# Change Agents for Civil Society and Church in Myanmar: The Role of KAAD-Alumni

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When winds of political change blew stronger in the last decades, politicians or political scientists emphasized regularly the key-role of the civil society, sometimes as if in the midst of a surprising and non-transparent, even chaotic historical turn this magic word could promise orientation for a substantial transformation towards a more democratic future.

In my own biography, working at that time for Latin America, I firstly became aware of these expectations, when military regimes came to an end in the 1980s, like in Argentina or Brasil. "Sociedad *civil*" was then evoked as the terminological antipode to "sociedad *militar*" which was characterized by a military dominated state-class and in some cases corporatist (social) movements under its control.

After the collapse of the former Communist bloc starting in 1989, there were again the hitherto practically non-existing or oppressed civil societies of the Central and Eastern European countries on which expectations and hope for democratic transformation concentrated.

We currently experience the same in the so called Arab Spring of the Near and Middle Eastern countries observing also for the first time to this extent the mobilizing power of Internet based social networking. It is interesting to note that in similar historical turns and transitions a call for "change agents" is also heard and that those who pretend to support or accelerate transformations discover the importance of capacity-building, particularly the instrument of *scholarship*-programs. Our organization, the KAAD, f. ex. has benefitted from this in the mentioned occasions, recently again receiving specific funds for change agents in the Arab Spring.

Of course, Myanmar is also undergoing a deep historical change. A rapid glance at political or scientific statements from Western countries concerning the status of civil society in Myanmar (2011/12, cf. the list at the end of this contribution) shows us that it is generally seen as a key-factor of change, but remains still underdeveloped or "informal" without appearance outside of a local context. Reasons for this might be a lasting insecurity among Burmese people towards the sustainability of the political change combined with existing bureaucratic registration-hurdles. But there is at any case a strong will of the young generation to obtain more possibilities of participation through political information and education. Again in this context scholarships could be an adequate instrument to help future change agents…

My contribution does not pretend to give an insight in the status and the specific chances of the civil society – and the Church in particular – here in Myanmar. You all are better analysts to do this and to identify concrete options for development actions. My objective is instead to give you some theoretical framework, some reflection-tools which might be useful for the analysis and the projects of the working groups which form the core of our Conference.

## 1. The concept of "civil society"

While analyzing definitions of what "civil society" (cf. for the following observations in particularly: Kaufmann 26s, 33; Kesselring 78, 86-91; Galindo 98-102; Höhn/LThK) could exactly mean, it becomes obvious that it is not easy to 'catch' this notion. Metaphorical prepositions like "between", "beyond", "parallel" appear when we try to determine the 'localization' of the civil society in its relation to the state, the market and to (small) communities. The term "societas civilis" originates from the Roman political philosophy (Cicero, De officiis III, 5, 21s) – already as a translation of Aristoteles' corresponding greek notion – conceptualizing the politically structured society as a whole. In the footsteps of English and French political philosophers of the 18th century (Rousseau's "Contrat social"!), the German G. W. F. Hegel formed a more determined notion of the "bürgerliche Gesellschaft" which is today generally seen as philosophical source of our actual discourse on civil society. In his conception the civil society 'steps in between' state and familiy (private sector), allowing the individual persons to articulate their interests publicly and to mediate the conflicts that might arise from this articulation in the perspective of a common good ("bonum commune") – to shape the particular in a common form ("Allgemeinheit", cf. Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts, published 1821, § 182).

Marx' and Marxist interpretation of Hegels concept restricted this common sphere of free civic interaction mainly to economical market-relations of the actors whereas today the mainstream of theories emphasize the independence of the civil society not only from the state and from small, private interests seeking communities, but also from the market- and predominantly economic interests. Negatively spoken, the performance of the civil society intends therefore always more than state-launched activity, more than market-driven dealing, but also more than actuation according to particular communitarian interests and should thus maintain a critical distance to state, economy and private sector even if a vital civil society needs at the same time a solid state, a functioning economy and a communitarian cohesion in order to develop its full potential.

