizenship. The existence of formal democratic rights did not automatically guarantee political freedom for all citizens.

Rueschemeyer, Huber Stephens and Stephens (1992) acknowledge that the exercise of civil rights does not in itself constitute the exercise of democratic power. Although it is a necessary condition of stable democracy, it limits state power to
the guarantee of both individual and collective liberties either under democratic or non-democratic regimes. They argue that the essence of democracy is embodied in two dimensions: universal suffrage, and responsibility and accountability of the state. The protection of civil rights is a necessary third dimension to guarantee the stability of a democratic regime. Based on the degree to which these three dimensions are met, they differentiate between ‘democratic’ and ‘non-democratic’ (oligarchic or authoritarian) regimes, and between ‘full’ and ‘restricted’ democracies. Karl (1990) adds a fourth dimension to describe democracy (in addition to contestation, accountability and inclusion): civilian control over the military. This is an essential dimension for the Latin American situation, which is not implicit in the narrow definitions previously mentioned.

Therefore, I would prefer to follow the comprehensive definition of Schmitter and Karl and suggest that ‘real existing democracy’ needs to be analysed in terms of the extent to which it is ‘restricted’. Three key restrictions should be mentioned. First, in Latin America (and this applies to most other regions in the world) free and fair elections did not lead to democratic governance, often caused by the lack of civilian control over the armed forces. Elections formally broadened political participation of citizens, but in practice this only applied to particular civil society sectors and generally only for limited periods of time (Booth 1989). Second, unfavourable social and economic conditions have seriously weakened the effective exercise (and even the protection) of both civil and political rights. Existing barriers to freedom of speech and association, or the right to cast a vote in free and fair elections are deeply rooted obstacles to social and economic reform. Cammack (1994a: 189) points at the need to remove these obstacles in order to realise political citizenship in Latin America, but in line with Castañeda warns of the potentially explosive consequences: ‘if citizenship and democratic participation become a reality, they will inevitably lead to demands for long overdue social and economic change’. A third restriction on exercising full citizenship in Latin America has been a general absence of autonomy by the polity from external constraints. Without exception, the sovereignty of (Southern) nation states has been (and still is being) challenged by geo-political interests of other (Northern) nation states, which is enhanced by the asymmetry of the global economy.

These three restrictions underline the need to analyse democratic transition in Latin America beyond the boundaries of narrowly defined concepts of democracy derived from Western political history. The slow process of Latin American democratisation was generated by a series of social struggles taking place over a long period of time, basically aiming to establish full citizenship without restrictions. Efforts to understand these struggles thus require a structural analysis of the main actors involved and of the national and historical contexts in which they evolved. This long historical perspective – which will be elaborated for Central America in Chapter 4 – potentially also explains why processes of democratic transition in South America were essentially different from Central America.
Lessons from democratic transitions in South America

The concept 'democratic transition' became popular among academics to explain the return to democratic rule in Southern Europe in the 1970s and in South America in the 1980s. Much of the analytical framework on democratic transitions – which was developed in a large number of studies – also was applied to the political shifts that occurred in Eastern Europe at the end of the Cold War. Except for Costa Rica, democratic transitions in Central America received virtually no attention in these studies, although taking place in the same period. This raises the question whether the 'transition framework' and the lessons from South America (and to a lesser extent from Eastern Europe) are at all relevant for Central America. After all, the Central American transitions were quite different from South America, as the latter only were dealing with temporary authoritarian rule. Or were the driving forces behind re-establishing democratic rule in South America possibly similar to the forces that 'constructed' democracy in Central America? In other words, is it possible to generalise about the context and the conditions that determine the (re)emergence of democratic rule?

The answer is probably not very encouraging. For instance, looking at democratic transitions in South America, and only considering the major domestic forces in these transitions, one could broadly identify two positions on this issue. One is that of O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986: 19) who argue: 'there is no transition whose beginning is not the consequence – direct or indirect – of important divisions within the authoritarian regime itself, principally along the fluctuating cleavage between hard-liners and soft-liners.' These internal divisions gave way to a series of negotiations, either induced by the regime itself or by oppositional elites, leading to peaceful 'pacted' transitions. In response to O'Donnell and Schmitter, Diamond et al. (1989) and Stepan (1990) argue that too little credit has been given to the role of opposition forces. They maintain that the principal force that led to regime transition was a change in the strength and mobilisation of civil society. When core supporters of the military regime realised that perpetuation of military rule was no longer in their interest, they switched to become part of the (passive) opposition to the military regime. As soon as members of other key groups of civil society, such as the clergy and academics, joined the 'growing numbers of defectors from authoritarianism', they were able to effectively pressure the military regime for change. As Stepan (1990: 44) puts it: 'The passive opposition will grow much larger as people no longer need constantly to fear savage repression. Passive opponents will also lose some of their passivity as they become willing to participate in anti-regime actions orchestrated by the active opposition. Under the right conditions, the passive and active opposition will coalesce and expand to the point where the idea of redemocratisation wrests hegemony away from authoritarianism.'

The point of the polemic is of course: what are these 'right conditions'? Under which conditions are authoritarian regimes forced to make 'strategic choices', or under which conditions does an opposition forge a coalition capable of delegitimising an authoritarian regime? Before democratic transitions in Latin America
started, theoretical discussions had focused on the character of necessary preconditions for stable democracy. But the polemic did not lead to any consensus about the principal preconditions. Was it the level of capitalist development (or ‘socio-economic modernisation’) at that particular moment, as Lipset and others argued? Was it the quality of the ‘civic culture’ (Almond and Verba 1963) or of the ‘political culture’ (Wiarda 1981) that determined the probability of democratic transition? Were these conditions primarily domestically determined (Moore 1966) or chiefly induced by external influences as Cardoso and Faletto (1969) and other scholars of dependency theory argued? After the experiences of democratic transitions in the 1980s, all these preconditions proved to be insufficient to explain the end of military rule. It appeared that no single precondition could explain the dynamics of democratic transition, since much contradictory evidence was generated by the transitions in South America (Karl 1990). In fact, most of these preconditions were the outcomes of democratic transitions rather than their causes.

After studying in detail the dynamics of democratic transition in Latin America (and later in Eastern Europe) some ‘transitologists’ — notably Diamond, Linz, Lipset (1989) and Huntington (1991) — tried to refine the modernisation approach by listing the whole variety of factors and preconditions that could influence or determine the establishment of democracy in these countries. Diamond et al. suggested a comprehensive theoretical framework consisting of ten theoretical dimensions (political culture, regime legitimacy, historical development, class structure, national structure, state structure, political and constitutional structure, political leadership, development performance and international factors), based on twenty-six selected case studies. These dimensions covered dozens of specific variables and questions from which they derived forty-nine tentative propositions about the likelihood of stable democratic government. Huntington, in a similarly empiricist way, selected thirty countries that became democracies after the mid-1970s and focused on five factors that could have determined these transitions: legitimacy problems, global economic growth, the Catholic Church, changing policies of external actors and demonstration effects.

These attempts to construct a new theoretical framework for democratic transition were criticised from various angles. Remmer (1995: 110) pointed at the fundamental difficulty of generalising about such a diverse and complex framework of causal paths and conditions: ‘Most reasonably parsimonious frameworks, such as modernisation theory, provide limited insights into empirical variations through time and space, while richer and more comprehensive explanatory efforts tend to yield complex and untestable case-by-case historical accounts of political democracy.’ Cammack (1994a: 177) also pointed at the problematic implications of analysing democracy as a general phenomenon, as no general laws of democracy or homogenous patterns exist that can explain the causes of democracy: ‘Liberal democracy is a conjunctural historical phenomenon, explicable in terms of its structural conditions of emergence and reproduction, and their interaction with its own institutional dynamics. As such it can be understood only if the histor-
Another group of theorists therefore tried to tackle these problems (implicitly linked to generalisations about the causes of democratic transition) either by looking at ‘contingent choice’ (O’Donnell & Przeworski), path-dependent analysis (Karl and Schmitter), centring on elite compromise (Higley and Gunther) or taking a structuralist approach (Cammack, Rueschemeyer et al.). From these approaches, Rueschemeyer et al. is particularly relevant as they have been one of the few to include both South and Central America in their empirical analysis. They extended Moore’s (1966) paradigmatic argument that ‘past conflicts and institutional structures have long-term effects and are of critical importance for later developments. Any attempt to explain current change without attention to these continuing effects of past history – any “presentist” analysis – is doomed to fail’ (Rueschemeyer et al. 1992: 23).

Implicitly they criticise those studies that focus on shorter term changes (O’Donnell, Huntington or Przeworski) with their emphasis on voluntaristic factors (leadership or choice) with little attention for structural constraints. Rueschemeyer et al. suggest a theoretical framework to explain why capitalism (economic development) has contributed to the development of democracy. Crucial dimensions in explaining the emergence of democracy (and authoritarianism) are the balance between class power, the nature of the state and the impact of transnational structures of power. The primary agents of democratisation in their analysis are not new dominant classes, but subordinate classes: ‘Capitalist development is associated with democracy because it transforms the class structure, strengthening the working and middle classes and weakening the landed upper class. It was not the capitalist market, nor capitalists as the new dominant force, but rather the contradictions of capitalism that advanced the cause of democracy’ (1992: 7).

