



Mains Practice Question

Q. The role of civil society in governance has evolved significantly in recent decades. Discuss its impact on policy formulation and implementation in democratic systems. **(250 words)**

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Approach

- Introduce the answer by highlighting the evolving role of civil society in governance
- Give Role of Civil Society in Policy Formulation and Implementation in Democratic Systems
- Highlight challenges and considerations related to it
- Conclude with a forward looking approach

Introduction

The role of **civil society** in governance has evolved significantly in recent decades. Initially focused on **nation-building and rights-based advocacy** in the **post-independence era**, civil society organisations shifted towards **filling service delivery gaps and promoting accountability in the 1990s and 2000s**.

- More recently, their role has expanded to **include digital engagement, collaborative governance, and data-driven advocacy**, reflecting the changing landscape of democratic participation and technological advancements.

Body

Role of Civil Society in Policy Formulation and Implementation in Democratic Systems

- **Enhanced Public Participation in Policymaking: Civil society organisations (CSOs)** have increased citizen involvement in the policymaking process, bridging the gap between the public and government.
 - In India, the **Right to Information (RTI) movement**, spearheaded by civil society groups like the **Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS)**, led to the enactment of the RTI Act in 2005.
- **Advocacy and Agenda-setting:** CSOs play a crucial role in **bringing important issues** to the forefront of public discourse and political agendas.
 - The **Narmada Bachao Andolan, led by Medha Patkar**, brought attention to the environmental and social impacts of large dam projects
- **Policy Research and Expertise:** Civil society often provides valuable research and expert knowledge to inform policy decisions.
 - The **Centre for Policy Research (CPR)** in New Delhi regularly produces policy papers and recommendations that inform legislative debates and policymakers across various sectors.
- **Watchdog Function:** CSOs act as watchdogs, monitoring government actions and holding public officials accountable.
 - The **Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR)** acts as a watchdog for electoral processes in India (e.g, Recent **Association for Democratic Reforms and Another v.**

Union of India and Others Case on Electoral Bonds).

- **Service Delivery:** In many cases, civil society organisations complement or supplement government efforts in service delivery, particularly in areas where the state's reach is limited.
 - The **Akshaya Patra Foundation in India** works in partnership with the government to implement the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, providing nutritious meals to millions of school children.
- **Representation of Marginalised Groups:** Civil society often advocates for and represents the interests of marginalised or underrepresented communities in the policy process.
 - The **National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR)** has been instrumental in advocating for Dalit rights.
- **Policy Implementation and Feedback:** Civil society organisations often participate in policy implementation and provide valuable feedback on the effectiveness of policies.
 - **Pratham**, an NGO focused on education, conducts the **Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)**, which has become a crucial tool in assessing and improving the quality of education in rural India.
- **Mobilisation of Public Opinion:** CSOs can mobilise public opinion on critical issues, influencing policy decisions through grassroots movements.
 - The anti-corruption movement led by **Anna Hazare in India** mobilised massive public support, leading to the creation of the **Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013**.
- **Collaborative Governance:** There's a growing trend of collaborative governance where civil society organisations work in partnership with government bodies to co-create and implement policies.
 - **Swachhta Hi Seva Campaign** saw extensive collaboration between the government and civil society organisations like **Sulabh International** in implementing sanitation programs across the country.

Challenges and Considerations:

- While civil society has significantly enhanced democratic governance, there are concerns about the **representativeness and accountability of some CSOs**.
- In some contexts, there are concerns about the foreign funding of NGOs and their potential influence on domestic policies. (In 2020, **Amnesty International India** ceased operations after its bank accounts were frozen by the government, citing violations of foreign funding regulations)
- The **digital divide (only 24% of rural Indian households have access to the Internet)** may limit the participation of certain sections of society in newer forms of civic engagement.

Conclusion

The evolution of civil society's role in governance has **undoubtedly deepened democratic processes**, making policy formulation and implementation more **participatory, transparent, and responsive to public needs**. As democracies continue to evolve, **finding the right balance and fostering productive partnerships between government and civil society** will be crucial for effective and inclusive governance.