Global Civil Society
Dimensions of the Nonprofit Sector

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BACKGROUND

When the independent trade union movement Solidarność (Solidarity) was born in the Polish city of Gdansk in 1980, it was perhaps among the earliest and most visible indications that the course of history in the entire region of Central and Eastern Europe was beginning to change. More specifically, the emergence of Solidarność signaled a new stage of civil society development across the region and was thus a harbinger of the processes that eventually led to the fall of the Berlin wall, the overthrow of the communist regimes, and the reunification of Europe. With political and economic freedoms re-instituted in Poland and the other former Soviet bloc countries a decade later, civil society and the nonprofit sector soon gained even firmer ground in Polish society, as this chapter will indicate.

The work presented here was carried out by a Polish research team at the KŁON/JAWOR Database on NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) as part of a collaborative international inquiry, the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project.1 It thus offers ample opportunities both to capture local Polish circumstances and peculiarities and to compare and contrast them to those in other countries both in Central and Eastern

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Europe and elsewhere in a systematic way. However, work in Poland began at a later stage than in other project countries, and a more complete set of data was not yet ready for release as this volume went to press.

The present chapter thus reports on just one limited set of findings from this project, those relating to the size of the nonprofit sector in Poland and elsewhere. Importantly, the findings presented here are preliminary and remain subject to substantial revision and re-evaluation pending further research and analysis. Subsequent publications will go beyond this first cut, provide a broader empirical picture, fill in the historical, legal, and policy context of this sector, and also examine the impact that this set of institutions is having in Polish society. The data reported here draw heavily on the 1997 census of nonprofit organizations and the 1997 employment survey both of which were carried out by GUS, the Polish Central Statistical Office. Additional research work, including a giving and volunteering survey and supplementary organizational survey conducted by the project team, will supplement and further extend these initial data. Unless otherwise noted, financial data are reported in U.S. dollars at the 1997 average exchange rate. (For a more complete statement of the types of organizations included, see Chapter 1 and Appendix A. For more detail on the methodology used, see Appendix C.)

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Keeping in mind the above caveat regarding the preliminary nature of the data, three initial findings emerge on the scope of the nonprofit sector in Poland:

1. A minor but growing economic force

In the first place, while its social and political impact has been substantial, the nonprofit sector remains a relatively modest economic force in Poland.

More specifically:

• **A modest employer.** Excluding religion, the Polish nonprofit sector employs nearly 91,000 full-time equivalent paid workers, which is a small but significant workforce. This figure represents 1 percent of nonagricultural paid employment in the country, 2.8 percent of service employment, and the equivalent of 1.9 percent of the government workforce at all levels (see Table 16.1).

• **More employees than in the largest private firm.** Although small, nonprofit employment in Poland still easily outdistances the employment
in the largest private business in the country, and does so by a ratio of 6:1. Thus, compared to the 98,387 paid workers (head count) in Polish nonprofit organizations, Poland’s largest private corporation, Daewoo-FSO Ltd., employs only 15,797 workers (see Figure 16.1). Moreover, nonprofit employment in Poland exceeds the combined employment of the 14 largest private companies. On the other hand, employment in Polish NGOs is lower than it is in the largest state-owned enterprise, PKP (Polish Rail), with 243,472 workers, though it is on a par with the second largest public enterprise, Poczta Polska (the Polish Mail Service), with 98,000 workers.

Table 16.1  The nonprofit sector in Poland, initial estimates, 1997

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<td>90,987 full-time equivalent paid employees</td>
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<td>— 1.0 percent of total nonagricultural employment</td>
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<tr>
<td>— 2.8 percent of total service employment</td>
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<td>— 1.9 percent of public employment</td>
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Figure 16.1  Employment (headcount) in nonprofits vs. largest private and public firms in Poland, 1997

Nonprofits

98,000

Largest Private Company (Daewoo-FSO)

16,000

Largest Public Enterprise (PKP-Polish Railways)

243,000

Second Largest Public Enterprise (Polish Mail Service)

98,000
On a par with several industries. Compared to other industries, the size of the Polish nonprofit sector remains rather modest according to these initial estimates. Nevertheless, nonprofit employment in Poland is essentially on a par with the printing industry and outdistances a number of smaller industries, including the air transport, fishing, computer, research and development, forestry, and insurance industries.

Volunteer inputs. A picture of the Polish nonprofit sector would not be complete without considering volunteering, for this sector attracts a considerable amount of volunteer effort. Indeed, an estimated 16 percent of the adult population reports contributing their time to nonprofit organizations. (If volunteering for religious institutions were included, this figure would increase to 25 percent.) Without religion, this translates into another 20,473 full-time equivalent employees, which boosts the total number of full-time equivalent employees of nonprofit organizations in Poland to 111,460, or 1.2 percent of total employment in the country (see Figure 16.2).

Religion. The inclusion of religion, moreover, would boost these totals by another 27,564 paid employees and 8,381 full-time equivalent volunteers. With religion included, nonprofit employment therefore rises to 1.3 percent of total paid employment and to 1.5 percent of to-
tal paid and volunteer employment. The influence of religion on the Polish nonprofit sector, however, extends even further. Indeed, Catholic Church-affiliated service providers account for approximately one-third of nonprofit employment without religion.

