Between Resilience and Resistance: promoting progressive culture in Africa

Hivos Africa Consultation
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This report draws from the consultation on Civil Society Building in Africa, hosted by Hivos in Arusha, Tanzania, June 2004, and the discussion paper *Civil Domains in Africa: Some Issues*, by David Sogge (2004, unpublished). Special thanks to Ireen Dubel, David Sogge and Jessie Greene for their comments, and of course to all consultation participants. Consultation participants included Hivos partners and staff, researchers and academics, and other development practitioners. Although the primary audience of this report is the consultation participants, the report is set up broadly to appeal to other NGOs, CSOs and practitioners working towards civil society building in Africa. We welcome your responses on csb@hivos.nl.

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Executive Summary

In June 2004, Hivos invited a motivated group of partners, researchers, development practitioners and staff members to Arusha Tanzania, to reflect on the challenges and opportunities facing Africa in terms of civil society building (CSB), from the perspective of economic development, challenges of politics, and social mobilisation. The consultation came forth from a need to re-identify the most pressing issues confronting civil society actors in Africa today, and to explore how Hivos should respond.

Two major motives framed the discussions: first, economic aspects, in view of the underlying structural poverty in Africa, the root cause of many social inequalities. Pro-poor development needs to be given far greater priority. The informal sector is the primary locus of entrepreneurship and economic activity in Africa. Nonetheless, public representation and policy focus mostly on the formal private sector, and are therefore irrelevant to the majority of the population. Public engagement can help lead to broader awareness in terms of rights, policies and opportunities. Only in this way can Africa's poor access the tools and opportunities to improve their lives. Processes of public advocacy need to be rooted in constituencies – through a long-term focus and an inclusive process. Real change needs to come from within; external agencies can facilitate discussion or provide the platform to achieve this.

Though globalisation has a dramatic effect on African economic and socio-cultural structures, it can be addressed proactively by African policymakers, the private sector and CSOs if they join efforts to pursue their often mutual interests.

To stimulate a more inclusive and thriving economic climate in Africa, the state must make pro-poor economic development its priority. The formal private sector must become more competitive and realistic in view of its opportunities and restrictions, and national markets and economies need to shake off their dependence mentality to catalyse positive change from within.

The second major motive pertains to social mobilisation and civil society building in Africa, in response to political challenges and political exclusion across the continent. There is a need for unity in opposition, even between opposing forces to make a fist against oppression. Change agents need a clear vision for the future direction of the state, even before the battle is fought. This should be supported by the understanding that the removal of inequality does not automatically lead to democracy.

Social mobilisation is not an easy task in areas of poverty and oppression. It requires a vast amount of patience, courage and creativity, drawing from locally appropriate knowledge and experiences. NGOs can play a role in facilitating debate and access to information, but depend on the inclusion of local leaders and communities, and vernacular associational life. Ultimately it is through such inclusive strategies that social movements and civil society can be mobilised to influence policies and fundamentally address inequality and injustice.

Sustainable change in the form of policy formulation and implementation means that advocacy needs to move a step further, to develop social pressure through public engagement and collective action. Active involvement of the media is critical. Further, CSOs need to develop a better understanding of policies in order to monitor their implementation and impact. Sustainable inclusion depends on proactive and creative responses, as well as inclusive coalitions and a culture of accountability.

The changing political arena is forcing Hivos and its partners to address many new challenges. Concern for accountability and internal democracy in NGOs and social movements has always been prevalent, but donor and development agencies are being called upon more urgently to deliver concrete results, in face of broad claims that development efforts have failed. Hivos and its partners should resist populist demands for short-term strategies and quick results. Rather, a clear recommendation is that Hivos should stick to what it is good at – and capitalise on this in a strategic and sensible manner, with a long-term focus on promoting progressive development in Africa.

The consultation addressed a vast range of issues and challenges, and concluded that much can be achieved if Hivos and its partners invest in expertise, build linkages, and foster knowledge sharing. In the long term, mobilising diverse actors and fostering the diversity and energy of African civil society has the potential to contribute to solutions for the almost insurmountable problems that confront Africa today.

Introduction

Background

In June 2004, 31 people from 11 different countries joined forces to reflect on the particular challenges and opportunities facing Africa in terms of civil society building (CSB), from the perspective of politics, economics and social mobilisation.

The meeting, set in Arusha, Tanzania, and hosted by Hivos, came forth from a need to explore, on the one hand, the relevance of the concept of civil society for Africa, and to understand what makes African civil society specific. On the other hand, African realities emphasise the need to identify what needs to be done to tackle the most pressing challenges. The discussions were set against the backdrop of negative economic trends, issues of gender inequality, the Aids pandemic and democratic strains across the African continent. At the same time the political climate in donor countries is changing as domestic concerns increasingly dominate the political agenda. This does not leave Hivos unaffected: public support and funding for development cooperation are no longer self-evident in the Netherlands. All in all, whilst the urgency of Hivos' policy priorities and actions are increasing, so are the challenges to continue providing support in the manner its partners are accustomed to.

As such, the Arusha consultation was convened to help Hivos improve the quality of its work, developing more relevant responses for sustainable and emancipatory development in Africa[1]. The energy and experience brought together by a variety of people – outspoken leaders of Hivos partner organisations, outside resource people and Hivos staff focusing on Africa – catalysed inspiring discourse, which we hope will contribute positively to the endeavours of all participants.

Civil Society in Africa

A great deal of discussion has taken place over the past 15 years around the concept of "Civil Society", presented increasingly as the pre-eminent model to promote more social inclusion, fair access to material and immaterial empowerment and development processes in general. NGOs and social movements created an alternative framework for development, providing the backbone of a vocal and vibrant 'civil society' – autonomous, endogenous, finding its identity in relation to the state, based on shared interests.

However, faced with the enormous economic, political and social adversities which continue to affect the African people, it is clear that civil society is in no way a magical formula for development. Over time its limitations become clearer, both in theory as well as in practice. On the conceptual level, we have been forced to acknowledge the importance of understanding the context we are looking at: civil society cannot be used as a one-size-fits-all concept.

