

What Gives Civil Society Its Legitimacy: Status or Capacity for Action?

This note draws primarily on the report led by Charles Petrie on United Nations action in Sri Lanka (2012), on his work on Myanmar conducted with Ashley South, and on the seminars organized in 2026 by ARDD and ODI Global on the relationships between activism, governance and legitimacy.

Charles Petrie's work is rooted in extensive experience of international crises, fragile states and the limits of multilateral action. Its significance lies not only in its contribution to debates on local governance, but also in a deeper question: why do institutions, whether national or international, so often fail to generate protection, trust and legitimacy, even when they possess mandates, resources and formal recognition?

A first strand of his work concerns the limits of international action in situations of major crisis. The report he led in 2012 on United Nations action in Sri Lanka is central in this regard. The report points to a systemic failure: lack of coordination, weakening of the protection function, difficulty in naming ongoing violations, and a tendency for institutions to preserve their access or position rather than fully assume their protection mandate. The issue is therefore both institutional and political: an organization may possess a legitimate mandate and yet lose its capacity to act when its internal mechanisms, administrative culture or political arbitrations neutralize its responsibility.

This analysis resonates strongly in many institutional contexts where the issue is not the existence of a formal mandate but the way in which it is exercised. Recent situations show that an institution may enjoy unquestionable formal legitimacy while raising questions about the way its procedures, internal arbitrations or relations to power affect its ability to fulfil the mission entrusted to it. The central issue then becomes less one of status than of the effective legitimacy of institutional action.

This question regarding the conditions under which legitimacy is exercised also arises in contexts where the state is weak, fragmented or contested. Petrie does not reduce crisis to the absence of institutions. Rather, he observes the gap between recognized institutional forms and the actual mechanisms through which societies continue to organize themselves. The question therefore becomes less: how can the state be rebuilt according to a predefined model? than: where are authority, trust, coordination and collective capacity for action actually produced?

This approach shifts attention away from civil society as an institutional category and toward the functions concretely exercised by certain actors: mediation, the circulation of information, trust-building, representation, coordination and the maintenance of social cohesion. It echoes a central question of the Civil Society and Multilateral Dynamics (CSMD) initiative: beyond statuses and organizational affiliations, what capacities enable certain actors to contribute effectively to processes of governance and political transformation?

Another question runs through Petrie's more recent work: what becomes of citizen movements when they move from mobilization to the exercise of collective responsibilities? The ability to denounce injustice, mobilize a population or resist oppression may confer significant legitimacy, but it does not necessarily prepare actors for the demands of governance. Organizing services, arbitrating divergent interests, representing groups with sometimes contradictory expectations, negotiating compromises or maintaining collective cohesion over time require other capacities. The real challenge is therefore not simply to gain a place in the political arena, but to build the conditions that make it possible to exercise collective responsibilities on a lasting basis.

This question leads directly to an issue that his work leaves largely open: what competencies make possible the transition from engagement to governance?

This issue is particularly important at a time when traditional mechanisms of civil society representation are showing their limits. In many national and international arenas, legitimacy continues to be largely associated with a status, a function or an institutional affiliation. Yet when institutions are contested, weakened or insufficient, collective action often depends on actors whose legitimacy derives less from status than from the role they concretely play in building relationships, compromises and durable forms of cooperation.

The capacities for mediation, negotiation, coordination and trust-building therefore emerge as essential resources in situations of crisis or transition. Yet they remain rarely identified, mapped or recognized. Systems of representation generally privilege statuses, mandates and institutional functions, even though the effectiveness of collective action frequently rests on competencies acquired through experience and tested in practice.

The issue then becomes less one of representing civil society than of its effective contribution to processes of governance, dialogue and negotiation. Who is capable of creating the conditions for compromise? Who succeeds in maintaining trust among actors with divergent interests? Who can circulate information between different institutional, social or cultural worlds? Who enables negotiations to move forward when positions appear blocked?

These questions connect directly with contemporary debates on multilateralism and negotiation processes. Improving procedures, negotiation formats and facilitation mechanisms is an important condition for successful negotiations. Yet it addresses only part of the problem. Negotiation does not rest solely on rules or procedures; it also depends on actors capable of building trust, sustaining dialogue and constructing the compromises that allow these procedures to produce results.

From this perspective, competencies forged through experience still appear as a blind spot in contemporary discussions on governance and multilateralism. Yet they help explain why certain actors are able to exercise decisive influence in contexts of crisis, transition or negotiation, even when they do not occupy dominant institutional positions. The challenge is therefore not only to acknowledge their existence, but also to understand how these competencies are developed, transmitted, strengthened and mobilized in support of more legitimate and effective forms of governance.

Charles Petrie's work thus invites us to shift our perspective: behind institutions, procedures and mechanisms of representation stand women and men whose actions contribute to building trust, sustaining cooperation and making governance processes possible. Their contribution rests not only on status or formal position, but also on competencies forged through experience and exercised in practice. Participation in processes of dialogue, negotiation and decision-making therefore relies on competencies that remain insufficiently identified and recognized.

The question then becomes one of the collective cost of this lack of recognition. How many mediators, facilitators and actors able to connect different social, institutional and cultural worlds remain invisible today even though they contribute concretely to the production of trust, cooperation and decision-making? In other words, what happens when systems of representation overlook precisely those actors who enable these processes to function?

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