The Polish nonprofit sector in the 1990s thus emerges from these preliminary findings as a modest, but still significant economic force both in terms of employment and volunteer input. This is so despite severe limitations, such as an unfavorable ideological environment, legal and financial restrictions, and socio-economic barriers that prevented citizens from active involvement in public initiatives for half a century (1947–1989).

2. A mid-sized nonprofit sector for Central Europe

Although the Polish nonprofit sector is still fairly small in relation to the overall Polish economy and to its counterparts in Western Europe, it is close to the level of other Central European countries.

- **Considerably below the international average.** As Figure 16.3 shows, the relative size of the nonprofit sector varies greatly among countries, from a high of 12.6 percent of total nonagricultural employment in the Netherlands to a low of 0.4 percent of total employment in Mexico. The overall 22-country average (calculated without these initial Polish data), however, was close to 5 percent. This means that Poland, with 1 percent without religion, falls considerably below the global average.

- **Almost on par with the Central and Eastern European average.** While it falls below the 22-country average, nonprofit employment as a share of total employment in Poland occupies a middle position among the Central and Eastern European countries studied. Thus, as shown in Figure 16.4, full-time equivalent employment in Polish nonprofit organizations, with 1 percent of total employment, is only slightly below the 1.1 percent average of the other four Central and Eastern European countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia). Indeed, as a share of total employment, nonprofit employment in Poland exceeds that in two of the Central and Eastern European countries covered in this project—Romania (0.6 percent) and Slovakia (0.9 percent).

- **Margin widens with volunteers.** The margin between Poland and the other Central and Eastern European countries widens, however, when volunteers are added. Thus, with volunteer time included, nonprofit organizations account for 1.2 percent of total employment in Poland, but 1.7 percent on average in the other four Central and Eastern European countries (see Figure 16.4).
3. A rich and complex history of nonprofit activity

That the Polish nonprofit sector has reached a substantial degree of development during the period since 1989 and despite the severe restrictions it faced under communism is, in no small part, a result of the long, rich
and, at times, complicated history that citizens’ initiatives have experienced in this country over the past 1,000 years. In other words, Poland’s current nonprofit sector is as much the result of cultural and institutional experiences accumulated during many centuries as it is the product of the deterioration of the Communist welfare state and the political breakthrough of 1989.

More specifically, from the Middle Ages to the end of the 18th century, when Poland lost its sovereignty, two key traditions shaped the evolution of voluntary activity in this country: first, religious charity and philanthropy fostered by the Catholic Church; and second, a more secular welfare tradition marked by interventions and contributions of the aristocracy and the municipalities beginning in the late 14th century. Both traditions remained intact during the following period of partition from 1795 to 1918. However, with Poland divided among, and ruled by, the neighboring empires, a new ethos of independence and patriotic inspiration developed that became crucial in bolstering national identity and the organization of Polish society against, and in spite of, the hegemonic rule of the foreign powers.

Significantly, the independence movement in the 19th century was cultivated and housed by the Roman Catholic Church as well as secular nonprofit organizations and thus emerged closely interdependent with the prior traditions. This pattern, moreover, would continue to hold throughout the

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**Figure 16.4** Nonprofit share of employment, with and without volunteers, in Poland and four regions, 1995
most critical times of Polish history in the 20th century, including the Nazi occupation during World War II and the Communist takeover thereafter. Not surprisingly, it forcefully re-emerged in the late 1970s, giving birth to the Solidarity trade union movement in 1980–81. The remarkable renaissance of nonprofit organizations in Poland after 1989 would not have been possible without the joint effort of the religious and secular formal and informal networks rooted in the Christian tradition, the humane inspirations of the Enlightenment period, and the ethos of independence. In all of this, the Roman Catholic Church played a crucial role. In many ways, the fact that about one-third of paid nonprofit employment is in church-related organizations today can be seen as the result and legacy of the Church’s influence dating back to the 11th century.

That the nonprofit sector in Poland has not developed even further since 1989 is due to a variety of factors. After 1989, pressures from below—spontaneous, grassroots initiatives—made the most crucial contributions to building the institutional capacity of the Polish nonprofit sector. However, attempts to establish a larger scale nonprofit service delivery infrastructure that would necessitate a greater employment base remained hindered by the continued monopolistic position of the state in fields such as social services, education, and health care. Moreover, insofar as strategies for de-monopolizing the public welfare sphere were discussed throughout the 1990s, the decision-makers favored commercial privatization over what might be termed “socialization,” that is, the transfer of welfare service delivery into the nonprofit sector.

The further growth of the sector therefore depends to a large part on whether the state will show a greater willingness to transfer parts of its public welfare programs to nonprofit providers and provide a more enabling environment for citizens’ activities. At the same time, it is worth noting that the relatively modest share of nonprofit employment must also be seen against the background of the larger privatization context: The private business sector so far only accounts for about half of the total Polish economy. Thus, while the Polish nonprofit sector may seem small compared to its Western counterparts, a similar point could be made about the whole private economy in this country.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The nonprofit sector thus emerges from the evidence presented here as a sizable set of institutions in Polish society. The remarkable upsurge in the formation of citizens’ organizations in Poland after 1989 is without question one of the most salient outcomes of the transition. By the same token, it is also an expression of the intensity of the pent-up demand for public
participation that existed in Polish society between 1947 and 1989 and the willingness of citizens to take active part in the process of establishing a new political, economic, and social order after the breakthrough of 1989.