Concerns

Practical concerns include issues of accountability and internal democracy in NGOs and social movements. These have always been prevalent on the sidelines of the debate, but have become more urgent now that donor and development agencies are increasingly being called upon to deliver concrete results. Broad claims are made that development efforts have failed, NGOs and the civil society are under increasing attack. Furthermore, in the wake of earth-shattering events such as the Rwanda genocide, crises in Sierra Leone and Liberia, '9-11' followed by the 'War on Terrorism', and failing efforts at democratisation in Zimbabwe and now perhaps Uganda, people have been mollified into submission and are increasingly hesitant to form social movements and claim their rights as civil society. In fact, it is increasingly acknowledged, "where states are weak and poorly institutionalised, space for emancipatory associational life will tend to be unfavourable. Citizens find open activism risky, and they are not always well positioned to leverage meaningful change in official policy and behaviour. But where there are robust state institutions, the environment can be enabling of emancipatory agendas"[2].

Nonetheless, alternative civil domains are still emerging in many conflict-ridden or underprivileged areas, pulled by determined individuals, organised citizens and opposition parties, to tackle the adverse social costs and suffering by pushing the margins of their social manoeuvrability. How do they do this? What challenges need to be overcome?

Contextualising the discussion

All in all, the questions pertaining to Africa's development are not new, but the continent has changed. Perspectives leading to new avenues for development in Africa have emerged. Drawing from the

[1] The findings of the Arusha Consultation will be used in the formulation of a new Hivos policy on Civil Society Building.

[2] David Sogge, 2004, *Civil Domains in African Settings: Some Issues* (unpublished), p.20.

experiences of a diverse group of practitioners, researchers, political advocates and lobbyists, this report is an attempt to address these questions and identify these perspectives. An ambitious aim, and although this report in no way claims to provide all the answers, we hope to tickle your mind and catalyse meaningful debate, bringing forth innovative strategies, new energy, and refreshed hope, to ensure the bleak picture is overshadowed by positive developments, leading towards a bright, African future.

About this report

This report is based on the discussions in the Arusha consultation. The structure of the document follows the logic of the meeting. The first two chapters explore Africa's economic and political context. This is followed by a conceptual intermezzo reflecting on the use of the concept of Civil Society in African contexts (further in-depth reflections are provided by David Sogge in his paper *Civil Domains in African settings; some issues*, written in preparation for the Arusha meeting[3]). The third chapter addresses two aspects of African civil society: the development of emancipatory social movements, and civil society influencing national and international policies. The next chapter illustrates some trends in Dutch development cooperation, and the challenges they provide for Hivos. The final chapter comprises recommendations and conclusions.

In the document the terms NGO (non-governmental organisation) and CSO (civil society organisation) are used interchangeably.

[3] see also http://www.civilsocietybuilding.net/csb/knowledge_corner/publications/civil_domains_in_african_settings

Africa's Economic Context: Globalisation and Entrepreneurship[4]

Globalisation is a part of life that can no longer be ignored. This is encountered not only in economic terms – foreign products on the shelves of any grocery store – but increasingly in socio-cultural terms – a child in the rural outback of Ghana, sporting a Disney t-shirt. Countries all over the globe are forced to acknowledge and address this trend, whether they are ready for it or not. And unfortunately, in many African countries, the latter is the case. The majority of populations do not seem to benefit from the advantages portrayed by neo-liberal economists: economic development as deployed over the past few decades, can in many cases not be described as pro-poor. A vast range of factors – internal or external – have adversely influenced local and national markets and economies over the past two decades; these have been augmented further by global factors which are becoming of increasing influence in many economies' efforts to join the global market. And in many cases, it is the poor in the informal sector who seem to be hurt the most, or who seem the most difficult to reach by global efforts aimed at economic development.

Positive economic effects to be associated with globalisation are only found in enclaves – mining and agricultural exports – or in so-called export processing zones (EPZ), either industrial or service-oriented. These enclaves attract some of the surplus labour of the surrounding areas, which are otherwise characterised by un(der)employment and poverty, increasingly concentrated in urban areas. The countryside is losing people, not as a result of a pull from urban industrialisation, but because of the collapse of the countryside. Although the "dynamic" enclaves do provide jobs/income to their workers, they fail to contribute to development in the sense of capital accumulation.

NEPAD has been presented as the African answer to globalisation. It proclaims to put the African countries on the path of development, to eradicate poverty and to promote the role of women. In short, it lists all the issues which nobody would dispute. Upon closer scrutiny, however, NEPAD is heavily based on the same neo-liberal assumptions underlying the structural adjustment policies of the past two decades. It proclaims to enable the private sector, but its emphasis on foreign direct investment (FDI) reveals that the focus is on the foreign rather than the domestic African private sector. More specifically, NEPAD is considered by some as a vehicle for the promotion of South African capital interests, in terms of attracting more foreign investment and stimulating their expansion in the rest of Africa. However, South African investments in other African countries operate just like any other foreign investments, seeking minimum cost opportunities and profit repatriation possibilities.

The liberalisation of Africa's financial markets has stimulated in the influx of speculative capital, taking over African financial service companies without additional foreign direct investments. In general the little foreign investment that Africa does attract concentrates on the extractive sector. Africa's mineral reserves constitute the main point of (renewed) interest of the world's major powers in Africa. The oil reserves from the Greater Gulf of Guinea and the Horn of Africa are included in the strategic considerations of the United States (and other powers like China), and codetermine foreign policy towards these regions. As such – there is a striking geographical overlap in Africa between areas of mineral richness and foreign direct investment on the one hand – and military conflicts on the other.

African countries are increasingly faced with donor-coordinated support. In itself the increased aid efficiency this implies is welcomed. However, it often means a reduced autonomy of recipient governments to apply their national policy instruments, like the national budget. Globalisation as a process is led by Western and in particular US interests. African actors have only limited opportunities for influencing that process, compounded by the fact that global decision-making is becoming less democratic: UN institutions are weakened, and the Southern (and certainly African) voice in the World Bank, the IMF and WTO is limited. (Although the 2003 WTO meeting in Cancun represents a rare defensive victory for the developing countries, its impact should not be exaggerated. The WTO agenda remains unchanged, and does not address the problem of decreasing commodity prices.) The possibilities for African regional economic integration – historically perceived as a response to face global developments – are eroded by the global trade agenda, and being replaced by bilateral talks between EU and individual ACP countries about Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs). In the past 20 years African countries have become more dependent on the world market, but their total share in this market has dropped from 6% to 2%. Traditional exports still dominate, but face decreasing prices and increasing competition from other Southern countries.