If we try a heuristic and still rather vague positive definition we could say that *civil society is the public sphere of exchange and competition in which free citizens and their associations articulate and mediate their interests*. It seems evident that this form of activity can take place only inside a political framework which enables or at least tolerates a plurality of different civil actors and ideologies. Therefore the concept of civil society is generally linked to democratic systems – in different, historically contextualized forms –, to the rule of law and (institutionalized) respect for human and civil rights. It is also evident that civil society is not simply an equivalent to NGOs as often shortcut in the public discourse. NGOs play of course an important role in this public sphere and can particularly take over the position of "watchdogs" if they maintain a critical distance to the respective governments. But the initiative and engagement of empowered citizens is much broader and often more informal than could be shaped in non-governmental organizations.

The above mentioned (formal) definition of civil society needs an essential complementation introducing an explicitly ethical factor: there are a lot of associations and NGOs whose objectives might contradict moral values or even include criminal networking and practice. An often quoted ambiguous example is the National Rifle Association in the USA – a country traditionally presented in sociological research as model of a wideranging and colourful civil society. A non-value-oriented concept of the civil society could face difficulties to exclude networks which promote f. ex. terrorist activities or preach intolerance and hate. Consequently, there is a certain consensus that civil society organizations should in general fit to the conditions: *respect for human rights and orientation towards the principle of sustainability which we conceive here as the ecological and intergenerational 'future component' of the "bonum commune", the common good of a nation, in the widest perspective of mankind as a whole in harmony with nature.*

To identify clearer the mentioned critical functions of the civil society, it might be useful to reflect on the human rights-criteria which are fundamental for its ethical vision. We include here also the second and third "generation" of human rights, the social and cultural dimensions, the last one understood as respect for and recognition of cultural and religious diversity and identities. In the 'classical' political perspective civil society-organizations should claim and protect civil rights against an oppressive *state* or a state totally controlled by a small elite – in some cases by a clan or a family –, organized as a "state-class" which accumulates also the economic rents. As far as civil society-organizations – often supported by international actors – conquer a space for action under these circumstances, their main duty should be to help to "de-privatize" the state and to bring him back to his original duty: to serve the common welfare.

In the perspective of human rights' social dimension civil society should focus on the promotion of social inclusion and cohesion empowering marginalized groups to more participation in market, state and society. Education is the key-factor in this process and civil society-organizations as critical "watchdogs" in many cases have to address *economic* actors. Accelerated economic progress often leaves considerable groups of the society as marginalized or even excluded victims, more and more also due to ecological consequences of economic growth. As to the cultural dimension of human rights, it is obvious that an advocacy for the recognition of traditional or religious identities on the one hand must be counterbalanced by a fight against 'totalitarian' claims of groups or *communities* which try to impose their ideology and way of life not only on their adherents but virtually on the society as a whole. Religious freedom means in this context not only the independence of religious communities and the possibility to practise their traditions but always also the freedom of the individual to choose or to change his or her confession.

Having passed rapidly through the main sectors where civil society should develop its engagement, I would like to emphasize that according to the form and state of democratization and according to the culture and religious background of a nation and society, every political community has to find their own and *contextual* definition of civil society. We tried this in our KAAD-publication on Myanmar (2007, cf. Lorch 37s), putting a special focus on the role of religious communities and churches. Depending on how we construct the 'triangular' relation between civil society and state, market and 'private' sector of (small) communities, we have to determine the degree of critical distance and/or cooperation civil society should engage. Our common deliberations during this Conference may find an orientation in this triangular relation-scheme in order to get clearer options for the context of Myanmar.
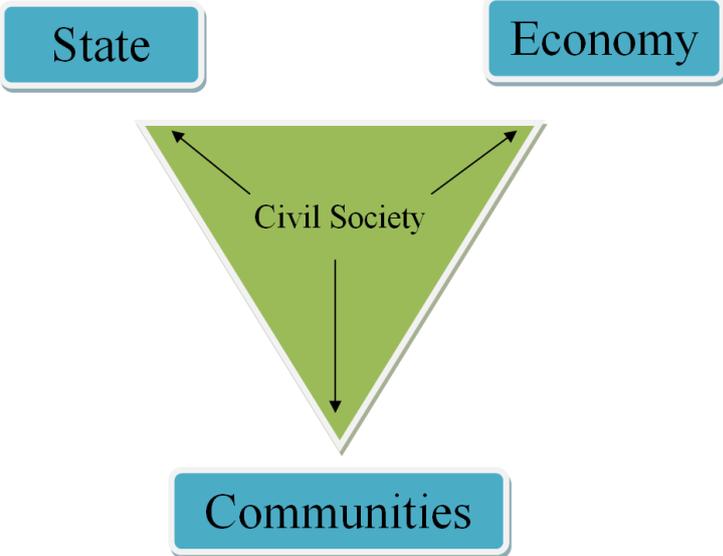
Before focusing on the specific role of the Church I have to introduce two phenomena which – in an era of globalization – became essential for any reflection on civil society: *its global and its virtual dimension*.