After comparing historical patterns of democratisation in Europe, South America, Central America and the Caribbean, they conclude that the urban working class was the driving force of democratisation in the advanced capitalist societies (Europe), whereas in South America the middle classes played a more prominent role in democratisation. However, these middle classes had an ambivalent attitude towards democracy, as they allied both with the oligarchy and the military to accept restricted democracy, or with the working class to struggle for full democracy. The formation of class alliances and the relationship between the state and civil society in the various Latin American countries was determined by their integration in the world economy and by their position in the global state system. What made democratisation in Central America different from the South American experience was the absence of consolidated mass-based unions and political parties capable of countering economic elite and military interests. This was in turn caused by systematic repression of these organisations by the oligarchy and the military, beginning in the 1930s and actively supported by US economic and military intervention. By comparing Central America with the British Caribbean,
Rueschemeyer *et al.* (1992: 263) show that external influence potentially was a key element in furthering democracy: 'The [British] colonial state, by allowing the formation of organisations of subordinate classes, contributed to a strengthening of civil society and a shift in the balance of class power which was favourable to democratisation. The dictatorial states in Central America did the opposite in that they used their coercive capacity to partially suppress the development of civil society, particularly the organisation of the rural and urban lower classes.' With US support, the state in Central America for many decades was able to act autonomously from civil society and repressed efforts for political articulation and participation of subordinate sectors in civil society.

The history of ‘postponing’ democratic rule in Central America for several decades appears to be a fundamental difference with democratic transitions in South America and Southern and Eastern Europe. However, this does not imply that the rich debate of transitologists is useless for the present analysis. The previous overview generates at least three questions about the conceptual tools used in this debate and how these could be elaborated for the Central American experience. The first question is: what could be the meaning of ‘democratic transition’ for a region that has not experienced democratic rule before? This question becomes even more relevant now that the transition literature in the mid-1990s is shifting its attention towards the conditions for ‘democratic consolidation’, in which the incomplete democratic transitions in Central America are again ignored. A second important question is related to the meaning of civil society and the impact of key social sectors during democratic transitions. On this issue the analysis of Rueschemeyer *et al.* is not very explicit, as it focuses more on explanations for why Latin American states are strong and civil societies have been weak. This also touches upon the problem that interests of various social groups cannot simply be aggregated as is often done in the analysis of regime change. A third question addresses the role of international actors during democratic transition (or during democratic consolidation). The key role of the United States was already mentioned, but particularly transnational influences countering US intervention also should be carefully analysed to understand how political openings were forged by opposition groups in the 1980s. Rueschemeyer *et al.* do point to the important role of the Catholic Church, but unfortunately do not elaborate on these and other forces any further. This last issue will be examined later in this chapter; the first two questions are the central topic of the following pages.

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**Identifying stages of democratic transition**

To understand differences between patterns of democratisation, such as between South and Central America, Karl (1990) points at the need to look carefully at ‘modes of transitions’, and thus at the arrangements being made by key political actors during regime change. These negotiated agreements might establish (or restrict) the parameters for democratic consolidation in the future. For example, accords between political parties and the armed forces about future delimitations
of civilian and military spheres— that might look temporary at the initial stage of transition— could become serious barriers for future transition to unrestricted democratic rule. To understand what actually happens during transitions, several stages, or ‘sequences’, have been identified to map the various (irreversible) steps in regime change. In the transition literature these have been identified as ‘regime breakdown’, ‘liberalisation’ and ‘democratic consolidation’ (O’Donnell et al. 1986). These stages could be confusing if the last transition stage (‘transition to what?’) is not clearly specified. Linz and Stepan (1996: 5-6) argue that the stage of ‘consolidated democracy’ is achieved when ‘democracy has become “the only game in town”, a stage in which the overwhelming majority of the people believe that any further political change must emerge within the parameters of democratic formulas’. Others have argued that this is too minimalistic as it resembles the criteria for ‘formal democracy’, and that democratic transition is not completed unless it passes through the stages of ‘participatory democracy’ (high levels of participation among all social categories) and ‘social democracy’ (increasing equality in social and economic outcomes) (Huber et al. 1997). In a similar way, democratisation could be considered as an ongoing process of improving political equality and popular control, which implies that a stage of ‘consolidated democracy’ is not a final stage, but instead part of the transition process itself.

Although the formal definition of consolidated democracy as was proposed by the ‘transitologists’ is not very accurate for the Central American situation, as will be illustrated in Chapter 4, it is still analytically useful to identify various democratic transition stages. However, there are several reasons to be more accurate about these stages in Central America’s democratisation process. One is that several transitions (from war to peace, and from authoritarianism to democratic rule) became interlinked during the political transformations of the 1980s. It appeared to be necessary to specify subsequent transition stages, instead of using the broader stage of ‘liberalisation’ which was very much geared towards the Southern European and the South American experiences. The period after ‘authoritarian rule’ will therefore be split up in three stages: ‘early transition’, ‘mid-transition’ and ‘late transition’. Another reason to be cautious about the complex process of democratic transitions is the assumption that there is not one (authoritarian) regime, but several coexisting (‘partial’) regimes (Schmitter 1992). This implies that democratic transition should be disaggregated and analysed as a combination or an accumulation of several regime transitions, which Karl (1995) has called ‘hybrid transitions’. This suggestion is helpful to understanding democratisation in Central America, in which several ‘imposed’ or ‘authoritarian’ transitions in the mid-1980s occurred without substantial regime changes. For example, the elections in El Salvador (1982, 1984) and Guatemala (1984, 1985), convened amidst civil war and state repression, were typical elements of ‘authoritarian transitions’ and a result of external pressure by the United States (Torres Rivas 1987). Moreover, these transitions were not followed by a ‘resurrection of civil society’ or a ‘popular upsurge’ as O’Donnell and Schmitter described in the South American transitions.
The meaning of civil society

Earlier debates on the causes of regime transitions – in which the breakdown of authoritarian regimes was explained as a result of internal splits in the regime (O'Donnell) or by a regrouping of oppositional forces in civil society (Stepan) – suggested an artificial state-civil society dichotomy. It was perceived that although during initial stages of transition liberalisation generally came from ‘above’ and during stages of consolidation democratisation came from ‘below’ (Weffort 1993), the potential roles of powerholders and opposition were closely interconnected during regime transition. As Mainwaring et al. (1992: 299) observe: ‘Many transitions involve complex interactions between regime and opposition forces from an early stage.’ Central to the understanding of the dynamics of democratic transition is therefore to analyse changes in the relations between the state and civil society, or more precisely: the political relations between the state and its citizens. The quality of relations between the state and civil society ultimately determines the quality of democracy. Diamond, Linz and Lipset (1989: 35) concluded after reviewing ten cases of democratic transition in Latin America that there is a strong correlation between the strength and autonomy of associational life and the presence and vitality of democracy: ‘Just as democracy requires an effective but limited state, so it needs a pluralistic, autonomously organised civil society to check the power of the state and give expression democratically to popular interests.’ But what is exactly meant by civil society and by associational life?

The concepts ‘associational life’ and ‘civil society’ are often used as synonyms, as both refer to the organisational density of society as a condition for democracy. However, the origins of the two concepts are quite different. Associational life stems from the analyses of De Tocqueville and Durkheim, who concluded that social mobilisation and the development of an ever expanding web of relatively autonomous organisations facilitates democracy. The idea of an ‘associational revolution’ is closely linked to the notion of pluralism as a necessary condition for democracy. Civil society in its modern conception, however, primarily refers to citizenship and to a distinct ‘societal public sphere’ of social relations between the family and the state. Civil society can be defined as the totality of social institutions and associations, both formal and informal, that are not strictly production-related, governmental or familial in character. But this definition needs more elaboration if it is used in relation to democratic transition.

In Latin America, thinking about civil society was strongly influenced by Antonio Gramsci and interpretations of his writings by progressive Italians, notably Norberto Bobbio. Although Gramsci’s conceptualisation of civil society and the state is not always consistent, he argued that a strong and dense civil society was closely connected to the development of capitalism, as the terrain of struggle of the people against the hegemony of the market and the state. The capitalist state maintained its hegemony through ‘consent’ by ideologically dominating a dense civil society, combined with its hegemony by ‘coercion’. In this way, the ruling classes made minority rule and democracy compatible. One of the most important impli-
cations of his thinking was that the right of any elite to exercise state power would be ultimately dependent upon popular acceptance. As Bratton (1994: 59) puts it: 'As long as civic actors grant consent, civil society exists in a complementary relationship to the state; its social institutions serve the hegemonic function of justifying state domination.' This opened the way for perceiving of a counter-hegemonic project which could be created within a civil society that had been functional to capitalist hegemony. Gramsci thus considered a counter-hegemonic project within civil society as a means to transform capitalist society, and not as an end in itself. However, due to interpretations by Bobbio (1987) and others, for the Latin American left in the 1980s 'the essential point was that it offered a new rationale for a more multi-faceted struggle against dictatorship and militarism rather than capitalism as a whole' (Pearce 1997a: 63). After the establishment of military regimes, they realised that revolutionary struggles (whether peaceful or armed) needed a new perspective, and many used Gramsci as a way to abandon Marxism, notably in Chile after the defeat of Allende's Popular Unity.

While Gramsci undoubtedly contributed to broadening the concept of civil society by separating it from the political and economic sphere, he also contributed to the interpretation of civil society as an essentially 'good thing' (Cohen and Arato 1992). Civil society became an idealised counter-image to counterpoise social virtue and political vice, the realm of freedom versus the realm of coercion, making the term serviceable to political struggle but thereby losing its analytical value. White (1994: 378) shows how the (re)discovery of civil society by political pluralists, modernisation theorists and others contributed to convert 'civil society' into a political slogan for a wide variety of purposes: 'Neo-populist development theorists and practitioners extol the virtues of grassroots NGOs as paradigms of social participation and the potential building blocks of democracy; economic liberals bolster their case for deregulation and privatisation by emphasising how these measures contribute to the emergence of a business class to counterbalance and discipline wayward states; treasury based cost-cutters see devolution of governmental functions to voluntary organisations as an ideologically palatable way of reducing state expenditure; conservative thinkers see it as a way of preserving traditional social solidarities in the face of disruptions caused by markets; and radical socialists zero in on the potential role of social organisations based on community, group or issue in transforming society or providing an alternative form of social governance.' White vividly illustrates here that the term civil society in its precise meaning could become elusive.