[4] Based on contributions by Yao Graham and Tunde Obadina, *Africa's economic context, global and local: major trends,* presented June 7th, 2004

Is globalisation to blame? Are Africa's economic woes entirely caused by external factors? What about the internal factors influencing economic development? A closer look at what are generally supposed to be the major actors in economic development – the private sector and the state – reveals a number of African particularities. The central role for entrepreneurs/the private sector in the development of Africa is generally accepted: if economic development is to be pro-poor it must create jobs and if Africa's economy is to grow it must transform and modernise, away from just producing more groundnuts, cocoa and copper. A dynamic private sector is supposed to be able to contribute to this kind of development. Successful entrepreneurs combine ideas (innovations), initiatives (the "get up and go") and organisation (structure) towards economic transformation beyond failed strategies, to identify modes by which to 'create a bigger pie'.

When most African countries became independent, the ownership and running of the economy were on the whole taken up by states. In the 1980s and 1990s structural adjustment policies followed, based on the tenets that this state-led development had failed and that the state should liberalise markets, leaving the economy to the private sector. However, in twenty years of professed and implemented structural adjustment policies, this has not happened. Today, Africa's GDP is 26% generated by government, 52% by the informal sector (in Nigeria even 77%), and only 22% by the formal private sector – the latter being dominated by foreign enterprises and politician-businessmen.

What Africa witnessed, as a result of the structural adjustment policies and privatisations, was not liberalisation and the growth of a dynamic private sector, but rather the enriching of ruling elites – not through dynamic entrepreneurship but by easy 'rent-seeking'. An entrepreneurial spirit is not flourishing. Production is not efficient nor able to compete with other more dynamic Southern countries, who are Africa's main competitors on the world market and at home.

How then should the entrepreneurial spirit and the private sector be encouraged?

1. *The state must make economic development its number one priority.*
   The liberalisation and privatisation of markets which is sweeping the continent can prove positive, when production activities are left to the private sector, and the state focuses on creating the enabling factors, by channelling resources into identifiable areas and encouraging entrepreneurship as a deliberate action. Scarce state resources must be allocated much more effectively, not to the well to do but towards more productive and more pro-poor purposes. A clear example is Nigeria's fuel subsidy: this is costing the state of lot of money, disproportionately benefiting the lucky few who are rich enough to own cars. The poor are better served by more direct subsidies for public transport as this increases their action radius. Such pro-poor policy reformulation can foster the entrepreneurial potential in the large informal sector in African countries. The state is the most crucial development agent, and as such African states need to more actively modernise their economic development tactics.

2. *The formal private sector must be more competitive and more realistic.*
   Local markets should take heed of and address external issues which adversely affect them. Rather than be intimidated or deterred, local producers can learn from competition and improve their own wares. For example, Nigerian cotton has trouble competing with Chinese cotton on the market. Why can't Nigeria produce equally cheaply at the same quality? The economies of scale and lower transport costs are a big competitive benefit which Nigeria should take advantage of. If Nigeria wants to stimulate its cotton industry, it needs to address these questions in a competitive manner.

3. *National markets need to shake off their dependence mentality*
   There is a tremendous focus in development dialogues and policies on attracting foreign investments, and the low level of FDI towards Africa is lamented. Domestic possibilities on the other hand are largely neglected. However, the more investors in a country, whether national or international, the higher the likelihood that others will follow. Therefore, countries need to work on building their own economies and show that there is a viable basis for domestic investments. In other words, the private sector should acknowledge that change has to come from inside, before looking outward for capital.

These are challenging conditions, even more difficult to address in the state of political transition in which many African nations find themselves. But does economic development really depend on political democracy? This is a controversial issue. Some argue that it is not. China, for example, is realising tremendous economic development without political democracy. Others object that in the unique context of Africa, economic development cannot take place without democracy. Either way, it is widely agreed that democracy is favourable and desirable, but not a sufficient condition for economic development.

So what can civil society do to influence democracy to its advantage, in the challenging process of economic development? What political factors do we need to consider, that determine the rules of the game?

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Africa's Political Context: Democratisation and Mobilisation

What are the major types of recent evolution shown by African states, and what perspectives for democracy and inclusive citizen participation do they offer? And what forms of exclusion and marginalisation? What are the depth and width of democracy in Africa today? These questions are explored in four reflections from different political contexts: Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda and South Africa.

A reflection on Zimbabwe[5]: *from independence to polarisation*

In 1980 the independent state of Zimbabwe was established out of former Rhodesia, ridding the country of oppression by the white minority. Those in the struggle subscribed to basic values: equity, compassion, and justice, based on a common feeling of patriotism. Although the country had succeeded in fighting together a common enemy of racial oppression, one critical question was left unanswered: what kind of state are we fighting for?

Many of Zimbabwe's problems today stem from the lack of addressing this question. It left the Zimbabweans with a sense of insecurity, and worse – immobilisation in terms of developing their own state. Unity had been the force of social mobilisation as part of the liberation struggle, between opposing forces; but with the common enemy gone, unity was destroyed and new forms of oppression capitalised on the vacuum. This cleared the way for the ruling elite to appropriate power, for corruption to take over public institutions, for the state to discharge its responsibilities, and for a general intolerance of opposing views. Over the years, democratic practice in Zimbabwe has been distorted, and the pluralistic framework destroyed.

Whilst every Zimbabwean in 1980 believed in land redistribution, none expected it to be used as a project of oppression or an instrument of division; none expected it to deepen the level of corruption and impoverisation in the country and the disenfranchisement of thousands. Under the pretext of land redistribution, democracy was parked in the corner, and extreme polarisation ensued.

However, not all is gloomy. Zimbabweans have jointly resisted the excesses of power. Thousands of women march the streets on Women's Day handing out roses as a sign of resistance; brave men and women continue to fight in the national constitutional assembly; the NGO sector continues to do work mobilising communities. Such forms of resistance are a source of encouragement and inspiration, proving that the day does not belong to tyrants, but to the ordinary people of Zimbabwe.

A reflection on Kenya[6]: *from dictatorship to reconstitution*

In 1984 Kenya became a one-party state. The ensuing feeling of discontentment entrenched a number of slow changes – which finally led to a change of constitution in 1991. This did not go without pain: dissenters were detained and ethnic clashes occurred. Nonetheless, gains were made, limits were set to the term for presidency and the multi-party system was installed by law, leading to 26 political parties. One opposition party was able to gain more and more support, and change seemed impending.

This however did not last: by the first multiparty elections in 1992, internal fragmentation had split the major opposition party along ethnic lines and fragmented. Opposition had weakened itself, and Moi continued to be President with the ruling party. The disunity in the opposition continued further still, sometimes through external forces such as bribery, sometimes through internal conflicts. And again, in 1997, the ruling party won – albeit with lower margins.