Starting after the Second World War and accelerating more after the collapse of the Communist bloc in 1989, globalization processes have established an infrastructure of dense interconnection and interdependence in any sector of life, including culture. Could this be a base for a real "world civil society" or even "world community"? In German language we distinguish terminologically between "Gemeinschaft" (community) as characterized by (close) personal relations and solidarity, and "Gesellschaft" (society) as form of common life marked primarily by the attempt to balance different interests, often of economical order. *(The KAAD-Community will deal with these aspects during our next Jahresakademie, April 2013, themed "Communio and Communities".)* Taking into account this distinction, it seems utopian to think of a "world community" (singular), but perhaps interesting to examine if there are "world communities" (plural), one of them being the Catholic Church (see next chapter).

On the other hand there have been serious efforts to build up a global civil society and to profit of the global infrastructure, particularly of the Internet, to bring civil initiatives into closer relation all over the world. The *anti-globalization* movement for a more solidary world, visible in the World Social Forum (since Porto Alegre 2001), which of course is a 'product' of globalization itself, gives an outstanding example. INGOs move constantly in this global sphere of inter-connection though we also have to mention critically that their approach should specifically respect the (traditional) local context where they engage, in order to avoid "neo-colonialist" or elitist attitudes. When it comes to the power-question, we have to admit that the influence of an internationalized civil society is still mainly limited to counselling or cooperative tasks, particularly for the UN-organizations, than expanding to real (co-)decision power even if there is a beginning process of including NGOs on this level as well.

Finally, it is undeniable that Internet and Internet based Social Media ("Web 2.0"), especially social networking via Facebook and Twitter etc., play a key-role for the building of a world-civil society forming a global public space of information and exchange that undermines the censorhip and firewalls of authoritarian and oppressive regimes and opens up participation possibilities across all social classes. Evidently countries like Myanmar and their young generations long for more and unfiltered access to these global network facilities. The Arab Spring currently gives us for the first time the possibility to examine how social networking influences – powerfully – in upheavals and

revolutionary processes that cause transformations in a whole region of the world.

But at a closer look it is rather the mobilizing force than strategic planning or long term coordination that could be supported by social media, apart from the basic information function, although this mobilization proves how 'virtual' relationship can change into (powerful) 'real' actions (cf. Joseph 166s, 186ss). In general we have to keep in mind that social media are tools which can be used in any direction and for any purpose, first of all by oppressive regimes themselves for propaganda, censorship or undermining of opposition networks. In a deeper philosophical perspective the dangers of a virtual world and relationship substituting real and personal experiences and relations became also obvious. These negative potentials, particularly for the young generation, can be shortly resumed with the terms: superficiality, anonymity (including 'masks' and fake identities), addiction (to chat, games, pornography) and tendency to violence (beginning with the language used)… The fundamental question is raised if or how social networking and virtual relationship – the Facebook "friends"! – can promote and substitute or on the contrary prevent and destroy the building-up of personal relations and communities. This also affects the religious communities to which we will now turn.