However, just as was earlier argued with the concept of democracy, the confusion about the meaning of the concept civil society should not be overstated. Although civil society is a theoretical concept, and not an empirical one, it can be a useful tool for analysing the practice and meaning of recent processes of democratisation in Latin America (Pearce 1997a). Two interrelated questions seem to be central to the confusion about the concept: what are the properties of civil society, and who belongs to it? Particularly the last question points to which civil
society one has in mind. It could be helpful to start from the (obvious) notion that civil society can only be analysed in relation to the state, and that ‘society’ as such becomes ‘civil’ both in its separation from and implicit relation to the state (Bratton 1994). In others words, civil society should be defined both in terms of society (as opposed to, autonomous and separate from the state), and as civic (being part of the political system). This still leaves room for different interpretations about which organisations actually belong to civil society. For example, are those social organisations not directly related or opposed to the state, such as remote local self-help organisations, also part of civil society? And what about organisations not directly aiming at political participation, such as sports clubs?

Taking up the first question about the properties of civil society might help us move forward. The complexity of the concept civil society is not least of all the result of its multiple interpretations by political philosophers over the past two hundred years. Bratton (1994) and others have shown that these thinkers emphasised different dimensions of civil society: material (Hegel, Marx and Engels), organisational (Ferguson, De Tocqueville) and ideological (Gramsci). Instead of emphasising one of these dimensions, Bratton argues that each dimension is critical for the emergence of civil society. The material dimension is determined by the nature of the dominant economic system, the organisational dimension is determined by the structure of relationships between social organisations, and the ideological dimension by the dominant values and attitudes that in turn determine the material and institutional realms. Reducing civil society to one of these dimensions will not only generate confusion, but allow the concept to lose its quality as a rich tool for analysing state-society relations. In Bratton’s words (1994: 57): ‘Although political resources, organisations, and ideas may be observed, none alone can capture the quality and complexity of civil society as a whole. Civil society is a composite concept.’ By stressing the need to analyse linkages within each dimension and the synergy between them, it becomes clear that civil society is broader than just the sum of its constituent parts.

This still leaves the second question unanswered: which organisations belong to civil society? Van Rooy (1996) suggests that non-civic associations such as sports clubs only belong to civil society if they contribute to ‘social processes critical to development’, for instance if politics is discussed internally or if it enhances (political) leadership. However, this implies a very complicated definition of civil society which is probably difficult to handle. Whitehead (1997:107) points at the existence of ‘uncivil associations’ (such as fundamentalist sects) that ‘may have to be tolerated in a democracy, but cannot be regarded as part of a modern liberal civil society.’ Others (such as Bayart) only include those organisations that actively interact with the state, making a sharper definition possible, but giving a rather restricted interpretation of civil society. I agree with White (1994: 379) when he proposes to use the more common, broader sense of the concept, instead of defining it away. Both for practical reasons (it prevents confusion) as well as to underline the social complexity. He defines civil society as ‘an intermediate associational
realm between state and family populated by organisations which are separate from
the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by
members of society to protect or extend their interests or values. Sports clubs thus
belong to civil society, even if they do not discuss politics internally. So do self-help
organisations operating in remote areas.

But with this definition the 'state' and the 'market' are not yet delimited in
relation to civil society. For example, does a shoe factory belong to civil society,
and what about a state-owned shoe factory? The first is an economic institution,
belonging to 'economic society' and is thus not part of civil society. However, the
employers' association of shoe manufacturers indeed is part of civil society. The
state-owned factory, for its economic activity, also belongs to 'economic society',
but in terms of its political character one could argue that it is part of the state. The
distinction between the state and civil society cannot always be clearly marked.
Civil society thus has to be explained in its relationship with the state and with
society more in general. White (1994: 281) notes that civil society 'derives much of
its specific political character from the deeper socio-economic structure and the
distribution of interests, social norms and power resources which society em­
body.' This implies that social relationships in civil society potentially contain
'social power' that in turn is determined, as Bratton already noted, by these inter­
ests, norms and power resources. The relevance of this specification is to underline
that a weak civil society is not only weak in relation to the state, but also because
some sectors are weaker (or stronger) than others.

To define the relationship between the state and civil society, it can be helpful
to disaggregate civil society and add the notion of 'political society'. Gramsci used
the term to refer to organisations that normally belong to civil society, but are in
fact part of the political superstructure. Political society is a separate sphere of
actors and institutions mediating, articulating and institutionalising the relations
between the state and civil society. Political parties (and legislatures) are the key
institutions of political society. But when their function of mediation and articula­
tion is performed or complemented by other organisations in civil society – such
as broad multisectoral coalitions – these could also (temporarily) be included in
political society. Stepan (1988) used this distinction between civil and political
society to analyse the political dynamics of the Brazilian opposition to authoritar­
ianism and to differentiate between the opposition in the civil arena and oppos­
ition in the political arena. The point is of course, if this distinction is not made,
where should political parties be located? They are not part of the state, although
the state conditions the operation and structure of parties. They could be con­
ceived as part of civil society, albeit with the special function of organising and
articulating organised interests within civil society vis-à-vis the state. It is therefore
more appropriate to locate political parties in political society, depicted in Figure
1.1 as an intermediary sphere between the state and civil society. This introduces
the issue that has become a growing concern of development aid agencies in recent
years: what is the function of civil society during democratic transition?
The shifting balance between the state and civil society

It is widely believed that a crucial relationship exists between civil society and democratisation. Not only is a strong (diverse, dense, autonomous) civil society considered to be a prerequisite for democracy, it can also play a crucial political role in undermining authoritarian regimes and in the establishment and maintenance of a democratic polity. However, there is less agreement about how civil society can be conducive to democratisation, and at which stage of democratic transition this is most crucial. Diamond (1994) suggests that a vibrant civil society is probably more essential for consolidating democracy than for initiating it. He notes that the primary goal in the struggle for democracy is the establishment of a viable and democratic political society, and that a vibrant civil society is a condition for further developing and securing democracy. In this view, the role of civil society becomes important in the stage of consolidating democracy, after electoral norms and procedures have been established in political society. Along the same line O'Donnell (1988: 283) writes: 'If political democracy is to be consolidated, democratic practice needs to spread throughout society, creating a rich fabric of democratic institutions and authorities.'

But what is the role of civil society when democracy is not yet consolidated, that is, when political society is still weak? Stepan has argued in the Brazilian case that the military regime took advantage of the suspicious attitude of the Church and the labour movement towards political parties that wanted to serve as intermediaries between civil society and the military regime. The result was that links between opposition groups in civil society and those of political society were weak, giving the military regime the possibility to exploit this sharp separation between the two 'arenas' of the opposition. The liberalisation of the regime ('abertura') was wel-

Figure 1.1 State, civil society and political society
combed by the opposition in civil society, although it did not change the rules for political parties of the opposition. Stepan (1988: 6) uses this example to explain the difference between 'liberalisation' and 'démocratisation': 'Democratization entails liberalization but is a wider and more specifically political concept. Democratization requires open contestation for the right to win control over the government, and this in turn requires free elections, the results of which determine who governs. Using these definitions it is clear there can be liberalization without democratization. Liberalization refers fundamentally to civil society. Democratization involves civil society, but it refers fundamentally to political society.' Following the earlier mentioned discussion between O'Donnell and Stepan, it could be asked again whether the priority in democratic transitions should be to strengthen civil society first, and then political society, or the other way around. However, this suggests that a strategic choice could be made between a top-down approach of elite transitions 'forging political society', and a bottom-up approach of increasing popular pressure and participation from below, by 'strengthening civil society' (Weffort 1993; Nunnenkamp 1995). Both processes are of course interdependent and take place simultaneously, and should therefore be studied in their complexity. This topic will come back in Chapter 3 when donor approaches to strengthening civil society are examined.

One crucial question has not yet been tackled: how is civil society supposed to play a role during democratic transition, and how does this apply in practice? The pluralist notion holds that civil society 'represents a reservoir of resources – political, economic, cultural, moral – to check and balance the power of the state' (Diamond 1992: 7). It follows the assumption that the 'autonomy' of a broad spectrum of interest groups can limit the power of the state, making control of the state by society possible. Generally, this idea is based on experiences of Western political democracies where civil society plays an important role in sustaining 'unrestricted' democratic political systems. A 'vibrant' and 'autonomous' civil society is usually understood in terms of its pluralism (number, size and variety) of interests that are organised; its democratic orientation (the civic values that are pursued) and its political participation (active use of civic rights and duties, and the formation of new leadership). However, it does not say very much about causal links between civil society and démocratisation, other than that civil society is either 'resurrecting' or 'newly emerging' to resist the domination of an authoritarian regime and hasten its exit to power' (Diamond 1992: 11-12). The 'density' of civil society certainly is important, but obscures the fact that there are differences in power and interests between the constituent parts of civil society.24

The pluralist notion of civil society, as it was used in the Latin American context in the 'transition literature', has been criticised for not differentiating between the forces that occupy either civil society or political society. Cohen and Arato (1992: 56) question whether there is still anything left of a 'resurrected' civil society 'after selective repression, co-optation, manipulation, internal conflicts, fatigue, disillusionment, and the channelling of opposition into the party and electoral systems
take their toll and demobilise the "popular upsurge". The question is whether actors in civil society are at all able to define their role vis-à-vis either political society or the state, when (as happened during many transitions) traditional political elites appear to be immune to pressures from civil society. Pearce (1997a: 62) thus suggests that the 'transitologists' ultimately were not truly interested in the sphere of civil society per se: "Civil society" is not conceptualised in relationship to democracy itself, as in any sense necessary to it, and there is no apparent reason why associational, organizational and movement life amongst the population should be conceptualized as "civil society" at all. In other words, it is not convincingly argued how a 'stronger civil society' would necessarily weaken the power of traditional elites and increase social and political equality, unless civil society is considered 'as an arena of contestation, a space which reflects the divisions of society as a whole'.