But by now the opposition had learnt their lesson. Before the 2002 elections, the opposition united forces to face the ruling party – overstepping their differences to try to win the elections by opposition. Finally, when the President acquiesced his impending defeat, and decided to then hand pick his successor – the remaining members of the ruling party jumped ship to the opposition, allowing for a major victory in the elections.

Despite the electoral democratisation, some problems persist. First, the constitutional process is not yet complete and is proving difficult, destabilising the country. Second, whilst the battle against corruption is fiercely being fought, it is not yet over. Third, the coalition is unhappy with the Memorandum of Understanding which they signed as opposition to fight the ruling parties. And fourth, Moi-type policies continue to dominate, leaving little room for pro-poor development. People thus see little difference – a potential undermining of their oppositional efforts.

Although some major steps towards democratisation in Kenya have been taken, the road towards completion of the process is still long and rocky.

A reflection on Uganda[7]: *from movement to dictatorship?*

The Ugandan constitution states that no one can hold office as President for more that two terms of five years. However, the same President who placed these restrictions on term when the new constitution was ratified has now instigated a debate to remove all limits, and allow life presidency.

After the first ten years of Museveni's Presidency, the country was organised under a *movement* system, as opposed to a political party system. Everybody was asked to conform to the movement, to generate stability, build the nation, and overcome conflict. However, the Constitutional Conference has since opened up the system to political parties, allowing for opposition to the ruling 'movement'. With the slow evolution of the system, the question of which direction Ugandan democracy should head is gaining importance.

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[5] Based on a contribution by Paul Themba Nyathi, June 7th, 2004

[6] Based on a contribution by Aleke Donde, June 7th, 2004

[7] Based on a contribution by Zie Gariyo, June 7th, 2004

Three major factors complicate the process of democratisation in Uganda. First, political opposition is coming also from within Museveni's movement, causing confusion and controversy especially in rural areas: after having been told about the benefits of the movement, people are now being told by the same representatives to question its legitimacy. Second, Museveni is highly favoured by donors: almost 30% of Uganda's budget depends on donor funding. With a highly donor-led economy, Museveni has neglected the violent conflict in North Uganda, leaving the army thoroughly corruption-ridden and the conflict drawing increasingly on the national budget. So, whilst Uganda has one of the most liberalised economies on the Continent, ten years of conflict with little hope of resolution, a corrupt army and a donor-led economy, the state of the economy is in danger. Third, Museveni's own resistance to multi-party elections and retirement have put strains on the country's sense of democracy.

However, it is not likely that Museveni will really suspend Parliament and rule by decree to prolong his Presidency: the Ugandan Constitutional Bill of Rights is very comprehensive and Parliamentary representation is diverse, comprising a wide range of minorities including youth, trade unions and people with disabilities. Despite the challenges Uganda faces today, the country is fairly well equipped to address the question of where the state should be heading, restoring in democracy the stability which it developed so impressively twenty years ago.

A reflection on South Africa[8]: from liberation to maturity

As one gets older, youthful ideas of all the possibilities that lie ahead begin to narrow. At the same time, one also becomes more aware of what is possible, without the unrealistic idealism of youth. The same story applies to South Africa, after ten years of liberation from apartheid. A wealth of possibilities lie open and ahead, but these are more focused.

The transition to democracy went combined with a sense of hope and dreams. During the period of consolidation under Nelson Mandela, South Africa grappled with its past, whilst focusing on the future. Civil Society saw itself in alliance with government, sometimes even contractual relationships ensued. Now, however, small cracks in this harmony are starting to appear. With President Mbeki asking unorthodox questions about Aids, with an underlying suspicion of the pharmaceutical industry, people became sceptical towards CSOs working in concert with the government. This was strengthened by the exposure of South Africa's frailty through her inability to deal with the Aids pandemic appropriately and on time.

However, Civil Society and Aids orthodoxy at this point have started being more open about questioning the government and her approach vis a vis Aids, and people on the ground have tapped into this. Increasingly, CSOs with the support of these people, are managing progressive policy changes to be made, gender equity is on the agenda and sceptical questions are being addressed. The bottom line is, however, that we cannot rest on our laurels of these small steps in the right direction. Whilst the disastrous effects of the Aids pandemic tear about the country, there is still a lot of work to be done.

Clearly, much has changed in Africa over recent decades. A number of critical success factors are crosscutting throughout these very different contexts. To name but a few: there is a need for unity – even between opposing forces – to overthrow a common enemy. Further, change agents need a clear vision for the future on where the state should be heading before the battle is fought, supported also by the realisation that the removal of one oppressive force will not lead automatically to democracy.

Since independence heralded the end of colonisation, political arenas continue to evolve in a multitude of manners, reflecting the diversity and energy across the continent. The discussion on Africa's political context and how public engagement can be harnessed to strengthen democracy is nowhere near conclusion.

[8] Based on a contribution by Sisonke Msimang, June 7th, 2004

Conceptual Intermezzo: Reflections on Civil Society in Africa

"*One can readily understand why the notion of civil society is so attractive… It has a nice ring to it: civil society as a term sounds lofty, non-partisan, citizen-oriented, participatory and democratic; and who could argue with those attributes? It holds promise of taking policy-making out of the hands of often corrupt, venal bureaucracies, governments, and "evil" international organisations like the WTO or the IMF, and placing it directly in the hands of popular organisations, or "the people".*"[9]

Whilst 15 years ago the term "Civil Society" was just being coined, it is now used as a container to describe all kinds of discourses around democratisation and citizen involvement. This has led to some confusion between civil society as a concept and an actually existing form. Due to this 'containerisation' of the concept, fragmentation and chaos ensues, when 'civil society' is presented as an actor next to, for instance, the private and the public sector. Furthermore, some question whether 'civil society' is even a concept that can readily be applied to the African context – it being a term emanating from Western historical development, and perhaps not even appropriate to African associational life and socio-cultural bearings[10]. Whatever the conceptual and ontological complexities, fact is the term is applied in African discourse as it is elsewhere.

So what then characterises "African" civil society? Is there an "authentic" African civil society, and what distinguishes it from civil society in other parts of the world? David Sogge identifies a number of particularities and possible limitations to civil domain concepts in Africa[11].

Particularities include:

- Vast socio-cultural diversity;
- Uneven continental development;
- Unnatural birth of territories and governance[12];
- Accountability issues: government vs. citizens[13].

Taking into account the idea of associational life as being voluntary, addressing cross-cutting issues horizontally and vertically, and there being an open platform and culture to voice one's dissent, one can imagine a vast range of obstacles for the development of African civil society.