## 2. The Church: "seed of unity" and part of civil society

The biggest number of actors in the civil society of Myanmar (still) has  a religious background (cf. Lorch 38-52, particularly 38s, 49, 51s). Religious background means primarily NGOs and Community Based Organizations (CBOs) which originate in the Buddhist Sangha, the Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC), the Myanmar Baptist Convention (MBC) and the Catholic Bishops Conference (CBC). Their contribution – first of all in the field of education and capacity-building – is fundamental for the development of a society where participation of all social and ethnic groups is the base for justice and peace. Christian organizations could particularly profit from a certain autonomy inside the ethnic states. Our Catholic Church in Myanmar is a small minority, literally the Biblical "small flock", but promising in her education- and Karuna-services which aim at the benefit of the whole society. Our Conference will also include a balance of this multiple work.

Through these tasks the Church enters the sphere of civil society as one actor among a plurality of others. During the transformation process Myanmar is undergoing, this plurality will grow and probably more and more actors with a non-religious, secular or even secularist background may appear in the 'forum'

of civil society. Many community-based organizations inspired by religious motivations may also get stronger institutional structures and a more professionalized performance.

But religious communities, acting on the one hand in a secular form inside a civil society, transcend on the other hand this sphere by their very nature. This is particularly true for the Catholic world church: the II Vatican Council whose 50th inauguration-jubilee we currently celebrate recognizes the Church in its famous document "Lumen gentium" (LG) as "a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race" (LG 1). 'Vertical' union with God is the transcendental fundament for the Church and develops further through her "sacramental" presence in the 'horizontal' sphere of society and world society. This universal irradiation as "germ-cell" of unity appears again when the document introduces the people of God as "messianic people" in an eschatological perspective:

> So it is that that messianic people, although it does not actually include all men, and at times may look like a small flock, is nonetheless a lasting and sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race. (LG 9)

As far as the Council's notion "people of God" transcends the boundaries of the institutionalized and visible Catholic Church, their presence and service in a more and more globalized world aims at bridge-building in the midst of a plurality of cultural, ethnic and religious traditions which will further diversify if a nation opens its doors to the worldwide civil society and gets closer links with international networks. Such a "service of unity" may present a promising challenge for the "small flock" of Myanmar's Catholic Church, taking into account that still many actors of the arising civil society in this country limit their work to specific (ethnic) groups or communities.

There is no doubt that the method the Church should choose in the midst of this already traditionally existing and in the framework of a developing civil society still growing plurality is inter-cultural, inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogue led by the hope that her "very closely knit union with God" may inspire her to promote a peaceful "unity of the whole human race". Of course, this mission needs well educated, competent and experienced actors and therefore it seems to be a paramount objective of capacity-building for Myanmar in general and for the Church in particular to train people for the specific tasks of dialogue including mediation in conflictive situations, including also linguistic competences, as Myanmar is not only a multi-ethnic but also a multi-lingual state.

Turning back 'ad intra' to our Catholic Church, it is mainly the task of laypeople to move and to be engaged in civil society organizations. It is therefore helpful

to remember the vision of Vatican II concerning laity. Parting from the conviction that all members of the body of Christ participate – in a specific way – at his triple mission – as King, as Priest, as Prophet –, the Council underlines the mutual respect and cooperation of all members, particularly of clergy and laity, not only in view of their service for the society, but also in view of their different services inside the Church:

> Let the spiritual shepherds recognize and promote the dignity as well as the responsibility of the laity in the Church. Let them willingly employ their prudent advice. Let them confidently assign duties to them in the service of the Church, allowing them freedom and room for action. Further, let them encourage lay people so that they may undertake tasks on their own initiative. Attentively in Christ, let them consider with fatherly love the projects, suggestions and desires proposed by the laity. However, let the shepherds respectfully acknowledge that just freedom which belongs to everyone in this earthly city. (LG 37)