White (1994) has argued that a strong civil society can contribute to democratisation in four complementary ways: (i) when organised forces in society attain enough strength to weaken the authoritarian state, the balance between civil society and the state can be altered; (ii) particular sectors of civil society can enforce standards of public morality and performance upon the state, playing a disciplinary role in relation to the state; (iii) civil society can articulate interest group demands, as an alternative channel of representation, serving as an intermediary between state and society; (iv) civil society can play a constitutive role by redefining the rules of the political games along democratic lines. Although White was primarily concerned with the improvement of the quality of governance, his categories can also be applied to stages of democratic transition as demonstrated later in this chapter. Still, it is necessary to be more explicit about how the balance between the state and civil society could be changed and who are the main actors capable of shifting this balance. Again, Bratton (1994: 58-59) is helpful as he emphasises the need to analyse civil society in relation to the state: 'Because civil society is a theoretical concept, it is best apprehended deductively, by deriving it in conjunction with the concept of the state. The state, civil society and political society together exhaust the scope of public life, and none of these concepts can be fully understood in isolation from the other.' Along Gramscian lines, he conceives of the state as 'the realm of the politics of force (domination), and civil society as the realm of the politics of consent (hegemony). At all. Although each of the realms is based on different sources of political power, neither of the two can claim to monopolise public life without provoking a reaction from the opposite realm to retain political space. This movement of what Bratton calls the 'centre of gravity of political life' between the state and civil society is continuously alternating. In periods of state domination of political life, social actors in civil society will try to find new independent forms and channels to recover the political initiative and balance state power through political society. The composition and legitimacy of political society is therefore a crucial indicator for determining this 'centre of gravity' and the dy-
namicsthe political state. Even if political society is either banned or absorbed by the state, this will provoke a reaction from civil society to occupy new autonomous positions of contestation. This continuously shifting balance between the state and civil society is possibly a key to explain the various stages of democratisation. The alternation of political initiative reconfirms what was argued earlier: civil society is sovereign. In Bratton’s words (1994: 59): 'The right of any elite to exercise state power is ultimately dependent upon popular acceptance. This acceptance — the key political resource for those who wish to rule — is manufactured by the institutions of civil society. For as long as civic actors grant consent, civil society exists in a complementary relationship to the state; its social institutions serve the hegemonic function of justifying state domination.'

The potential role of civil society in democratisation has two further dimensions that should be examined. The first was already mentioned: democratisation is more than just a matter of shifting the balance between the state and civil society, it also depends on patterns of conflict and cooperation between various parts (or sectors) that make up civil society. Rueschemeyer et al. call it 'the balance of power between classes and class coalitions', although this should be extended to include also gender and ethnic balances. These patterns are determined by material, organisational and ideological conditions. The other dimension is that the strength and the role of civil society is contingent upon the structure, strength and autonomy of the state, and on the international political environment (White 1994; Robinson 1995a). The following section focuses on the contending forces inside civil society and their relation with the state. In other words, what does a 'stronger' civil society mean in practice, and who are the crucial actors contributing to its strength?

1.2 Civil society: actors, roles and stages

The composition of any civil society is a product of social struggle, as Fowler (1996b) and others have argued. The structure and strength of any civil society is determined by the slow historical process of nation-building. The evolving character of the nation state determined the composition of civil society, and vice versa. The term social struggle is emphasised to underline the often violent way in which civil society has been constructed, and to stress the implicit uniqueness of civil society in each country. Even within the same nation state various patterns of civil society configurations have developed as a result of local power struggles (Putnam 1993). Major differences can be traced between the development of the state and civil society in former colonial powers and former colonies, for example between Europe and Latin America. European nations have grown more or less organically from their own social struggles and wars, whereas the formation of Latin American nations was permanently disrupted by Spanish colonialism, US imperialism or Cold War rivalry. The result is a weaker sense of common interests or common
identities, often visible in weak citizenship, or even a duality in civicism.\textsuperscript{37} These unique national histories and the consequences of non-organic nation-building should be included in an assessment of the constituent parts of civil society.

From the theoretical considerations of the previous section it could be concluded that ‘civil society’ can be defined as a normative and a teleological concept, as a value, but also as an ‘observable reality’ in which a wide variety of social actors and organisations often pursue opposing goals (Pearce 1997a; Van Rooy 1998). This section will look at who the constituent parts in civil society actually are, which interests they represent, and what their potential role in democratisation could be. This is an important issue in relation to aid policies of donor agencies who often prefer to work with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in their efforts to strengthen civil society. However, ‘NGO’ is a blurry concept in a discussion of state-society relations: it should be specified what ‘non-governmental’ means in relation to other organisations of civil society and in relation to ‘governmental’ institutions. As with ‘civil society’, the concept ‘NGO’ has become a buzzword in development policy circles, meaning very different things to various constituencies (Smillie 1995b). This section will briefly discuss the meaning of NGOs in civil society and to what extent the concept is useful for the present analysis. The key purpose of the following pages is to develop a practical framework for analysing changing relations between the state and civil society during democratic transitions.

\textbf{NGOs and civil society}

Non-governmental organisations often are equated with ‘voluntary organisations’, belonging to the ‘third sector’ of organisations in society that serve personal and social interests based on shared values. The third sector together with the ‘second sector’ (private enterprise) are understood as the private realm, as opposed to the public realm of the state (‘first sector’).\textsuperscript{38} This implies that all organisations in the private realm by definition are ‘non-state’ and ‘non-governmental’ organisations (NGOs). Development discourse, however, generally assigns NGOs to the ‘third sector’, as these private organisations delivering services to the poor pursue social values instead of profits. NGOs should therefore not be equated with business organisations that primarily pursue profit, but that does not mean they do not belong to the (economic) private sector. Their relationships with the persons whom they serve – clients and customers – exhibit essential similarities’ writes Uphoff (1995:19). He argues that most NGOs belong to the service-subsector of the private sector: they primarily service persons who are not members of their organisation. As a result, NGOs formally cannot be held accountable for the services they deliver, whereas membership organisations are formally subject to accountability by their members. The category ‘third sector’ can generate confusing questions, such as: if most NGOs are not part of the third sector, do they belong to civil society? As far as their civic function is concerned – to contribute to voluntary collective action and self-help – they certainly do. But if it is their economic func-
tion that is considered, they probably do not belong to civil society.\footnote{29}

Official aid agencies, such as USAID, tend to consider most organisations of civil society as 'NGOs' on the conditions that these are concerned with influencing state policies, and are autonomous from the state and political parties (Blair et al. 1995). Supporters of this view call this subset of the NGO-community civil society organisations (CSOs), which excludes those NGOs that are only concerned with service delivery, relief or productivity functions. However, this vague notion of CSOs is problematic because the two conditions (influencing state policies and autonomy from state and parties) for NGOs are difficult to apply in Latin America. The first would include virtually all social organisations in a given civil society, as most organised social interest in Latin America has been concerned with influencing state policy. Ironically, the condition of autonomy from either the state or political parties would practically exclude all organisations in civil society. The concept CSO is not only too broad, it also contains a strong smell of anti-statism – which might explain why it has been gaining acceptance in recent years – and it suggests a societal harmony that is absent in Latin America.\footnote{30}

This point can be further clarified by another implication: the 'third sector' is determined by 'voluntary association' as opposed to market interaction and exercise of authority in other sectors.\footnote{3} Key characteristics of these associations are (i) the collective purpose of their members to pursue common interests, and (ii) that leaders are formally accountable to their membership. A wide range of social organisations respond to these criteria, from women's organisations to employers' associations, from churches to cooperatives. According to their goals and memberships each could be classified in several categories.\footnote{32} Throughout this book these membership (or popular) organisations will not be considered as NGOs, to stress that they serve different purposes in civil society.\footnote{33} Still, the question could be raised how to categorise NGOs that very much resemble popular organisations, or NGOs that have developed into a coordinating body of these organisations? In other words, how to distinguish among the variety of NGOs, and how to consider NGOs that are informally accountable to the clients they serve? For this purpose Carroll (1992) introduced the distinction between membership-support organisations (MSOs) and grassroots-support organisations (GSOs), the first being a service organisation (for example research or policy advocacy) that is part of – or a product of – a membership organisation. The distinction is useful, as the grey area between NGOs and popular (or membership) organisations has proven to be very diverse.\footnote{34} However, I would prefer to use a more explicit indicator for mapping differences between NGOs and popular organisations, such as ownership. A popular organisation is 'owned' by its constituency through the existence of 'membership' and the 'accountability' of leaders to these members, whereas a development NGO is not owned by a membership.\footnote{35}

In the rapidly expanding 'NGO literature' it is often assumed that NGOs have been the key players of civil society in bringing about democratic transition.\footnote{36} But this is a risky assumption, as it depends on the definition of NGO that is applied.
If NGOs are equated with the broad spectrum of non-state organisations serving as intermediaries for foreign aid, a definition still popular with many donor agencies, virtually all organisations in civil society could be labelled as NGOs. Obviously, this does not add to a better understanding of the constituent parts of civil society. The definition of NGOs used in this book— independent non-profit organisations, not owned by their members, delivering development services to the poor—implies that NGOs are probably less decisive in building up civil society than is sometimes suggested. What are often referred to as ‘NGOs’ either are not independent (from political parties or from the state), are actually ‘owned by their members’, or are national or international networks of popular organisations with low levels of internal accountability.