Limitations include:

• Allegiance through kinship, ethnicity or traditions	…rather than voluntary affiliation on ideological grounds;
• Socio-cultural factors determining roles and opportunities, especially age and gender	…rather than open to all;
• Patriarchal, hierarchical models based on customary power	…rather than cross-cutting models;
• Polarisation of power through "winner-takes-all logic"	…rather than balance of forces through negotiation and bargaining;
• Lack of middle-class critical mass, polarisation of elite vs. poor (concentration of power)	…rather than robust wage-earning class;
• Short-term struggle for survival (poverty) overrides longer–term interests	…rather than meaningful participation and advocacy;
• Disordered political systems	…rather than orderly processes determining who gets what, when and how;
• "Quick & dirty" methods to overthrow power	…rather than (time-consuming) political mobilisation;
• Past failures or oppression extinguishing people's will or courage to organise themselves and resist.	…rather than a continuous exploration of margins in an open domain.

[9] Howard J. Wiarda (Colorado: Westview, 2003), *Civil Society: The American Model and Third World Development*, p. 130, quoted by Ebenezer Obadare, *A History of the Concept of Civil Society and its Usefullness in Different African Contexts*. Presented June 7th, 2004

[10] For more on this, see Ebenezer Obadare, *'The Alternative Genealogy of Civil Society and its Implications for Africa: Notes for Further Research'*, accepted for publications in *Africa Development*, Vol. 29, Number 4, 2004

[11] David Sogge, 2004, *Civil Domains in African Settings: Some Issues* (unpublished), pp. 7-10

[12] This refers to the imposition of colonial borders and statism.

[13] With the vast majority of Africans earning their livelihoods in the informal sector – and not paying taxes – accountability between government and citizens is limited. When people pay taxes, it is likely they will be more inclined to check how it is being spent – and vice versa.

As many countries are still recovering from colonial exploitation, post-colonial dictatorship or conflicts, are (re-)discovering their independence and are still in the process of inventing their preferred forms of state, it is understandable that there are many challenges in setting up a civil domain, or a space for emancipatory actors. Several studies indicate that civil society will be more active where the state is strong: if people have access to an open platform through which their concerns can be voiced and if the changes they advocate can really be implemented, civil society efforts will have more effect – and thus attract participation.

At the political and economical meta-level, opportunities to intervene seem few and far between. The vastness of the discourse and the arena can even lead to inertia. Despite all this, civil society successes are possible, even for marginalized peoples and individual citizens. For instance, the efforts of TAC, a South-African CSO, led to access to cheaper anti-retroviral drugs in South Africa for millions of people[14]. This illustrates that opportunities to enter the arena are there – one just needs to know how. In this context, the particularities of African civil society, its limitations and its opportunities, are highlighted in the following section.

[14] Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), see also www.tac.org.za

Civil Society in Africa: The Development of Emancipatory Social Movements in Africa

Emancipatory movements are groupings of individuals who seek to advance their interests. They aim at more political inclusion and power for citizens and better material and non-material living standards. This may mean trying to regain lost power or a way of living. It may involve grabbing and controlling a societal "space", breaking the shackles that limit rights and choices of (groupings of) individuals as set against the backdrop of universal human rights[15]. Emancipatory movements often challenge the dominant vision or definition of culture including such as aspects traditions, religion and ethnicity. They question cultural practices – roles of women, youth, etc. – or values and practices as defined by a few people.

Notions of rights, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the SADC declaration on gender can be strong factors stimulating emancipatory movements. However, rights do not enforce themselves. In the end, the enforcement of human rights is a question of power. And often there are situations of conflicting rights, for example the conflict between traditional land rights and the right to private property.

Social mobilisation: conditions and limitations

All kinds of conditions can stimulate the development of emancipatory movements. For instance, negative circumstances such as injustice, repression and marginalisation are breeding grounds for the formation of emancipatory movements: a common bad or a common enemy, like apartheid or the regimes in former Rhodesia and the former Portuguese colonies. Positive conditions include global historical changes (like the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the Cold War). Underlying characteristics across the scale include (charismatic) leadership, appropriate strategies (both internal and external), the ability to build alliances and autonomy vis-à-vis external actors. Movements thrive where the state is strong and confident, allowing space for expression and a plurality of ideas. Political inertia lurks, however, where a strong state pacifies people into the 'sit back and relax-mode', making it very difficult for emancipatory movements to generate the critical mass and energy needed to advocate change.

Generally, educated and literate members of the middle classes provide leadership to emancipatory movements. Movements depend upon mutual reinforcement between the "poor and marginalised", who need such leadership for their emancipation, and the middle classes, who need the numbers of the poor to reinforce their constituency.

Factors limiting the development of emancipatory movements in Africa include:

- A culture of oppression or fear, where people are afraid or not accustomed to raising their voices. Dissenting voices in such a culture are rare or suppressed and as such, movements will not be able to move far.
- Excessive patriarchy. Whether this is a chief or the head of an NGO, this factor can paralyse emancipation, by restricting access to emancipatory platforms under the pretext of culture[16].
- Placing the leader above criticism and reproach. This capitalises on the 'cultural' notion of bowing to the chief. Examples aplenty of charismatic opposition leaders turning into unyielding dictators once they have come to power. *"Why is there a tendency within the people's movement to throw up leaders who, when they come to power, behave no differently, or even worse than the leaders whom they have replaced? For brevity, we may call this the 'Chiluba sydrome'"*[17]. This leads to the situation, that people who have been subjected to decades of oppression and abuse by political leaders, will be left with a very negative impression of the political arena. This is obviously a major inhibitor for anyone trying to mobilise in such a region[18].
- Traditional inertia. Resistance to moving beyond 'the way things have always been done'.
- In Africa, movements tend to be organised vertically, based less on class than on cultural divisions, and often determined by ethnicity or rural-urban stratification. The "*zero-sum, winner-takes-all logics and incentives, around neutralising … opponents*"[19] which such allegiance entails, has a restrictive effect on space for emancipation and dissent.

Although the factor of *own identity* in culture is of critical importance, custom and tradition are often abused to perpetuate the status quo, particularly in relation to issues of gender inequality. However, the organic

[15] This excludes un-civil domains such as the Mafia from being considered an emancipatory movement.

[16] "It's un-African to have women in Parliament", Kenya's former President Moi, 2002

[17] Yash Tandon, *In Relation to the Imperial Factor the European Mind is Generally in a Denial Mode and the African in the Victim Mode*, June 8th, 2004

[18] Quoted from Paul Themba Nyathi, *Organising and mobilising the rural areas in situations of extreme political polarisation*, presented on June 8th, 2004.