However, the renaissance of the nonprofit sector in this country turned out to be a complex process, as the still limited economic position of the sector after almost a decade of transition clearly indicates. On the one hand, further analysis will show that the scope and structure of the Polish nonprofit sector in the 1990s still reflect the limitations and the priorities that the Communist regime designed for citizens’ activities. On the other hand, the current development level of the sector also shows the unexpectedly slow pace of the institutionalization of nonprofit organizations as service providers and guardians of the public interest.

To some degree, this is due to the ambiguous policies towards this set of institutions pursued by the various political coalitions in power after 1989. To be sure, at the most fundamental level, there was a firm consensus among all political elite that voluntary organizations are an indispensable element of a democratic system. This consensus was enshrined in those parts of the general legal framework that guarantee the principles that underpin nonprofit organizations, especially the freedom of expression and the freedom of association. After these general principles were put in place, however, there was considerably less eagerness on the part of subsequent governments to establish a sound legal and financial basis for nonprofit organizations to deliver public services and advocate for public causes.

The evolution of the Polish nonprofit sector since 1989 thus did not proceed without paradoxes and, in many ways, remains unfinished. Among the most striking paradoxes is that the government continues to overlook these organizations as meaningful social partners in service delivery and in formulating public policy agendas despite the Solidarity trade union movement’s crucial role in the rebirth of parliamentary democracy and the market economy in Poland. Also under-recognized is the inherent capacity of the sector to complement and enhance government service provision. In addition to the often highly unpredictable and at times chaotic government policies towards the sector that seem to seriously endanger the role of nonprofits in society, other crucial external and internal challenges include:

- Privatization, as opposed to “socialization,” of the public welfare system. While the importance of the nonprofit sector for democratic development, as previously noted, is recognized in general terms, its role as a full-fledged partner of both central and local governments in service delivery has not yet been fully embraced by the political elite. Indeed, in the neo-liberal strategy adopted by the Polish government to reconstruct the state welfare system and reduce state assistance, priority
has been given to the “privatization” of the welfare system through market and quasi-market institutions at the expense of a “socialization” of state welfare through greater involvement of the nonprofit sector.

• **Fostering legitimacy through self-regulation.** Although the development and enforcement of codes of conduct, accountability, and administrative standards are of critical importance, in reality, the impact of such rules is not yet strong enough to discourage misconduct and dishonest practices firmly.

• **Capacity building and sustainability.** Over the first few years after 1989, Polish nonprofit organizations developed some 300 networks and umbrella groups at both the local and national level. The Forum of Non-Governmental Initiatives, the Union of Catholic Associations and Movements, and the Union of Social Service Non-Profit Organizations are the most prominent examples of such national umbrella organizations. Despite this substantial sectoral infrastructure, however, most nonprofit organizations in Poland still do not identify themselves as part of a separate “third sector,” and have not perceived the need for self-organization, which is one of the key issues in establishing financial sustainability for the sector. In Poland, as in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, it is thus crucially important to continue to develop training programs and capacity-building efforts to enhance the professionalization of nonprofit organizations. In addition, constant efforts are needed to promote and strengthen voluntary activity as well as to build meaningful relationships with the corporate sector.

Taken together, these external and internal challenges can potentially severely impede the nonprofit sector’s ability to address social issues, meet human needs, and prevent the social marginalization of minority groups as well as the fragmentation of Polish society. The lack of resources has slowed the efforts of nonprofit organizations to mitigate rapidly growing social and economic inequalities and, more generally, to bridge the gap between the profound pressures society is confronted with and the shrinking role of the public sector. It is hoped that the kind of data generated within this project will help overcome these hurdles and finally allow Polish society to fully tap into the potentials of the nonprofit sector in this period of major social and economic change.

**ENDNOTES**

1. The work in Poland is coordinated by Local Associates Ewa Leś (University of Warsaw) and Jan Jakub Wygnarski (KLON/JAWOR), who were assisted by Sławomir Nałęcz at KLON/JAWOR. The team was aided, in turn, by a local advisory committee made up of 14 prominent academics, government and parliament officials, and nonprofit leaders (see Ap.
pendix D for a list of committee members). The Johns Hopkins project was directed by Lester M. Salamon and Helmut K. Anheier and the Central and Eastern European portion of the work overseen by Stefan Toepler.

2. The definitions and approaches used in the project were developed collaboratively with the cooperation of the Polish researchers and researchers in other countries and were designed to be applicable to Poland and the other project countries. For a full description of this definition and the types of organizations included, see Appendix A. For a full list of the other countries included, see Chapter 1 above and Lester M. Salamon and Helmut K. Anheier, The Emerging Sector Revisited: A Summary, Revised Estimates (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies, 1999).