Key sectors in civil society

Distinguishing between categories such as ‘NGOs’ and ‘popular (or grassroots) organisations’ does not say very much about the power relations between the various organisations of civil society, about the internal strength of organisations, or about the relationship between civil society and the state. Typologies of associational life and the pluralist approach of the ‘third sector’ only refer to the organisational dimension of civil society and tend to hide potential conflictual interests that are related to the material and ideological dimensions of civil society. Civil society is not only strong because it is ‘dense’, but also because it is relatively ‘equitable’ and ‘inclusive’; ‘density’ and ‘vibrancy’ of civil society do not automatically imply ‘consensus’. As some organisations in civil society generally are more powerful than others, they have the potential to impose decisions favourable to their interests on others. The point is that not all organised interests share a common view about the desirability of deepening democracy (Chazan 1992). Rueschemeyer et al. (1992: 57) correctly argue that ‘those who have only to gain from democracy will be its most reliable promoters and defenders, those who have the most to lose will resist it and will be most tempted to roll it back when the occasion presents itself.’ Apparently, particular sectors tend to play a key role in strengthening civil society, whereas other sectors tend to frustrate these efforts because they are contrary to their interests. When the former manage to strengthen their legitimacy, both within civil society and towards the state, this considerably enhances the chances for a shift in the balance between the state and civil society towards democratic transition. Who are these key sectors in civil society, how are they organised and what are the sources of their ‘social power’?

Only particular sets of organisations in civil society manage to play an active role in mediating and articulating demands from subordinate sectors at the level of political society during democratic transitions. Moreover, the various stages of these transitions should be carefully analysed, as different groups appear to take the lead in subsequent stages. O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986: 50) suggest that the middle classes, due to their ‘superior capacity for action’ and their ‘lesser exposure to the risk of repression’ play a ‘crucial role in the earliest stages of transition’, even
when they are ‘among the regime’s earliest supporters’. Although the middle classes have been the main protagonists in the emergence of civil society, and often take the lead in founding and leading civic organisations, they are not necessarily the main protagonists in civil society during democratic transitions.

In Latin America, urban-based associations have been critical in early stages of political transitions, particularly those run by artists and intellectuals. O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986) point at the crucial role of urban-based middle-class individuals who voiced their critique of authoritarian regimes in South America by using their position in journals, universities, research centres and professional associations. But intellectuals also played a major role in later stages, as was shown in the Chilean transition where party-related intellectuals determined the opposition strategy leading to the defeat of Pinochet in the 1988 plebiscite (Puryear 1994). Human rights organisations and sections of the Catholic Church certainly also have been important channels for voicing popular protest, particularly when popular organising was still repressed. But as soon as (mostly urban-based) ‘social movements’ began to emerge from the underground and acquired more room to manoeuvre in networks or popular fora, this small initial group of civil associations was broadened. The role of churches and NGOs in this process generally was important in providing financial resources and some kind of political protection, which was based on an externally derived legitimacy. Rural organisations generally did not take the lead in mobilising popular pressure to democratise the system, as repression often was concentrated in rural areas where the principal anti-democratic forces were located (Fox 1994).

The role of political parties deserves special attention. During authoritarian regimes in the Southern Cone, political parties were banned (or restricted) and their leaders continued their activities underground, often protected by the Church, or by setting up legal institutions with foreign support. As most social organisations were in some way or another linked to political parties, this lack of autonomy weakened the social sectors as soon as parties regained legal political space in later stages of the transition. The Chilean transition is a good example of mobilisation followed by effective demobilisation of social movements by political parties. In his study on neighbourhood associations during the military regime, Oxhorn (1995: 282) concludes: ‘Whereas narrow partisan interests led political parties to try to capture the incipient movement in 1986, as the possibility of an actual transition to democracy became increasingly imminent in 1987 and 1988, political parties joined together to dismantle the movement as part of their collective efforts to secure the transition.’

Several lessons could be drawn from this brief overview of key societal actors in democratic transition. First, it underlines that one has to be careful in generalising about the identity of ‘lead institutions’ of civil society during political transitions. Bratton’s idea (1994) of one leading actor might be true for some African experiences, but can be questioned for most transitions in Latin America. Another lesson is that the use of the concept ‘non-governmental organisation’ to identify key actors
in civil society can create confusion and misunderstanding. Throughout this book, an effort is made to avoid this concept or at least to be specific about the type of NGO under consideration. A further reason for being careful about generalisations is that the role of key players in civil society is contingent upon local political and economic conditions. This is one of the most important — and probably unintended — lessons of the transition literature. It means that the role of societal actors during democratic transitions can never be disconnected from their national context. Before analysing several key actors in the Central American transitions, Chapter 4 will therefore provide an analysis of the various dimensions in the formation of state-society relations. Finally, an historical dimension should be added to this picture, for during various stages of democratic transition new sets of actors seem to play a key role, either in civil or in political society. This implies that strengthening civil society appears differently in the various stages of democratic transition and consolidation. It is therefore time to have a look at what these key organisations possibly can do to shift the balance between the state and civil society.

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**Five means for civil society building**

Relations between the state and civil society are mediated by, and organised within, political society. Figure 1.2 schematically illustrates the balance of power between the state, civil society and political society.

Within civil society, broadly speaking, organisations are located in a spectrum between full autonomy from the state (B) and co-opted by the state (A). Autonomous association is, as was argued earlier, a precondition for a strong civil society.

![Figure 1.2 The balance between the state and civil society](image-url)

- Authoritarian rule
- Co-opted by the State
- Autonomy from the State
- Democratic rule
- State
- Civil society
- Political society

*Figure 1.2 The balance between the state and civil society*
So if organisations are mostly located in area (A), civil society is generally weak, and if the emphasis is on (B), civil society is usually strong vis-à-vis the state. This has consequences for the interaction between the state and civil society, and thus for the strength of political society. Associations in civil society performing an intermediary role during certain transition stages become active in (and part of) political society. These associations could be political parties, but also (coalitions of) social organisations of various kinds. If these mediating actors are mostly active in area (D), political society potentially has a strong position in regard to the state, generally manifested by efforts for political and social reform. However, in most of Latin America political parties are either weak or co-opted by the state, which implies that they usually strive for short-term changes and longer term preservation of the status quo. Civil society ideally pushes mediating organisations to move from area (C) to (D), so as to increase the leverage towards the state. Any analysis of the power balance between the state and civil society should consider the composition and the strength of political society, in order to assess the potential for political change towards democratic government.

Strengthening civil society is only one part of democratic transition; the other is to strengthen the state by making it transparent and more accountable (and more efficient as is nowadays the dictum). Strengthening civil society thus is a matter of combining widening participation with increasing accountability. Shifting the balance between the state and civil society is a complementary process: civil society should become more inclusive, and the state has to become more accountable to its citizens (Fowler 1993b). Ideally, these two processes go hand in hand, where civil society and the state each have their responsibilities. This is the assumption of the ‘governance’ approach of the World Bank, in which the ‘bottom-up’ approach is combined with a governmental ‘top-down’ approach. In the recent history of Latin America, authoritarian regimes have proven to be rather weak in their ability and their willingness to truly reform themselves (Nunnenkamp 1995). The organisation of popular pressure from civil society to push for political inclusiveness and state accountability therefore seems to be essential, particularly in the early stages of democratic transition. In Latin America this potential political role of civil society has been identified as a way to ‘open up political spaces of contestation’, which comes down to rebuilding (in the Southern Cone) or constructing (in Central America) political society from below. This generates the question: by what means can organisations in civil society strengthen political society, and what exactly are they strengthening? A variety of complementary mechanisms have been identified for this purpose, which I group into five categories: (a) building the foundations of civil society, (b) building alliances in civil society, (c) developing intermediary channels between the state and civil society, (d) opening up transnational political space and (e) building citizenship. The first two categories are central to building a strong civil society and to providing conditions for the establishment of political society, whereas the remaining three categories are central to consolidating civil society and to constructing political society.
(a) building the foundations of civil society
A condition for civil society to play a political role at all is that citizens are not
excluded from participation in collective decision-making, either as individuals or
by way of some form of interest organisation. This 'foundation' of civil society
could be strengthened both by the formation of autonomous new interest organ­
isations, but also by increasing the 'diversity' of organisations so that no particular
interest is excluded from civil society. But there is also a qualitative aspect to this
civic action which is often underplayed by pluralist analysts: it is important that
these organisations themselves uphold democratic values and methods so that they
really contribute to strengthening the democratic orientation of civil society. This
applies not only to other actors in civil society, but also to internal accountability
structures and transparent decision-making. Another qualitative element is to
provide and enhance the capacity for key organisations in civil society to support
their activities – direct or indirect via political parties – in the realm of political
society. Access to information sources and communication channels is one of the
capacities that is often weakly developed. Another is the ability to develop coherent
proposals and longer term visions. VeneKlasen (1996) points at particular skills of
organisations that need to be improved in order to effectively interact with the
state: analysis and research, organisational and management skills, as well as the
ability to negotiate with institutions and bureaucracies.

(b) building alliances
A further way to build a strong civil society is to develop the 'social fabric', by
forging mutually beneficial relationships at various levels among constituent parts
of civil society. One obvious way to build these linkages is to coordinate activities
within a particular sector. This could be done at the level of communities or munici­
palities (Reilly 1995), but is often also applied to national and international levels.
In Latin America, trade unions, cooperatives and peasant organisations have a rich
tradition in forming coordinating associations to represent sectoral interests in
negotiations with employers' associations, national ministries or international
agencies. In addition, to bring forward demands that go beyond sectoral bound­
aries, often networks or alliances of representative bodies from several sectors are
formed. These multi-sectoral alliances generally are built around one particular
issue. Examples from Latin America include the Brazilian alliance of social forces
campaigning for direct elections, the Honduran Plataforma de lucha against the
adoption of new legislation turning back the land reform process, or the Civil
Initiative for Central American Integration (ICIC) which includes all major orga­
nisations of subordinate societal actors in Central America. Alliances could even
include political parties, especially if these parties are excluded from (or only weak­
ly present in) political society. An example is the Asamblea de la Sociedad Civil
(ASC) in Guatemala, where a broad spectrum of parties and social organisations
monitored agreements during the recent peace negotiations.
(c) building intermediary channels
The key to a strong political society is the existence of democratic political parties whose leaders can be held accountable, both by a diverse membership and by the electorate. But it has already been mentioned that most Latin American countries have a weak system of political parties, and thus a badly functioning system of formal mediation between the state and civil society (Torres Rivas 1995). This is where the intermediary function of organisations in civil society has become extremely important, particularly for the most vulnerable sectors in civil society whose interests are not or only weakly represented. In situations of a restricted civil society, where efforts to build alliances between sectoral groups are repressed by force, informal intermediary channels generally are also closed. The function of articulating concerns in these situations is performed by those groups that still enjoy a certain legitimacy with the regime, such as Church leaders or journalists. This takes the form of a moral representation and is not guided by any mechanism of formal consultation. During later stages of democratic transition, when more freedom is given to articulate sectoral demands, political space is widened and increases the potential to build up new channels of communication, dialogue or negotiation with the state. This is in fact the moment in which political society is being constructed and when the ‘political role’ of civil society is practised.

