

CIVIL SOCIETY, JUSTICE, AND PUBLIC TRUST IN CONTEMPORARY GOVERNANCE

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Abstract. Contemporary democratic governance in Asia faces persistent challenges of institutional mistrust and social injustice. This paper examines the contribution of civil society to rebuilding public trust in government through the advancement of justice mechanisms. Drawing on normative theories of justice, including Rawls's justice as fairness and communitarian critiques, as well as Kantian principles of autonomy, the analysis explores how civic organizations, community movements, and participatory forums embody ideals of fairness and respect for persons. Institutional frameworks concerning legal access and governance design are reviewed to demonstrate how civil society can address gaps in formal justice provision. The central argument is that when civil society actors promote procedural fairness and substantive equity in ways consistent with Rawlsian and Kantian norms, institutional legitimacy is reinforced and public trust is strengthened. The discussion highlights illustrative cases such as citizen councils and NGO watchdogs aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals on justice, particularly SDG 16, showing how inclusive and justice-oriented participation contributes to stronger institutions. The qualitative analysis relies on secondary data drawn from the provided literature and situates the theoretical frameworks within an Asian context. The findings indicate that linking justice and trust requires both normative commitments to fairness and practical reforms, including improved access to courts, anti-corruption efforts, and community-based health initiatives. The paper concludes that civil society engagement in justice practices, guided by the theories of Rawls, Sandel, Kant, and related scholars, plays a vital role in enhancing public trust and supports policy recommendations that empower civic actors in line with SDG targets on peace, justice, and strong institutions.

Keywords: civil society; public trust; democratic governance; justice; sustainable development

Introduction

Trust in government institutions is a cornerstone of democratic governance, yet many Asian democracies today struggle with public skepticism over fairness and accountability. When citizens perceive government as just and responsive, social cohesion and legitimacy are bolstered (OECD, 2022). Conversely, perceived injustice in legal access, distribution of resources, or respect for rights erodes trust and fuels social conflict (Baute, 2023). In Asia's diverse democracies, civil society actors (non-governmental organizations, community movements, grassroots associations) have increasingly sought to bridge this gap. By advocating for transparent procedures, equitable policies, and inclusive participation, civil society can infuse justice into governance and thereby enhance public trust.

Normative political theory offers a foundation for this link. Rawlsian justice as fairness holds that a legitimate democracy must guarantee basic liberties and fair opportunities to all citizens (Rawls, 1971). Michael Sandel's communitarian perspective adds that justice must resonate with shared values and community attachments (Sandel, 2009). Kantian theory further emphasizes that citizens must be treated as ends in themselves, involved in rule making and respected by law (Rosen, 1993). These theoretical frameworks suggest that just institutions, those that respect persons and distribute benefits equitably, are more likely to gain citizens' trust. Civil society

engagement exemplifies these ideals through participatory forums and watchdog roles. In practical terms, nonstate actors can improve access to justice, as Deborah Rhode emphasizes in her discussion of legal underrepresentation (Rhode, 2004), and can press for institutional reforms. This paper focuses on how civil society contributes to justice, understood both normatively and institutionally, in order to build trust in Asian governance.

The Asian context is emphasized for two reasons. First, governance structures and civil society traditions vary widely across the region, providing a rich setting for examining different models of justice. Second, global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals identify peace, justice, and strong institutions, particularly SDG 16, as central to sustainable development (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). SDG 16 highlights that institutions earn public trust by being inclusive, accountable, and equitable, objectives that are frequently advanced by civic actors. By examining normative theories of justice alongside empirical patterns of civic engagement, this analysis clarifies how civil society and justice mechanisms together foster the social contract that underpins democratic legitimacy in Asia.

The paper is organized in a conventional analytical sequence. The literature review surveys relevant theories, including normative conceptions of justice associated with Rawls, Sandel, and Kant, as well as institutional approaches addressing legal access, global justice debates, and sustainability-oriented justice. The methodology is based on conceptual analysis using secondary sources. The discussion then applies these frameworks to examine civil society practices such as nongovernmental organizations and community forums, and their role in building trust within Asian democracies, including connections to SDG targets. The paper concludes by summarizing how justice oriented civic engagement can be strengthened in order to enhance public trust in governance.