[19] Sogge, p.8

nature of culture provides space to re-evaluate 'traditions' or 'cultures' that restrict emancipation and affect human rights (such as female circumcision, child marriage, etc.). Such issues can be overcome by sufficient 'horizontal' critical mass, by a new generation who rebels against oppressive customs, by seeing other practices and applying them to one's own, or by changing internal cultures. Furthermore, the semantic shift from custom/tradition – how it's always been done – to culture – who we are or want to be – provides room for change, room for dynamics.

Social mobilisation in poor rural areas[20]

People in areas of hardship often have the resilience of generations and a high capacity of endurance. In such contexts, mobilising people to advocate for change, moving beyond resilience to resistance, is no mean feat.

Where people have suffered abuse and oppression at the hands of their own political leaders, built-in cynicism and real fear can result in political inertia. Anyone promising anything on behalf of the government, a new political party, or the NGO community will have to overcome deep-rooted suspicion.

Moreover, NGOs tend to think in terms of projects with short-term life cycles, often manned by workers from outside the community rather than by the intended beneficiaries, and often funded by overseas agencies. This tendency, often accompanied by a distorted version of democracy and consultation without real empowerment, explains the failed irrigation schemes, crumbling school buildings, and empty telecentres, littered around the African continent. In this context, it is easy to understand that mobilisation for new projects can be challenging.

These challenges are amplified in rural areas in particular, by such basic problems as:

- Limited access to choices, little access to information
- Tendency/preference to retain the status quo
- Experience of failed NGO projects
- Isolation and vulnerability

Nonetheless, this is not a reason to give up or neglect challenging rural areas altogether. History has shown, after all, that the smaller the margins for democratic space, the more creative people will become in finding ways to push these margins. "*People's basic desire for human rights, which is universal, is a strong source of energy for mobilisation… It is something in the human spirit that works in favour of change. People may be afraid, but they simultaneously recognise that it is a basic right to live a life without fear, and they want to struggle against a government that makes them afraid*"[21].

Methods of mobilisation at a local level require a vast amount of patience, courage and creativity. For example:

- Study the community to identify the real issues in the settlement (e.g. famine, inequality) – and tackle these, linked to the struggle.
- Good listening skills are a must. We tend to see and hear what we want and understand – not what is really being said.
- Capitalise on local knowledge.
- Identify and resource local leadership.
- Deal with the fear factor by showing real courage and fearlessness in leadership.
- Acknowledge the communal tradition; draw on the hearts and minds of the community, not just individuals.
- Mobilise the Diaspora and visitors as a source of information, hope and support.
- Facilitate debate and access to information. NGOs can play a role in this.

[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.

In the face of so many adverse circumstances in Africa to advocate and catalyse change and democratisation, which strategies can be applied to mobilise people? Which general political space is available to citizen groups at large? One emerging trend shows the development of vernacular associational life, or in other words, "*alternative civil domain groupings born in the struggle for democracy … based on members: religious associations; voluntary organisations; social networks … Africa continues to make its history its own way – including its own modes of associative life and resistance*"[22].

Ultimately it is through such inclusive strategies that social movements and civil society can be mobilised, in order to fundamentally address the inequalities and injustices by influencing policies.

[22] Sogge, p.13

African Civil Society: Influencing Policies

From 'policy to projects' and from 'projects to policies'

The 1960s and 1970s – just after independence for many African countries, and for some even before – were decades of strong visions and policies, located within African ruling parties and their governments. A vivid example was president Nyerere in Tanzania, with his views on Ujamaa and African socialism. After the crisis at the end of the 1970s, the next two decades witnessed an 'end of ideology': visions and policies were replaced by 'projects & programmes'. NGOs became active as carriers of these projects and programmes, and they were widely heralded as superior development actors. Today, some twenty years later, there is a return to policies, as it becomes increasingly clear that projects by themselves don't work. This shift signals new challenges and new opportunities for NGOs. Whereas some of them – certainly not all – have always emphasized policy work, most find it difficult to effectively take up this new challenge.

The experience in Uganda: claiming space in the policy arena[23]

In terms of CSO participation as a collective stakeholder in policy planning, the preparation in 2000 of Uganda's first Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) was a groundbreaking process for Africa. Unlike most African countries Uganda had a predecessor to PRSP: the 1997 government-formulated PEAP (Poverty Eradication Action Plan). Three years later the scheduled PEAP-review coincided with and was used for the formulation of Uganda's PRSP. This offered a window of opportunity for civil society to influence policymaking.

It was seized by a core group of twelve organisations. They formed a Civil Society Task Force and – with the support of another 45 organisations around them – organised a country-wide consultation, collecting people's views on what should be the priorities in the new PEAP/PRSP, and subsequently translated these into recommendations to government.

A number of stiff challenges had to be overcome to achieve this: limited capacities amongst CSOs – both in terms of human resources as well as skills to engage in donor and policy discourse – further aggravated by a very tight time frame for preparation and response, critical analysis of documentation and providing quality responses. However, most of the contributions and recommendations made by civil society were ultimately reflected in the final policy document.

Flexibility and the willingness to respond quickly and against adverse time conditions on the side of CSOs were major success factors for their prolonged involvement in government processes – demonstrating a serious, pro-active mentality, working to support government aims and thus adding significant value to the outcomes, both qualitatively and in terms of democratic ownership of the process and implementation.

A number of advantageous spin-offs ensued from the efforts:

- CSOs involvement in discussions previously restricted to government (Uganda Debt Network for instance is involved in working groups on macro-economic issues and budget frameworks);
- CSO recognition as advocates for mainstreaming issues (for example mainstreaming poverty eradication as a priority);
- CSO acknowledgement by government as a central actor in influencing, monitoring and evaluating policy processes;
- A key role for CSOs in ensuring grassroots participation in local government policy formulation and implementing pro-poor policy implementation;
- CSO participation in the Consultative Group (CG) meetings between the government and its donors;
- Consensus between government, civil society and donors, setting a precedent for future consultations;
- Enhanced government transparency, commitment to increased accountability;
- Citizen ownership of policy implementation.

Through this process, CSOs succeeded in convincing government to set poverty eradication high on the agenda, prioritising it as an issue in itself next to (and as a measure of) economic growth.

Despite these first successes, the next challenge CSOs need to address is how to maintain their edge, ensuring that government can be held accountable to their policies.

[23] This section draws on a contribution from Zie Gariyo, *Can civil society influence government's economic policy,* presented on June 8th, 2004.