(d) opening up transnational political space
In addition to the mechanism of building intermediary channels, there often also is an international dimension. When civil society is restricted by force, societal actors sometimes have to reach across their national boundaries to make alliances with (external) actors that could enhance their legitimacy, both within civil society and vis-à-vis the state. This externally derived legitimacy of course only works temporarily, but it can boost the growth of an opposition movement towards an authoritarian regime. An example of this mechanism is the impact of international awards (such as the Nobel Peace Prize) to opposition leaders that are either imprisoned, banned or ignored by the regime. Many of these laureates in South Africa, Argentina, Guatemala, Burma and East Timor generated substantial international attention for their national struggles, which could no longer be dismissed by authoritarian regimes. It often resulted in state recognition of opposition forces in civil society, forging ‘political space’ for these organisations. Another example of strengthening civil society via external linkages is the use of lobbying campaigns directed at international organisations to put forward particular national issues on which the regime is unwilling to negotiate. These international bodies could be governmental – such as the UN Human Rights Commission, the European Commission or the World Bank – as well as non-governmental, such as private international organisations promoting human rights or environmental issues. By enlarging their access to this ‘transnational political space’, societal actors of the opposition often manage to strengthen their leverage upon the national regime.
(e) building citizenship

Complementary to these four means for developing political society is keeping the newly conquered political space open and institutionalising democratised relations between the state and civil society. In other words, guaranteeing that the state can be held accountable for its actions and that it will do so in the longer run. A condition for reproducing a democratic political system is to increase its legitimacy. Low voter participation in elections could be an indicator of weak legitimacy. Civic education campaigns are often mounted to increase the confidence of citizens in the new system. But this is not enough if formal citizenship is only applied to elections and not to other areas of civic action. Another condition for maintaining a viable political society is to guarantee that citizens can participate in public debates and that they can trust their elected representatives. Building and main-

Table 1.3 Changing relations between the state and civil society during stages of democratic transition

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<tr>
<th>Authoritarian period</th>
<th>Early Transition</th>
<th>Mid-Transition</th>
<th>Late Transition</th>
<th>Early Consolidation</th>
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taining a strong political society thus implies that citizen participation beyond elections is highly valued and that new generations of political leadership are trained and formed (Robinson 1995a). The ultimate goal of building a strong realm of intermediation between the state and civil society is the constructive interplay between civil society and democratic political parties, whose members after all are recruited from civil society. These efforts to ‘deepen’ democracy are contingent upon what is called ‘creating an enabling environment’. This has a national and an international dimension, to which I will return in Chapter 3 when options for international donor agencies during democratic transitions are discussed.

Civil and political society during stages of democratic transition

An historical element is still missing in this examination of the construction of civil society and political society. Democratic transition is, after all, a slow process which is far from linear and in which stages of progress and retreat can be identified. To monitor shifts in the power balance between civil society and the state, and especially to monitor the expanding space for opposition forces in political society, four stages of democratic transition have been identified: ‘early transition’, ‘mid-transition’, ‘late transition’ and ‘early consolidation’. Following the authoritarian period, in which political society is repressed by the authoritarian regime, civil society only has restricted freedom to organise. The stage of early transition is the phase of ‘political opening’, in which the authoritarian regime concedes restricted opportunities for formal channels of mediation between civil society and the state. Usually, this mediation is restricted to those political parties that are not too rigidly opposed to the regime, whereas opposition parties are still banned. However, when this ‘early transition’ of political openings is in motion, it often provides new opportunities for popular organisations in civil society to pronounce themselves and to conquer some space in political society. This is a key stage for democratic transition, as it entails negotiations between the elites of civil and political society and the regime that are often characterised by mutual distrust. A climate which initially seems to be favourable for dialogue can easily be reversed if one of the parties withdraws. An example is El Salvador after the violent elections of 1984, in which negotiations between the insurgents and the government ended in a deadlock due to a veto by the armed forces, prolonging civil war another seven years.

As soon as polarisation in civil society eases, and the key forces opposing each other reach a basic consensus on the need for entering negotiations in order to move democratic transition forward, the second phase of mid-transition starts. The main issue in this phase is to determine who are the legitimate forces to articulate the interests and demands of civil society, especially of those (subordinate) sectors in civil society that previously were excluded. In other words, mid-transition is characterised by a political struggle between civil society alliances and (old and new) political parties for a legitimate role in political society. Typical of this stage is the coexistence of popular mobilisation and elite negotiations, and a substantial
role of external actors pressuring for democratic rule. As soon as an agreement (between elites) is reached about the constitutional framework for future democratic rule, civil society has to endorse this agreement to confirm the existence of a national consensus to finalise authoritarian rule. This is often the moment in which political parties of the opposition are legalised and formally admitted to political society.

The stage of late transition starts as soon as these political parties successfully have participated in unrestricted elections and enter legislatures at national and municipal levels. The mediation between the state and civil society during the stage of late transition is now formalised into political society, the legitimacy of which gradually increases. Sometimes former (banned) opposition parties become part of the new regime, which happened for example in the recent South African transition to the African National Congress. However, practically in all Latin American transitions opposition parties have continued their oppositional role, although qualitatively improving their leverage as they have become part of national legislatures. 'Late transition' is generally considered to be a phase in which civic education programmes play a decisive role in educating the electorate about the rules of formal democracy, to ensure that democratic rule is broadly accepted and rooted in civic responsibilities (G. Hansen 1996; Fowler 1996b).

As was argued earlier, democratic transition is rarely concluded (or consolidated) when the stage of late transition is completed. Especially in countries where democracy had been absent in the past (such as in Central America) the construction of democracy requires a long process of consolidation. I would therefore prefer to identify various stages of consolidation, instead of only considering one 'end stage' which is popular with transitologists (Linz and Stepan 1996). The reason is that during early consolidation only initial steps are taken to end restricted citizenship. This could mean, for example, that the armed forces are put effectively under the control of a civilian government. Only in later stages of consolidation can it be ensured that democratic rule is institutionalised and that mechanisms for political participation are effectively in place, to guarantee that the state can be made fully accountable to civil society. The final stage of democratic transition could be regarded as the stage in which all other (informal) restrictions to citizenship have been tackled, such as severe socio-economic inequality or external dependencies. For that reason, it is more realistic to limit the present analysis to the stage of early consolidation.

With these stages in mind, various strands from the previous analysis are pulled together to construct an analytical framework that is depicted in Table 1.3. It points to the essential functions of civil society, political society and the state during the various stages of democratic transition. There is one important element however which is missing in this framework and needs further examination: the role of the international context.
1.3 Democratisation and the international context

The previous sections focused on democratisation as a process in which power relations are shifting both within and between the realms of civil society, political society and the state. But the role of international actors (and developments) also should be examined, as these constitute a further dimension of power relations determining democratic transitions. The international context proves to be ‘a notoriously difficult variable to pin down’ (Schmitter 1996: 28). Although its presence and impact are not disputed, the way in which it affects domestic political processes is dependent upon many local variables. Not long ago a broad consensus existed among scholars that external actors played only a rather marginal role, either in forging or obstructing national processes of democratisation. For example, O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986: 19) concluded in their study on political transitions in Southern Europe and Latin America that ‘domestic factors play a predominant role in the transition’. Diamond et al. (1989) also did not pay very much attention to international actors, but admitted that they were important. After the rapid political transitions in Eastern Europe, followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the notion that the international context was perhaps decisive started to take root. Schmitter (1996: 27) for example, was impressed by the rapid political changes in countries such as East Germany and Albania and admitted that these would have been unlikely without the previous dramatic changes in the Soviet Union: ‘perhaps it is time to reconsider the impact of the international context upon regime change’.

Although Schmitter and others assert that regime change tends to be a domestic affair, the international context can influence the balance between the state and civil society, as it can strengthen or weaken either one of them. Schematically, Figure 1.4 illustrates the interdependent relationships between the ‘trinity’ of forces that shape or obstruct democratisation. International forces can directly or indirectly influence the strength of civil society, by either reinforcing or weakening its diversity, density or inclusiveness. These interactions between international actors and organisations operating in civil society are located in a distinct realm, which is sometimes called ‘global civil society’. However, as will be analysed below, the distinction between ‘global’ and ‘domestic’ civil society cannot always be clearly drawn; international actors often are ‘operational’ in the South by creating ‘proxies’ that insert themselves inside a foreign (domestic) civil society.

Simultaneously, the state can be affected in many ways by international actors: by reinforcing its repressive function, by limiting its economic function, or by increasing its national or international legitimacy. Interactions between international actors and the state are mediated within the realm of the interstate community that I would label the ‘global state system’. These interactions could develop between two (bilateral) or between various (multilateral) states, either within or outside the multilateral sphere of international organisations. By doing so, the international context ultimately influences the balance between the state
and civil society. For example, if governments are forced by international actors to increase their accountability and transparency towards citizens and improve their governance, this could positively influence the strength of civil society. On the other hand, if dominant sectors in civil society are supported by external anti-democratic forces, this could negatively influence democratisation.