Literature Review

Normative Theories of Justice

John Rawls's seminal work *A Theory of Justice* advances the argument that a just society must secure fundamental liberties and fair equality of opportunity for all citizens. His concept of justice as fairness establishes an ethical baseline according to which social and economic inequalities are acceptable only when they improve the position of the least advantaged members of society. Central to Rawls's theory is the claim that each individual possesses an inviolable moral worth grounded in justice, which cannot be overridden by appeals to collective welfare (Rawls, 1971). This principle underscores that justice is concerned with the protection of persons rather than the maximization of aggregate outcomes. For public institutions, Rawls's framework implies that governments are obligated to treat citizens as free and equal participants in a system of fair social cooperation. When institutions fail to meet this standard, public trust is likely to deteriorate. Within this perspective, civil society can be understood as part of the basic structure of society insofar as civic actors promote policies and practices that seek to realize justice as fairness in institutional arrangements.

Critics of liberal impartiality, most notably Michael Sandel, argue that justice also possesses a communal and moral dimension. In *Justice: What Is the Right Thing to Do?* (2009), Sandel presents the communitarian critique of liberal theory, which challenges the assumption that individuals are isolated and freely choosing selves. From this perspective, personal identities and social attachments are understood as integral to moral reasoning about justice. Communitarian theorists therefore reject the

view that principles of justice can be derived independently of shared values, purposes, and forms of social belonging. In practical terms, this approach implies that justice should be grounded in community needs and collective moral understandings rather than framed solely in terms of individual rights. Civic organizations frequently reflect this orientation by articulating concerns such as inequality and corruption in relation to communal well-being and shared social responsibilities.

Sandel also draws attention to an important distinction within Rawlsian theory between universal moral duties and obligations that arise from voluntary consent. Rawls maintains that certain duties apply to all persons regardless of agreement, including duties related to respect, fairness, and justice. This indicates that even within a liberal framework grounded in abstraction and impartiality, there remains a universal moral requirement to act justly toward others. Civil society organizations often invoke this moral requirement when holding governments accountable for failures in fairness or respect for persons.

Immanuel Kant's political philosophy, as interpreted by Allen Rosen, introduces a further dimension by emphasizing autonomy and moral agency (Rosen, 1993). Kant holds that citizens must be regarded as ends in themselves and not merely as means to political objectives (Kant, 1996). Within a political order, this principle requires that citizens be treated as participants in the creation of laws rather than as passive subjects of authority. Rosen explains that for Kant, laws imposed without the consent of the governed undermine individual freedom and moral autonomy. Demands by civil society for transparency, participation, and public deliberation therefore reflect a Kantian commitment to legitimate authority grounded in consent and respect for autonomy. In this view, governance that excludes citizens from meaningful participation risks eroding trust and generating political alienation.

Taken together, these normative theories suggest that justice in governance requires both the protection of individual rights, as emphasized by Rawls and Kant, and recognition of shared values and communal attachments, as stressed by Sandel. Citizens are more likely to place trust in institutions that treat them fairly, involve them in decision making, and respond to collective social concerns. Civil society plays a key role in translating these normative commitments into practice by advocating fair distribution, fostering moral debate in public life, and promoting participatory forms of policymaking. The interaction of these theoretical perspectives provides the framework for analyzing concrete civil society practices in the subsequent discussion.

Institutional Theories of Justice

Beyond abstract norms, institutional mechanisms that realize justice must also be considered. Deborah Rhode's *Access to Justice* draws attention to the persistent gap between the ideal of equal justice and its realization in practice. Rhode demonstrates that legal systems frequently fail disadvantaged populations by concentrating legal resources among those who can afford them while leaving others without meaningful representation (Rhode, 2004). Such barriers to justice not only harm individuals but also weaken confidence in public institutions. When citizens perceive courts as accessible primarily to the wealthy, faith in the fairness of the legal system diminishes. Civic organizations often intervene through legal aid services and public interest advocacy, thereby improving access to justice. Rhode's analysis suggests that restoring public trust requires institutional reform, and that civil society plays an important role in pressing for changes that ensure legal rights are substantively meaningful rather than merely formal.