The experience in Tanzania: building coalitions for public engagement[24]

The return to policies and moving 'beyond projects' presented similar challenges to civil society organisations in Tanzania. Faced with a concrete opportunity to influence policymaking – in the context of the PRSP – CSOs were at first insecure and responded reactively, in the form of protest or lament after the fact. Only more recently have they taken more appropriate steps, most clearly expressed in the establishment of the NGO Policy Forum in 2002. The NPF is a broad grouping of more than 100 civil society organisations and networks, which now participates in various national PRSP structures as well as in the machinery of Public Expenditure Review (PER).

The Tanzanian experience generated a number of reflections on what it takes to be effective in advocacy:

- Seize the space and stretch it: if government provides limited time and space to provide input, respond – but explore the margins and room for expansion;
- Expand the circle: broaden the democratic ownership of the process by ensuring minorities – or representatives thereof – are included in policy processes;
- Make a qualitative difference: ask new questions and bring in new information, suggest alternatives. Provide a distinctive added value to the policy process;
- Build coalitions: with NGOs, with trade unions and beyond: find allies amongst empathetic/progressive people in government, and with donor agencies.

From advocacy to public engagement

Despite these positive examples from Uganda and Tanzania, there are limits to what advocacy can do. Progress can be reversed, and there is no public accountability in advocacy. Sustainable change will only come from social pressure. This means that advocacy has to move a step further and develop public engagement, and the deepening of domestic accountability.

In this broader context, civil society organisations must:

- Link with media: capitalise on impact and effect. A media component should be included in all activities.
- Translate and popularise policies: ensure that there is broad-spread understanding of government policies to root public accountability and engagement.
- Facilitate monitoring of policy impact; document the process and feed into media.
- Turn private atomised actions into public, collective action; for example, provide people with access to policies, with access to information on specific issues, with different options on what they might do. Help ordinary people feel how they can make a difference.

Influencing the policies of international actors, like the Bretton Woods institutions, the World Trade Organisation, the EU and northern governments, can seem even more daunting. The vast majority of African players lack the resources – both in terms of human capacity and finance – to make a real difference on the global stage. The experience of organisations like Third World Network-Africa indicates that successful work at international level requires[25]:

- Quality analytical work, and the capacity to produce this;
- Partnerships and alliances. During the past years a number of issue based regional networks have been established (trade, health, environment, debt etc);
- Working in northern capitals, supported by Northern allies;
- A domestic constituency which has a direct stake in the issues advocated;
- Skills to play the game of international meetings and conferences.

When working in the global context, African CSOs often find themselves side by side with their governments, advocating the same policy changes internationally. In these cases CSOs play very important roles, having topical expertise to contribute to the government officials involved in official negotiations. Even when they are in disagreement on domestic policy issues, African governments increasingly welcome the expert inputs and advice from CSOs at these levels.

A framework for involvement

Much discussion focuses on what should be done. How then can this be operationalised? There are roughly six phases by which civil society goals can succeed in the political arena. These phases comprise an iterative process, at both the national and global level.

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[24] This section draws on a contribution from Rakesh Rajani, *Mobilising people to influence government policies,* presented on June 8th, 2004.

[25] This section draws on a contribution from Yao Graham, *Civil society alliances influencing international economic relations,* presented on June 7th, 2004.

Phase:	
1: Whistle-blowing	Signalling the issue as a problem;
2: Agenda-setting	Getting the problem on the agenda of major forums;
3: Change the "talk"	Beginning to change the discourse, getting the words into the sphere of language used by decision-makers;
4: Drafting the rules	Changing policy language, submitting draft texts for policy documents;
5: Changing procedures	Reaching policy makers and starting to change the rules of the game;
6: Changing behaviours	Following up on the impact of policies and changing behaviours of what institutes do.

Lessons learned for civil society participation in policy processes

- *Be proactive*
  Anticipate national agendas: space is never given to civil society, it has to be claimed. CSOs must be ready and able to respond quickly and creatively (even under time-constraints) in order to show their added value and earn themselves a place at the government negotiating table.
- *Be creative to mobilise and promote*
  Use old and new technologies and creative dissemination mechanisms (Internet and email campaigns, local radio, etc.) to promote access to relevant information, enhance civil awareness, lobby for change, and build support in the international community.
- *Capacity development and involvement*
  Training is needed for CSOs to engage in government and donor dialogues at international level.
- *Inclusive policy design & agenda setting*
  Policy design and planning should be set through clear goals defined by governments and the people (or their representatives) it aims to address – and not by external agencies.
- *Build inclusive, coherent coalitions*
  Advocacy has its limits, so ensure broad representation (NGOs, trade unions, progressive people in government, donors, regional representatives…). Partnerships and alliances – both formal and informal – are critical to ensure representation and building critical mass at a global level. Capitalise on Diaspora for South-South and South-North allegiance.
- *Champions of causes*
  Engage with progressive, well-known individuals who *can* make a difference.
- *Involve the media*
  The media – both local, national and international – is a critical part of the emancipatory environment and in terms of awareness building, informing people and giving them a voice – not just in the South, but also in the North. To maximise civil society participation locally relevant content is a must. If objective media is hard to come by in support of civil society work, sufficient resources should be set aside to facilitate journalistic coverage and enhance awareness of the topics at hand, to develop media standards, or to create alternatives to mainstream media in terms of content generation and dissemination.
- *Build a culture of accountability*
  CSOs need to ensure their own processes and organisations are transparent and democratic, to strengthen the sector, and to ensure they can be taken seriously when addressing the government to adhere to these same standards.
- *Address the negotiation boundaries*
  Unfair terms of trade cannot be addressed until unfair negotiating practice has been addressed. Challenge the margins, challenge the agenda.

Development starts from within. Nonetheless, donor involvement cannot be ignored within the African development discourse. With political change sweeping donor countries, significant implications for development cooperation are impending. What are these changes, why are these occurring, and how should development practitioners and organisations respond?

Changing Contexts of Development Cooperation in the Netherlands – produce or perish?[26]

Historically in the Netherlands, religious and ideological conviction divided social and political life into so-called 'pillars'; Catholic, Protestant, Humanist and non-denominational ideologies were represented throughout society, from schools to sports clubs, from political parties to development agencies. It was in this context that Hivos – the Humanist representative for development cooperation – was set up.

However, as society increasingly secularised during the 1970s, the traditional barriers between social groups began to fade and 'depillarisation' was a reality, to be replaced by neo-liberalism permeating economic, social and ideological life. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the position of the four co-financing agencies in the Netherlands (Cordaid, ICCO, Novib and Hivos) began to be questioned, and this trend continued and accumulated force, throughout the years that followed.