It is striking that the fathers of the Council employ twice the term "freedom" to characterize the main attitude in a common space of action inside and outside the Church, alluding at the end of the quotation to the civil rights of 'secular' citizens ("earthly city"). Let me follow up with an interpretation that links the role of laity, also inside the Church, to the famous principle of "subsidiarity", one of the pillars of our Catholic social teaching (cf. Hünermann 136s). In the version of Pope John XXIII (in his encyclica "Mater et Magistra") this "principle of subsidiary function" says:

> Just as it is wrong to withdraw from the individual and commit to a community what private enterprise and industry can accomplish, so too it is an injustice, a grave evil and a disturbance of right order, for a larger and higher association to arrogate to itself functions which can be performed efficiently by smaller and lower societies. Of its very nature the true aim of all social activity should be to help members of the social body, but never to destroy or absorb them. (MM 53, quoting his predecessors Pius XI "Quadragesimo Anno")

The secular 'success story' of this principle is tremendous given f. ex. that the European Union adopted it in order to work out (juridically) their structures of "unity in diversity". May it find its way into the political thinking of decision-makers here in Myanmar, f. ex. in the process of developing an independent and cooperative civil society. Regarding the role of the Church in the current transformations, under the guidance of the subsidiarity-principle "freedom and room for action" for Church actors, primarily laypeople, is needed to undertake tasks, works and projects on their own initiative and according to their own competence. An effective participation in a developing civil society also needs

the creation or extension of professional structures and of course an investment in capacity-building in order to better serve the people.

Inside the German Church, in the 1950s, when the conscience for world church-oriented solidarity awoke, it was mainly on the initiative of laypeople that a work like KAAD was born. Hopefully, also our KAAD-Alumni-association here in Myanmar can develop its potential for a better service to the Church and society in your country!

After the II World War, in a process of economical recovery and new openness for Third-World-solidarity, the German Church developed an actually very complex setting of organizations which articulate this sense of solidarity in a One World- and world church-perspective. They work on a very high professional level, like Caritas or Misereor, observing a division of labour according to their tasks, but seeking at the same time synergetic structures. The (financial) base is of course the German church-tax system which will face– due to demographic factors – a considerable quantitative decrease in the future. This will also affect the KAAD to a big extent.

In view of this complexity and professionalization the German bishops reminded us that the source of all this activity is the mission of Jesus Christ to bring unity, hope and salvation through his Church to all people. Therefore, in the plurality of services there is *one* mission. In our work religious-missionary and human development oriented tasks should be distinguished, but in principle never be separated (cf. Die deutschen Bischöfe 65, Nr. 19).

## 3. The concept of "change agents"

Switching back from community-level ("macro") to the "micro-level" of individuals and personalities, let us focus in the last part of our presentation on the notion of "change agents" which currently plays a dominant role in discourses on transformation processes, at least in Germany. The concept is relatively new and has been introduced in research and policy-making about 10-15 years ago via theories of "change management" for organizations. It is interesting to note that an important scientific advisory board of the German government ("German Advisory Council on Global Change", WBGU, 2011) proposing a global 'master plan' for sustainable transformation in reaction to the challenges of climate change, focuses much more on the role of change agents than on the (already 'traditional') importance of civil society. Here follows the definition of the Council:

> Change agents is a term used in diffusion, innovation and transition research to describe actors who play a central role in the initiation and shaping of

change processes. Initially, these are usually single individuals and small groups fulfilling various tasks or functions in transformation processes, including the identification of alternatives, development, communication and mediation, synthesis, investing, optimisation, diffusion, etc. (WBGU 391)