Henrik Palmer Olsen and Stuart Toddington's *Architectures of Justice* examines how the design of legal and political institutions shapes the realization of justice. Their work emphasizes that the structure of courts, systems of accountability, and arrangements of checks and balances significantly influence legal outcomes and perceptions of fairness (Olsen & Toddington, 2007). This perspective implies that justice is not determined solely by legal principles but also by institutional configuration. Civil society organizations frequently advocate for structural reforms such as independent oversight bodies and anti-corruption institutions in order to improve the functioning of justice systems. By drawing on legal theory and comparative experience, these actors promote transparency and accountability, thereby strengthening institutional legitimacy and public trust.

At the global level, Gillian Brock and Darrel Moellendorf's *Current Debates in Global Justice* brings together philosophical discussions on international obligations and distributive fairness (Brock & Moellendorf, 2005). Although focused on global justice, these debates illuminate principles that are also relevant within domestic contexts. Concepts such as equality of opportunity and moral responsibility toward disadvantaged populations can inform national policies on social welfare and minority protection. Civil society networks in Asia frequently invoke international human rights norms and global justice principles when advocating policy reform. This connection between local struggles and international standards reinforces trust by demonstrating that domestic institutions are aligned with broader commitments to fairness and moral responsibility.

Environmental justice represents another important institutional dimension. Agyeman and Ogneva-Himmelberger's work on environmental justice and sustainability in post transition societies illustrates how pollution, land use, and environmental regulation often impose disproportionate burdens on vulnerable communities. These patterns raise concerns about distributive and intergenerational justice (Agyeman & Ogneva-Himmelberger, 2009). In Asia, civil society movements addressing air quality, water access, and equitable urban development reflect similar concerns. Such initiatives argue that sustainable governance must be pursued through fair and inclusive means, linking environmental protection with social justice. By opposing the concentration of ecological harm in disadvantaged areas and promoting equitable development, civic actors contribute to a vision of governance that integrates justice and trust in long term institutional planning.

The Commission for a Socially Sustainable Malmö (2013), as discussed by Jessop, illustrates an integrated approach to justice, health, and welfare. Although it lies outside the core reference set, this model demonstrates how civic oriented analysis can influence public policy by linking social determinants of health with economic and ecological considerations. The Malmö strategy emphasizes empowerment and education rather than attributing responsibility to disadvantaged groups, and it promotes institutional design and community-based strategies that extend beyond individual responsibility. Its approach highlights the importance of coordinated policy frameworks, inclusive governance structures, and community participation in addressing structural sources of inequality. While the case is not drawn from Asia, it illustrates how policy architectures can be oriented toward justice through cross sectoral coordination and participatory institutions. Comparable initiatives in Asian cities, such as participatory budgeting processes and local social commissions, reflect a similar orientation, with civil society actors connecting social welfare objectives to institutional reform.

Anne Haugestad and J D Wulforst's *Future as Fairness* extends Rawlsian principles to ecological justice and global citizenship by emphasizing responsibilities toward future generations. Their work advances the concept of intergenerational justice, which suggests that public trust in governance is also shaped by the sustainability of policy choices over time (Haugestad & Wulforst, 2008). From this perspective, justice extends beyond present populations to include those who will bear the long-term consequences of political and economic decisions. Civil society movements, particularly environmental organizations and youth groups, often advance this perspective by advocating sustainable development and long-range policy planning. This orientation reinforces the Sustainable Development Goals by linking justice, sustainability, and institutional responsibility.

Julie Guthman's *Weighing In* examines food justice by analyzing how access to healthy food and patterns of diet are shaped by broader political and economic structures. Her analysis connects issues of nutrition and public health to questions of corporate power, inequality, and accountability (Guthman, 2011). Civil society initiatives addressing food security, including community agriculture projects, consumer advocacy, and campaigns for transparent food systems, reflect this justice-oriented approach. When such efforts succeed in improving access and fairness in everyday domains, they can enhance public trust by demonstrating that institutions are responsive to common needs rather than narrowly aligned with market interests.

Taken together, the literature indicates that justice in governance involves both normative ideals and institutional design. Normative theories associated with Rawls, Sandel, and Kant clarify the ethical demands of justice, while institutional analyses of legal access, governance architecture, and sustainability demonstrate how justice can be realized in practice. Civil society operates at the intersection of these dimensions by advocating rights, pressing for institutional reform, and shaping public perceptions of fairness. The following section outlines the conceptual approach used to analyze these dynamics.

Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative and conceptual research design based on secondary sources. The analysis relies exclusively on the provided books and publications, which are treated as theoretical and contextual sources for interpretation rather than as empirical data. The methodological approach resembles literature-based policy analysis, in which insights from normative political philosophy and social policy scholarship are synthesized to construct an integrated understanding of the relationship between civil society, justice, and public trust.

The analysis combines a normative theoretical approach grounded in philosophical texts with an institutional perspective drawn from studies of governance and public policy. Core arguments concerning justice articulated by Rawls, Kant, Sandel, and related theorists are examined, followed by an assessment of how civil society roles and strategies correspond to these theoretical frameworks. Conceptual discussions and illustrative examples of civic engagement, such as participatory forums and nongovernmental oversight activities referenced in the literature, are used to infer mechanisms through which trust in institutions may be strengthened or weakened. Although no original empirical data are collected, a comparative orientation is applied by drawing on scholarly observations concerning Asian democratic governance, including variations in civil society space and patterns of institutional reform across the region.

Given the emphasis on the Sustainable Development Goals and contemporary governance challenges, the theoretical discussion is situated within global normative agendas. The analysis aligns relevant arguments with SDG targets related to justice and institutional quality, treating these goals as normative reference points rather than empirical measures. For instance, SDG 16 emphasizes inclusive decision making, which provides a framework for examining how civil society initiatives contribute to participation and accountability. Where the literature addresses the activities of nongovernmental organizations or community movements, these discussions are interpreted through the lens of normative justice theory.

Throughout the analysis, in-text citations to the provided sources support each major theoretical claim. The method emphasizes interpretation and synthesis rather than measurement or formal modeling. The resulting findings are therefore conceptual in nature and focus on the ways civil society functions, as derived from theory, can contribute to the generation of public trust. The subsequent discussion relates these conceptual findings to patterns of governance in Asia and to the broader objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Results and Discussion

Civil Society as Agent of Justice

Civil society organizations and community movements operate on various scales, including local, national, and regional levels, but they share a common characteristic in that they represent citizens' interests outside formal government hierarchies. Through advocacy, service provision, and collective mobilization, these actors introduce justice-oriented concerns into policy processes. The analysis identifies several key roles through which civil society contributes to the pursuit of justice and the strengthening of public trust.

- **Advocacy and Oversight:** NGOs often act as watchdogs, monitoring government adherence to laws and transparency. For instance, anti-corruption NGOs demand fair enforcement of anti-bribery laws; human rights groups call out violations of due process (Lindblom, 2005). These actions echo Rawlsian fairness: they seek to hold institutions accountable to universal principles of justice. When public interest groups highlight favoritism or inequality, they prompt reforms that align with a fair system. In doing so, they make justice more visible to the public. Seeing that injustice is challenged, citizens' trust can increase because institutions are perceived as responsive to moral norms.
- **Legal Assistance and Access:** Building on Deborah Rhode's critique of unequal access to legal representation, many civil society organizations provide free legal assistance to marginalized communities. Through these efforts, they give practical effect to the principle of justice as equal access to the legal system. In South Asia, legal aid clinics and community based paralegal programs assist disadvantaged groups in navigating judicial procedures and asserting their rights (UNDP & UNODOC, 2016). Such initiatives respond to a fundamental justice deficit identified in the literature, namely the unequal distribution of legal resources that favors those with greater economic means. By reducing these barriers, civil society organizations contribute to greater inclusiveness within legal institutions, which in turn strengthens public trust by signaling that government is responsive to the rights of all citizens. Similarly, international and public interest law clinics operating in jurisdictions such as India have influenced labor and environmental litigation (Baxi, 1980). These

activities reflect a Kantian understanding of political participation, in which citizens exercise agency within legal processes and contribute to the shaping of law through institutional channels.