The scope of this international dimension of democratisation is highly diverse. International actors include governments and multilateral agencies such as the World Bank, but also non-state organisations such as (transnational) corporations, churches, labour unions or private aid agencies. The method of external intervention might be predominantly economic, but often also has been military, political or cultural. External influences could be direct or indirect, intended or unintended, and so forth. Whitehead (1996a: 6) identifies three categories of international factors that could affect domestic democratisation: ‘contagion’, ‘control’ and ‘consent’. Contagion is in his view democratisation ‘by infection’, and the result of ‘neutral transmission mechanisms that might induce countries bordering on democracies to replicate the political institutions of their neighbours’. Actions of third powers to impose democracy by open intervention could be categorised under the notion of ‘control’. Whitehead asserts that two-thirds of democracies existing before 1990 owe their origins to these acts of external imposition. As ‘contagion’ and ‘control’ have proven to be insufficient explanations for many post-1990 processes, Whitehead suggests a third relevant factor in the international context: ‘the generation of consent upon which new democracies must be based’, in which the emphasis is laid on the interplay between (often non-governmental) international and domestic actors over a considerable period of time. One of the

Figure 1.4 International actors and democratisation

![Diagram showing interactions between international actors, global civil society, global state system, national context, and political society.](image-url)
central questions guiding this study is to assess how important external (aid) interventions have been for democratic transitions. It is this ‘enabling environment’ that makes a distinction between the sphere of global civil society and the global state system useful for the analysis; both spheres will be examined in terms of main actors, motives and methods to enhance or ‘promote’ democracy.

‘Third governments’ promoting democracy
Foreign policies of governments aimed at the promotion of democracy should be analysed with caution, especially because many authoritarian regimes in the past have been supported ‘in the name of democracy’ (Carothers 1991). This paradox has been particularly visible in US foreign policies since the turn of this century (Drake 1991). Whitehead (1986) remarks that official declarations in favour of democracy in the abstract correlated poorly with observable behaviour affecting specific real interests and international relationships. He gives two illustrations. First, there is a particular model of democracy that has been favoured by international actors, which was closely tied to Western political ideology during the Cold War: liberal democracy. With its emphasis on civil liberties, private ownership and electoral competition, liberal (or capitalist) democracy was pitted against communism. This anti-communism was particularly strong in the United States, whereas European (usually Social Democratic) actors also considered socioeconomic equality intrinsic to democracy. The second point is that international actions promoting democracy predominantly have come from the Western industrialised world, and were directed at poorer countries with less political stability. Whitehead points at this ‘centre-periphery aspect’, in which ‘catching up’ in economic terms for these nations often implied the introduction of authoritarian measures to pursue national unity and internal order. This partly explains the paradox sketched earlier, in which the promotion of democracy sometimes resulted in support for authoritarian regimes.

What has driven (Western) governments to intervene in foreign political processes under the banner of ‘democracy promotion’? An important factor has already been mentioned: the rhetoric of the promotion of democracy derived its legitimacy from the establishment of political democracy in the Western industrialised world. As such, it proved to be a useful tool for conquering unfriendly regimes during decolonisation and the Cold War. An attitude of supremacy about the domestic political and economic model was central to the powerful position of the United States as the principal international ‘exporter’ of democracy in the twentieth century. But it was the imposition of formal democracy abroad that contributed to establishing US international supremacy. The repeated use of armed force, which is sometimes explained as a by-product of its domestic process of nation-building, distinguishes US policies from those of European governments. US governments derived their legitimacy for democracy promotion primarily from domestic support for their foreign policy, and less from its actual implications abroad. As Lowenthal (1991: 260) puts it: ‘Specific US efforts to
promote democracy in Latin America are motivated more often by domestic US
or broader international considerations than by particular trends within the
affected country.'

European governments (individually or in a coordinated fashion through the
European Community) also have actively supported democracy abroad, although
with a substantially different approach than that of the United States. European
governments were more inclined to use instruments of diplomacy and negotiation,
instead of force. Whitehead (1986) explains this by pointing at the need for Euro­
pean governments to concentrate on their own region, where they also lacked
adequate means to promote democracy, for example in authoritarian Spain and
Portugal, or in Eastern Europe. European governments acted more cautiously and
with far more patience than the United States. In part, this also was influenced by
developments in (former) colonies where the extension of democracy implied a loss
of privileges to European interests. The decision to support democratic forces in
post-colonial states on the other hand often guaranteed a continuation of European
influence. Still, the international ‘police role’ of the United States in the South was
often welcomed and tacitly supported by European governments, although often
domestically criticised. Particularly during the 1970s and early 1980s, when Euro­
pean (Social Democratic) governments were more critical of US foreign policy,
Europe was not unhappy to perform a so-called ‘third party’ role in Cold War
conflict areas. In this period, the role of non-governmental actors proved to be
quite useful for European governments, as will be shown later.

Military intervention probably has been the most visible and vigorous instru­
ment of third governments to influence foreign political processes. Imposing
democratic rule by external military force has occurred to various degrees. The
United States, for example, went from open military invasions (Grenada 1983,
Panama 1989, Haiti 1994), or the threat of invasion (Dominican Republic 1978)
to covert military operations (Afghanistan, Angola, Nicaragua, Cambodia) in
order to establish democratic rule abroad.48 The lasting effects of these interven­
tions on democratic politics usually proved to be marginal; a general lesson
appears to be that the more interventionist the policies of external states have been
in imposing democracy, the less effect they have had in the long run.49 Other
instruments, such as economic sanctions, diplomatic action, aid packages or pub­
lic statements on human rights are often considered more effective for promoting
democratisation. Despite the rhetoric and the wide variety of instruments being
used, a major study on US efforts to promote democracy abroad concluded that
the results, with few exceptions, had been disappointing (Lowenthal 1991). The
enduring effects of external interventions appear to depend largely on the local
power structure and on favourable conditions at the moment of intervention
(Rueschemeyer et al. 1992). Governments, and external actors in general, can back
locally controlled processes and institutions, but hardly seem able to influence
them directly. Even Huntington (1991: 86) concludes that foreign actors can best
be thought of as ‘hastening or retarding the effects of economic and social devel­
opment on democratisation’, instead of having the potential to determine these processes.

Schmitter (1996) makes a useful distinction between ‘coercion’ and ‘voluntary action’ in the promotion of democracy by external actors. Coercion (either by control or by conditionality) refers to actions available to governments. The control aspect is exercised by military force or economic policies, and conditionality, for example, by linking aid packages to human rights concerns. Non-state actors are unable to promote democratisation by coercion and have used other means which proved to be more effective in practice. This could possibly explain why interventions by governments are usually of secondary importance in determining local democratisation processes. Governments, and international actors in general, apparently only can perform a primary role under exceptional finely balanced circumstances, when foreign influence contributes to ‘tip the scale’. The assumption of Lowenthal (1991) and Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) that this potential is particularly present in regions which have been highly penetrated and are most vulnerable to external influences (such as Central America or the Caribbean) is in a sense ironical. Especially in those smaller nations of Latin America where US influence was greatest, democratisation advanced least (Karl 1990). In the post-Cold War period it seems to be less disputed that the promotion of democracy has functioned as ‘a component in a world-wide system of alliance control’ (Whitehead 1996: 14).

Non-governmental actors strengthening civil society

If the relevance of governments in promoting democratisation abroad is relatively marginal, what about non-governmental actors, such as churches, labour unions, private aid agencies or human rights groups? Lowenthal (1991: 261) concludes in his study that these actors could be of greater significance: ‘The US government can probably do more to promote democracy in Latin America by encouraging non-governmental policies and processes to support the region’s democratisation than by direct governmental pressures.’ Schmitter (1996: 39) makes the same point even more sharply by suggesting the following hypothesis: ‘The international context surrounding democratisation has shifted from a primary reliance upon public, inter-governmental channels of influence towards an increased involvement of private, non-governmental organisations.’ Whitehead and Schmitter call these non-governmental organisations the agents of consent that have learned from earlier democratic transitions and react interactively with key domestic actors to further democratisation. Their actions can augment, undermine and even countermand those of the states they belong to, and there is reason to suspect that this world beneath and beyond the nation state has played an especially significant role in the international promotion of democracy’ (Schmitter 1996: 29). Whitehead and Schmitter basically explain the increased relevance of non-governmental actors for democratisation as a result of the end of the Cold War. Dominant powers have become less concerned that uncertain pro-
cesses of democratic transition will be exploited by the external interventions of competing superpowers which might destabilise international security. This has given domestic actors more freedom to determine their internal politics and choose their international allies, and it has provided new political space for international actors to intervene in domestic political processes. What is not very clear, though, is why this would particularly benefit the actions of non-governmental international actors. But assuming that this is the case, how to explain the relevant actions of non-state actors before the end of the Cold War? The explanation seems not to be very solid, as many non-governmental actors flourished in the international arena thanks to the dynamics of the Cold War. Governments secretly made use of ‘informal diplomatic channels’, either through party internationals, private aid agencies, human rights organisations or churches, to intervene in those societies with which bilateral relations were politically sensitive. Well-known examples are the support from the National Democratic Institution (the private foundation of the US Democratic party) to the Chilean opposition in the mid-1980s, the support of the Socialist International to the Spanish Socialist Party in exile, and the support of European private aid agencies to opposition forces in El Salvador and Guatemala. The end of the Cold War as a (single) variable to explain the increased relevance of international non-governmental actors is therefore not very satisfactory.