As there is an emphasis on innovation and the identification of alternatives, it is not surprising that these change agents often start from an 'outsider'-position in relation to the mainstream-society or elite. Curiously the Council illustrates this with the example of Leonardo da Vinci, the famous "uomo universale" of the Italian Renaissance. In this context a typology of change agents is introduced:
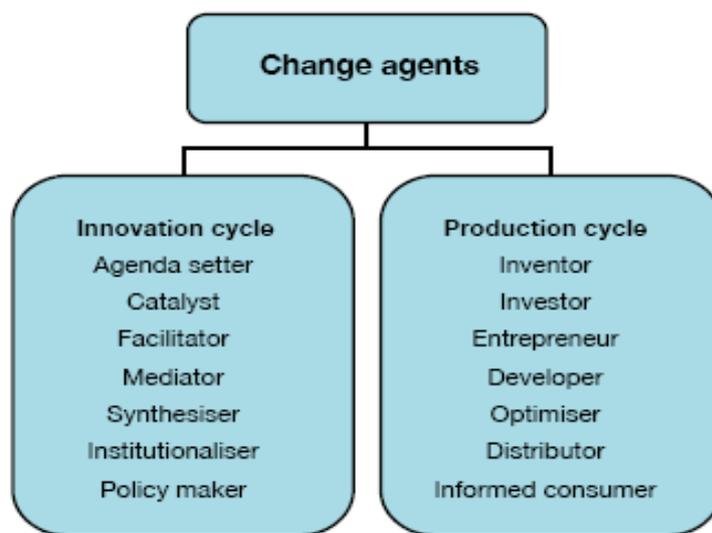


**Figure 6.2-1**
Typology of change agents.
Source: WBGU.
(WBGU 244)

In this figure the innovation cycle concentrates more on political, the production cycle more on economical change. We may see that all the competences and talents which come together in a "uomo universale" like Leonardo are split up in this figure and we thus may get a chance to identify ourselves with one or several of these types – but perhaps there is also a hidden genius like Leonardo among us… It could be an interesting task for the workshops of our Conference to clear up which types of change agents, promoters, pioneers etc. are most needed in the organizations you represent here and in the transformation context of your country in general.

Even if the starting point for change agents is often a marginalized or outsider position – niches where nearly invisible processes of innovation begin whose importance even the inventors themselves might be unaware of – , it is clear that those agents are often single and outstanding personalities. Their social position

is not limited to a certain class, but they can of course also be a part of the ruling elite. Anyway, inside of transformation processes they will obtain the strategic function of an "elite", a term which we understand here in an ethical perspective as responsibility- and service-oriented.

In this direction KAAD, too intends to identify scholars and alumni who may play a responsible and multiplying role in society and Church, particularly when it comes to innovation and transformation. Therefore, I will end my presentation with a brief glance at our own organization and network.

## 4. KAAD: alumni and communities

The assets of KAAD's work are primarily individuals who integrate scientific competence or excellence with social responsibility in order to strengthen the presence and the work of the Church inside the civil society, particularly when her position is that of a small minority like in many Asian and Middle Eastern countries. But at the same time KAAD aims – as part of the global "Communio" of the Catholic world church – at institution- and community-building. Bringing together scholars from the whole world, KAAD offers the chance for an intercultural forum, open also to inter-religious dialogue, which could form inside the world church – and at the same time situated as interface between the Church and the international Scientific Community – a particular "seed of unity" in fidelity to the mission of Jesus Christ who is present in the vital centre of any community-building in his name.

There is a constant reflection in the KAAD how we can define and shape this 'communitarian' aspect of our work. There are groups who speak – in analogy to what they know from their own cultural background – of a "KAAD-family"… If you pass through the References at the end of my contribution you may find some articles and books which originate from KAAD-conferences in Germany or in the home countries of scholars all over the world. This demonstrates that KAAD-community is first of all a learning-community of common reflection on important issues concerning development and transformation processes. Therefore, KAAD could activate an enormous scientific, cultural and religious innovation potential in our conferences and meetings, but also in the virtual world as we try to organize KAAD-specific Internet-communities through "Alumniportal-Deutschland" or other instruments.

Effectively, it is up to our more than 50 Partner Committees and to the nearly 30 Alumni associations all over the world to define their own way of cooperation and community-building. Our Conference may help us to further clarify what is possible and desirable for KAAD-alumni here in Myanmar who mostly do not have a "German" background and experience of the bigger KAAD-community, but perhaps a more "familiar" feeling after the common experience in Bangkok.

Anyway, KAAD in Bonn is willing to help you according to our possibilities and in respect to the principle of subsidiarity which always gives a good orientation for our Church activities.

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