- **Participatory Forums and Deliberation:** Sandel and other communitarian theorists emphasize the importance of community dialogue about shared conceptions of the good. Civil society can facilitate such dialogue by creating deliberative spaces such as citizen councils, town hall meetings, and participatory budgeting processes in which ordinary citizens articulate their needs and priorities. In several Asian cities, initiatives such as people's councils and decentralized planning forums have been introduced to enable public participation in local decision making (Patel, *et al.*, 2016). These practices reflect a Kantian conception of co legislation, insofar as citizens take part in shaping laws, policies, or budgetary priorities. Governance arrangements developed through such participatory processes tend to enjoy higher legitimacy, as Kant suggests that individuals are more likely to accept and comply with rules to which they have consented or contributed. This participatory inclusion strengthens public trust by demonstrating respect for citizen autonomy. From a Rawlsian perspective, these forums also support fair equality of opportunity by ensuring that all citizens have a meaningful chance to influence the basic institutions that govern areas such as education, health, and housing.
- **Service Provision with Justice Goals:** Some civil society organizations directly provide services in areas such as legal assistance, health care, and education within underserved communities (European Training Foundation, 2024). Although these activities primarily address immediate gaps in provision, they also serve to expose weaknesses in existing institutions by publicly drawing attention to unmet needs. Through this process, civil society actors can prompt government awareness and response. For instance, nongovernmental organizations that organize health outreach programs in informal settlements highlight patterns of inequality and exclusion. When such initiatives are framed within a rights-based discourse, they underscore that access to health care constitutes a matter of justice, consistent with the objectives of SDG 3 on health and SDG 10 on reducing inequality. These practices align with Haugstad and Wulfhorst's conception of social and ecological justice, which treats the fulfillment of basic needs as a requirement of fairness. Public trust in state institutions may increase when governments acknowledge these deficiencies and cooperate with civil society efforts (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2024). Conversely, restrictions on civic activity can undermine trust, illustrating the importance of safeguarding civic space for the legitimacy of governance.
- **Mobilizing for Policy Change:** Grassroots movements (e.g. anti-eviction protests, labor rights campaigns) often press governments to adjust policies. These actions are grounded in normative claims: a community claims that certain economic development plans are unjust if they displace people without compensation, for example. This recalls Rawls's difference principle: benefits should "redound to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged". When civil society wins concessions (legal compensation, fair housing quotas), it realizes Rawlsian fairness, enhancing faith in democracy. Conversely, if governments ignore these justice claims, trust erodes (as many Asian states have learned during popular protests).

Civil society therefore functions as an intermediary between individuals and the state in the pursuit of justice. By translating broad normative ideals such as equality, rights, and participation into concrete programs and advocacy efforts, civic actors render abstract conceptions of justice visible and actionable. The presence of active civil society organizations signals to citizens that the definition and pursuit of justice are not monopolized by the state but are shaped through a plurality of social voices. This pluralism can, in turn, reinforce public trust, since institutions that permit critique, dialogue, and collaboration are more likely to be perceived as legitimate. This dynamic is consistent with Sandel's argument that justice emerges not solely through top-down imposition but through public deliberation and collective enactment within communities.

Institutional Design and Trust

How do these civil society actions influence trust in specific institutions? The analysis suggests that justice oriented institutional design plays a central role in shaping public trust.

- **Legal System Reforms:** Where civil society applies sustained pressure to improve access to justice, institutional reforms often follow. In several contexts, the introduction of legal aid statutes, public defender offices, and simplified court procedures has occurred in response to advocacy by nongovernmental organizations. Rawls's conception of liberal equality emphasizes the importance of procedural justice in which all citizens are subject to the same legal rules and decision-making processes. Civil society actors promote this form of procedural fairness by demanding transparency, equal treatment, and accessibility within judicial systems. When such reforms are implemented effectively, courts and related institutions tend to be perceived as more credible, which in turn strengthens public trust. In parts of Asia, civil society initiatives have contributed to the establishment of anti-corruption bodies and community-based courts designed to be more accessible to ordinary citizens. These institutional innovations reflect a Kantian respect for persons by affirming that individuals should not be excluded from justice on the basis of power or wealth. Empirical research on trust consistently indicates that perceptions of fair treatment by officials strongly influence judgments of legitimacy regarding courts and law enforcement agencies (Handelman & Yeo, 2019). In this sense, civil society participation in reshaping justice institutions can play a systematic role in enhancing institutional trust.
- **Good Governance Mechanisms:** Many governments have established joint bodies that include representatives from civil society, such as development boards and ombudsman institutions with citizen participation. This arrangement reflects a Kantian understanding of governance as a shared enterprise in which citizens participate in the formation and oversight of public authority. Where such bodies operate transparently and meaningfully, levels of public trust tend to improve. *The Sustainable Development Goals* framework similarly emphasizes inclusive decision making, particularly under SDG 16.7. Civil society advocacy for participation, such as efforts to secure nongovernmental representation on anti-corruption commissions, aligns closely with this objective. In East Asia, several countries have experimented with participatory budgeting processes in which residents directly allocate portions of municipal budgets (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development & Asian Development Bank, 2023). These practices reflect communitarian ideals of public deliberation associated with Sandel, as well as Kantian principles of consent in governance. Evaluative studies indicate that participants in such