Another explanation provided by Schmitter (1996: 32) is the increase in international interdependence, ‘especially forms of “complex interdependence” involving a wide range of types of exchange’, that has contributed to democratisation of national political institutions. He points not only at the impact of increased exchange of goods and services, but also of information. The ongoing revolution in information technology (faxes, satellite television, internet) and the resulting growth of information flows have increasingly connected societies without the approval and mediation of governments. The impact of (live) broadcast images of open resistance, such as the siege of the West German embassy in Prague by East German refugees and their illegal crossing of the Hungarian-Austrian border, definitely influenced the sequence of events in Eastern Europe. Without disregarding the impact of the spectacular development of ‘complex communicate interdependence’ on democratisation, it seems to be insufficient to explain the increased relevance of non-governmental actors or the primacy of ‘global civil society’ over the ‘global state system’. It could be helpful to explore the properties of this global civil society and how it is related to domestic civil societies.

**Global civil society versus domestic civil society**

The meaning of ‘global civil society’ needs to be clarified, because it has been a controversial concept among international relations theorists. Broadly speaking two arguments are made against the existence of a global civil society. The first is that it is non-existent for the simple reason that there is no ‘global state’ it can relate to, as civil society and the state by definition are national entities. The second argument is that the power of transnational societal actors has been marginal compared
to the power of nation states (Sullivan 1982). In recent years the idea of a global civil society seems to have gained more acceptance since both arguments have been countered. On the first point, the non-existence of a global state, Shaw (1994: 25) argues that (an ‘embryonic’) global civil society is a product of global interdependence, ‘coming into existence in an interdependent relationship with the state system, and especially with the developing international state institutions.’ The interdependent dynamic of the development of global civil society is the key, as it reflects its fundamental linkage with the global state system. Along the same lines, Waterman (1996: 54-55) argues that ‘the development of a global civil society depends on and stimulates the democratisation, deconcentration, and decentralisation of interstate organisations and of global capitalist companies and institutions’. Although it is inevitable that global civil society interacts with states and the state system, actors in global civil society simultaneously deny that the primacy of sovereignty lies with states.

The other objection to global civil society, that it is politically irrelevant, has been countered by pointing at the perceived threat of several Southern governments that transnational societal actors are challenging their national sovereignty. This was the case with international environmental actors such as Greenpeace and World Wildlife Fund, but also with transnational advocacy networks on security or human rights issues, and with international relief agencies. Sousa Santos (1995: 268) argues that the contestation of these actors shows successful attempts to create ‘a transnational agency alternative to the TNCS and their supporting institutions. Without pushing risky symmetries too far, there is some evidence that transnational NGOs represent for the agendas of cosmopolitanism and common heritage of humankind what the TNCS represent for the agendas of localised globalism or globalised localism.’ The political relevance of these transnational actors, and the global civil society they operate in, is thus not limited to the fact that they interact with or try to influence state policies. On the contrary, their political relevance lies in the ability to put into effect various forms of ‘global governance’ that go beyond the instrumentalist forms used by states (Wapner 1995). By combining ‘vertical deepening’ of domestic democracy with ‘horizontal expansion’ of democracy beyond state-society relations, Falk (1995a: 86-7) argues that these transnational societal actors facilitate the growth of global civil society: ‘this countervision presupposes the possibility of globalization from below to establish new entities and communities, reclaiming the instrumentalities of law and global institutions to promote the goals of nonviolence, social justice, and ecological balance’.

Parallel to what was suggested in the earlier discussion on domestic civil society, it could be helpful to ‘map’ these transnational (societal) actors that shape global civil society, especially those that have contributed to domestic democratisation. A brief look at the variety of transnational actors that have intervened in domestic political transitions over the past decades shows that the Catholic Church probably has been one of the most influential transnational networks supporting opposition to authoritarianism. The changes in the social doctrine of the Catholic Church that
were a product of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and the Latin American Episcopal Conferences in Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979) contributed to Catholic Church leaders taking an active role in promoting domestic democratisation in Latin America (notably Brazil, Chile and El Salvador) but also in several Asian countries (Philippines, South Korea) and Eastern Europe (especially Poland). Changes within the Catholic hierarchy occurred at two distinct levels, which often contradicted each other. At the level of parishes in many Latin American countries, a new progressive (often Marxist-inspired) ideology of 'liberation-theology' politicised grassroots activities of the Catholic Church. In Brazil, for example, popular ecclesiastical base communities were central to the mobilisation of popular opposition to the Brazilian military dictatorship.

On the other hand, at the level of the National Episcopal Conferences, where traditional and conservative ideologies remained dominant, Catholic bishops became crucial mediating players between opposition groups and authoritarian regimes during the 1980s. The Catholic Church often was the only channel to voice critical opposition to military rulers, although in the 1970s it had welcomed most of the military coups in Latin America. International support from the Vatican, and particularly from Pope John Paul II with his frequent travels to military-dominated societies, converted the Catholic Church into one of the major opponents to authoritarianism during the last period of the Cold War. It could be argued that this is only valid for countries with a strong Catholic community, though Huntington (1991) convincingly shows that out of all democratic transitions between 1974 and 1989 three-quarters occurred in Catholic societies. One of the key explanations for the successful role of the Catholic Church was its open anti-communist discourse – which coincided with (and was warmly supported by) foreign policies of the Reagan administration in the United States – combined with a more implicit (and generally grassroots-based) anti-imperialism. The Vatican, not surprisingly, opposed the latter tendency and gave priority to legitimising the intermediary role of the national clergy in pursuing a peaceful transition to democratic rule.

The example of the Catholic Church suggests that transnational support can legitimise the oppositional role of national forces confronting authoritarianism. The mechanism of deriving national legitimacy from transnational actors operating in global civil society also seems to be central to actions in other sectors. International human rights organisations, for example, have been crucial in denouncing human rights violations at an international level, but simultaneously provided security and legitimacy to national human rights committees (Sikkink 1993). Transnational networks of women's, indigenous and environmental organisations have been influential in shaping international treaties, adopted by the United Nations, which then provide opportunities to domestic movements to pressure for their ratification by national parliaments. Transnational networks of political parties, such as the Socialist International or the Christian Democratic International, have provided national legitimacy to persecuted national sister-parties. Party internationals derived their political weight predominantly from some of
their member parties occupying governmental offices in the North. In other words, transnational party networks often were used by Northern (European) governments as a transnational instrument to intervene abroad without risking bilateral diplomatic damage (Grabendorff 1996).

Another key sector operating in global civil society is the variety of non-governmental development aid agencies, which combine support to local opposition groups in civil society with international advocacy initiatives. These 'private aid agencies' seldom are mentioned in the literature on international dimensions of democratisation. This is remarkable, because these private aid agencies share some characteristics that make them potentially powerful compared to other transnational actors intervening in processes of democratic transition. Like other transnational actors they are relatively autonomous from the state, have the ability to build transnational alliances, and pursue the earlier mentioned goals of non-violence, social equality and ecological balance. However, what makes them different from many other transnational actors is their source of power: they are able to provide substantial financial resources to local organisations in civil societies in the countries where they intervene, often without the limitations of diplomatic barriers, bureaucratic procedures or ideological submission. The following chapters will examine the history and strategies of these private aid agencies, of which it is assumed that they have been particularly influential in strengthening Southern civil societies.

1.4 The magic of civil society

Since the 1980s 'transitologists' have dominated theoretical discourse on democratisation by analysing the wave of political transformations in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and other regions. Discussions on the conditions for democratic transition and consolidation, or on the various types of regime change, certainly have added to understanding the (short-term) dynamics of these complex political processes. But in recent years several transitologists have admitted that their analytical framework lacks the predictive power that was suggested initially. One of the limitations of the transition literature is that many assumptions are based on a concept of 'formal democracy', a 'procedural minimum', which is certainly desirable but overlooks a number of informal restrictions to the effective exercise of citizenship which are particularly visible in the Latin American context. The use of transition stages implicitly suggests that the 'end stage' of democratisation is reached when 'democracy has become the only game in town'; presumably, here is where the pendulum between authoritarian and democratic rule stops in favour of the latter. This approach has been questioned in this chapter, although it was also argued that the identification of 'transition stages' still can be a valuable tool to monitor qualitative shifts between the state and civil society during processes of democratisation. This could be particularly useful for monitoring democratic
transition in those countries where democracy still has to be constructed.

A key concept in analysing the dynamics of democratic transition is the sphere of civil society, which has become a 'magic' concept since the political transformations in Latin America and Eastern Europe, and which has been used with a variety of meanings. Although often understood as an essentially 'good thing' and often a synonym for 'freedom', it should be carefully defined as it is a complex and ambiguous concept. Civil society is understood as an intermediate associational (public) realm between the state and its citizens, populated by organisations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests and values. Whereas the organisational dimension of civil society is very important (and certainly the most visible property), it is often seen by pluralist analysts as the only dimension. However, civil society also has material and ideological dimensions. A 'strong' civil society is therefore not only 'dense' and 'vibrant', but also strong because it is 'equitable' and 'diverse'; in other words 'inclusive'. The changing balance between the state and civil society in stages of democratic transition could be monitored in political society, an intermediate realm of actors (political parties, but in early stages also multisectoral coalitions) and institutions (elections, legislatures) mediating, articulating and institutionalising relations between the state and civil society. The quality of democracy is determined by the combined strength of the state and civil society, which becomes explicit in the legitimacy of political society.

In the process of constructing democracy, civil society is strengthened by making it more inclusive and by making the state more accountable to its citizens. Several mechanisms have been identified to strengthen civil and political society 'from below', in which the international context appears to be a key variable. 'Third governments' seem to have been less successful in promoting democracy, especially during the Cold War, while the role of transnational societal actors is believed to have been more important. From the variety of transnational actors that have contributed to democratic transition, the role of 'private aid agencies' has received little or no attention in the transition literature, even though it is often assumed that they have played an important role in providing financial and political resources to subordinate sectors in Southern civil societies. Before looking at the results of these interventions (Chapter 3), a historical and analytical framework of these private aid agencies is required for a better understanding of their relevance during democratic transition.