processes often report higher satisfaction with government, suggesting that justice oriented institutional mechanisms can contribute to increased trust in public institutions.

- **Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals:** The SDGs emphasize justice: targets on non-discrimination (SDG 10), rule of law (SDG 16), and inclusive institutions connect directly to civil society's mission. For example, SDG 16.3 calls for equal access to justice for all. Civil society's work on court accessibility and legal aid is a direct implementation of this target. Moreover, SDG 17 on partnerships implies that governments should work with civil society. Thus, civil society engagement in justice not only builds domestic trust, but also aligns Asian governance with global norms, which can enhance international legitimacy and domestic confidence that a country is meeting global standards. This perspective ties back to Brock & Moellendorf's view of global justice: obligations and norms extend beyond borders and apply domestically. When citizens know their country is advancing these goals, it may bolster pride and trust in institutions.

Civil Society in Asian Contexts

While the preceding discussion applies in general terms, Asian democracies present distinctive contextual conditions. Some countries possess long-established and vibrant civil societies with deep historical roots, such as India and South Korea, whereas others operate under more restricted civic environments, as illustrated by recent developments in Myanmar (Freedom House, 2023). In pluralistic settings like India, social movements have historically played a prominent role in advocating for policies related to land reform, labor rights, and social welfare, often framing these demands in explicitly ethical terms (Upendra Baxi, 1985). Such mobilization reflects a moral discourse consistent with communitarian perspectives that emphasize shared values and collective responsibility (Partha Chatterjee, 2004). In Southeast Asia, mass movements such as those observed in Thailand have challenged political authority on grounds of fairness and representation, demonstrating that civic mobilization can both strengthen democratic accountability and intensify political polarization (Duncan McCargo, 2019). These movements frequently assert claims over the foundational organization of political power itself, reflecting a Kantian emphasis on citizen participation in the constitution of authority.

In post-authoritarian contexts such as Indonesia and the Philippines, civil society organizations have played critical watchdog roles during democratic transitions by exposing corruption and advocating judicial independence (Larry Diamond, 1999; Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, 2008). During early reform periods, these efforts were often associated with increased public trust, as institutional change was visible and aligned with popular demands for justice (*Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* [OECD], 2024). By contrast, restrictions on civil society activity in parts of the region have tended to weaken justice advocacy and foster public suspicion toward government institutions, suggesting a negative relationship between constrained civic space and institutional trust (OECD, 2024; Freedom House, 2023).

Civil society activity in Asia is also frequently intertwined with religious and community-based organizations. Many initiatives related to justice, mediation, and social inclusion are carried out through faith-based groups or local associations rather than formal nongovernmental organizations alone (Asian Development Bank, 2013). Interfaith councils and community networks, for example, often engage in conflict mediation or the defense of minority rights by embedding justice claims within culturally

resonant narratives (Amartya Sen, 1999). This pattern aligns closely with communitarian theory, which holds that justice is realized within lived social contexts and shared moral frameworks rather than solely through abstract institutional arrangements (Michael Sandel, 1982).

Empirical Illustrations

Although this paper does not present original case studies, it draws on well-documented examples from the region. In India, the development of Public Interest Litigation has enabled citizens to raise justice claims directly before the courts, a practice strongly encouraged by civil society lawyers and activists (Baxi, 1985). This mechanism, influenced by common law traditions, has resulted in judicial interventions on issues such as environmental protection and prison conditions (Galanter & Krishnan, 2004). It reflects Rawlsian principles of fair equality of opportunity (John Rawls, 1971) by allowing disadvantaged groups to seek legal remedies, and it also aligns with Kantian respect for persons insofar as the state is required to respond to rights-based claims. Empirical studies in India indicate that landmark Public Interest Litigation decisions, particularly in areas of environmental justice, have contributed to increased public confidence in the judiciary (Ghosh, 2010).

In South Korea, rapid industrialization generated significant environmental harms, including pollution and the displacement of local communities. During the 1980s and 1990s, civil society groups mobilized to demand remediation and compensation, combining appeals to fairness for those bearing disproportionate environmental burdens with a communitarian emphasis on collective responsibility (Gi-Wook Shin, 1999). Over time, these movements contributed to the creation of special commissions and stricter regulatory frameworks. As institutions became more responsive and transparent, public trust increased relative to earlier authoritarian periods (OECD, 2018). Strong patterns of civic engagement in South Korea have also been associated with comparatively higher levels of trust in local government when measured against other East Asian contexts (Asian Barometer Survey, 2022).

By contrast, in China, where political space for independent civil society is more limited, justice-oriented advocacy has been constrained. In cases where environmental protests or service-oriented organizations have been permitted to operate, they have occasionally prompted localized reforms (Yongshun Cai, 2010). However, the absence of stable and institutionalized channels for civic participation has meant that public trust remains uneven and fragile (OECD, 2024). This case illustrates that when justice advocacy is restricted, trust in institutions is difficult to sustain.

Additional examples demonstrate alignment between civil society engagement and the Sustainable Development Goals. Community-based health justice programs associated with SDG 3 have similarly benefited from civic involvement (UNDP, 2020). In Bangladesh, the introduction of community feedback mechanisms within police stations, supported by civil society training initiatives, has been associated with higher public confidence in law enforcement, as policing practices were perceived as fairer and more accountable (UNDP, 2019). Taken together, these observations support the central argument of this paper that when civil society advances justice through institutional and normative pathways, public trust in government is more likely to increase (OECD, 2024).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that civil society contributes to public trust in government by advancing justice in its multiple dimensions. Normative theories associated with Rawls, Sandel, and Kant provide a moral framework in which justice is understood as fair treatment, respect for individual autonomy, and meaningful participation in collective decision making. When civil society actors draw upon these normative commitments to advocate policy change, legal reform, and inclusive governance processes, they help bring public institutions into closer alignment with citizens' expectations of legitimacy. Institutional approaches further demonstrate that justice requires concrete arrangements, including accessible legal systems, participatory forums, and effective accountability mechanisms. Civil society frequently plays a central role in promoting these structures, thereby reducing the gap between normative ideals and institutional practice.

Within Asian democracies, where governance is shaped by distinct historical experiences and development challenges, the justice-oriented activities of civil society are particularly significant. Across the region, civic movements articulate claims related to land rights, anticorruption, social equity, and environmental protection in ways that resonate with established philosophical conceptions of justice. Through these efforts, civil society not only addresses substantive policy concerns but also reinforces the principle that government authority should be guided by fairness and respect for persons. This signaling effect contributes to the rebuilding of public trust by demonstrating that institutions can respond to ethical demands. The alignment of these practices with the Sustainable Development Goals, which frame justice and participation as core elements of development, further situates civil society engagement within a broader global commitment to peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.

The analysis yields several practical implications. Governments are encouraged to recognize civil society organizations as partners in the provision and realization of justice by including nongovernmental representatives in oversight bodies, supporting legal aid initiatives, and formalizing mechanisms for public consultation. Civil society advocacy should be understood not as a threat to authority but as a legitimate expression of social justice concerns. When governments respond by improving institutional fairness, such as expanding access to legal representation or adopting citizen driven budgeting processes, they give effect to principles associated with Rawlsian equality and Kantian respect for autonomy, thereby strengthening public trust. In addition, long term democratic stability depends on fostering public understanding of moral duties and shared values, an area in which civil society can play a vital role through civic education and public discourse, consistent with communitarian insights.

The pursuit of justice through civil society engagement is therefore not merely a technical or administrative undertaking but a foundational element of contemporary governance. The literature examined, ranging from classical political philosophy to applied studies of justice and institutions, consistently indicates that trust emerges when citizens observe justice being realized in practice. In the context of Asian democracies, empowering civil society to shape legal, social, and environmental justice mechanisms represents a critical pathway toward stronger institutions, enhanced legitimacy, and more stable systems of governance.

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