Whereas by 2004 the Netherlands is one of only a handful of countries to reach the 0.7% target of its Gross National Income for Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), critical voices are increasingly being heard. Because of its modest size, the Netherlands was always a fairly internationally-oriented country; nowadays however the national or European agenda increasingly dominates the political sphere, with concerns over immigration and shrinking economies fuelling Dutch disenchantment with forty years of development assistance and not always a great deal to show for it. New, populist political tendencies enforce this sentiment by focusing on quick results rather than on ideology and long-term results.

As such, funding towards development cooperation is no longer self-evident and Dutch development agencies are finding themselves in competition with each other. As one of these agencies, Hivos too is faced with new challenges: the requirement to confirm the credibility of the institute and its ideals, the increased demand for results and the need to mobilise financial and ideological public support. To top it all off, Hivos' thematic interests – culture, democratisation, civil society building, to name but a few – come across less 'sexy' and provide less visible results than for instance, the humanitarian sector. Furthermore, Hivos' resistance to 'aid paternalism' makes it more difficult to define result indicators and impose them on its partners to please the minister and secure funding. All in all, Hivos is faced with a significant challenge to rethink its strategies, if it wants to continue collaborating in the same fashion with its partners around the world.

But all is not gloomy. This period of reflection provides an opportunity to innovate, re-strategise, and reengage the public in critical global issues. A number of avenues might lead us there – in firm collaboration with our partners: first, we should harness the energy of resistance, rather than be neutralised by global forces. Second, we need to recognise that a clear and concrete articulation of result indicators is inevitable – and then we need to follow-up on these accordingly to intensify accountability and transparency in development initiatives. Third, rather than adapting our priorities or apologising for our strengths to suit political whimsies, 'let the cobbler stick to his last'; in other words, we should emphasise and document our good practices, accumulated over years of experience. Whilst this helps us 'sell' what we are doing and address the call for results, this at the same time enhances the practice of knowledge sharing opportunities amongst peers and partners. And fourth, we need to strengthen awareness in the North for problems which may seem (geographically and ideologically) remote, but have global consequences. For example, if the North wants to address its economic recession, it cannot close its eyes for the Aids pandemic which is paralysing trade partners and affecting social structures across the developing world; nor can the fight against terrorism be resolved without democratisation and elimination of repression in war-torn countries.

All in all, promoting progressive culture requires a joint investment from CSOs and donors alike, to root public engagement beyond one-off activities. On the long run, by harnessing our energy of resistance and by combining our strengths, Hivos and its partners can mutually reinforce their efforts and results, to address the challenges of modern-day politics in a fruitful and balanced relationship.

[26] Based on a contribution by Allert van den Ham, June 9th, 2004

Recommendations

Expertise

- Promote independent media and journalistic involvement with civil issues;
- Build drafting and advocacy skills for NGOs;
- Address engagement in multiple areas of discourse and upscale representation of interests in different forums;
- Institutionalise knowledge sharing practices, build sectoral expertise, creating the opportunity and *time* to develop;
- Foster a long term focus on building expertise and experience;
- Document good practices of civil society in the global arena, analyse success factors and replicate;
- Educate and build awareness in North and South;
- Invest in building leadership.

Linkages

- Link domains for civil society participation in multiple spheres (from local to global);
- Facilitate alliances: international NGOs should facilitate CSO networking and involvement in international issues but
    - Not alone (create alliances)
    - Not on all issues (create expertise or capitalise on existing expertise)
    - Provide a platform for partners to get linked to expertise;
- Identify vehicles for alliance building & operationalisation of goals;
- Broaden the scope of engagement beyond NGOs (include parliamentarians, movements, private sector);
- Link crosscutting themes (such as HIV/Aids and gender issues) rather than fragmenting interests;
- Professionalise strategies and approaches;
- Include the media: it is a conduit for information, discussion and awareness;
- Advocate for deepening domestic accountability and consciousness through public engagement (strengthening the base at grass-roots level all the way to national policy makers)*;*
- Harness the energy of resistance rather than to be let captured or neutralised by global forces.

Knowledge sharing

- Strengthen North-South engagement through platforms and opportunities for exchange. Bring African voices to the stage – rather than speaking for Africans;
- Share good practices, make a case for one's strengths, and learn from mistakes;
- Strengthen popular voices to bring the realm of action closer to the people we are trying to mobilise;
- Capitalise on charismatic leadership and foster leadership;
- Research the real effects of globalisation on Africa to strengthen African civil society on the global stage;
- Research social movements across the continent: analyse what issues people are coalescing around.
- Harness the role of the imagination and encourage creative thinking about enabling factors for alternative perspectives and development models. What do we need to do differently, how to fire the public imagination that change and development are possible?

Conclusions

'Civil society' has become a container term for such a multitude of actors and concepts that it is rapidly losing its meaning and risks fragmentation in (inter-)national debate. Who is civil society, what does civil society want, how do we mobilise civil society? How can civil society organise itself to provide a strong and valid voice to counter private sector interests and policy makers dominance in the public domain, and international organisations in the global circuit? The challenge ahead is to move beyond the semantic discussion and to find a method or process to achieve appropriate balance between coherence and diversity – gaining critical mass whilst including minority interests.

A flourishing civil society in Africa does however depend to a large degree on middle-class involvement and representation of the poor – the fight for survival after all inhibits the real poor from participating in social movements. Although democracy and economic growth are intertwined and reinforce one another, they are part of different discourses in terms of development. Poverty alleviation is an important factor in terms of democratisation and social mobilisation, but there are instances where growth is possible without democracy (for example in China).

Nonetheless, pro-poor development needs to be given far greater priority in terms of economic development policy. The informal sector is the primary locus of economic activity in Africa, but is entirely discounted in public representation, which therefore irrelevant to the majority of the population. Awareness in terms of rights, policies and opportunities needs to be cultivated: as represented interest is acknowledged predominantly through policy, public engagement in the field of policy is a priority for Africa. Only in this way can Africa's poor begin to improve the terms of control over their lives in a sustainable manner, accessing the tools and opportunities to improve their livelihoods. In terms of implementation, processes of public advocacy need to be rooted in constituencies – a long-term focus and an inclusive process. Real change needs to come from within; external agencies can facilitate discussion or provide the platform to achieve this.

The media plays a critical role in terms of public engagement. Objective media in Africa, however, is few and far between – just as in the rest of the world, dominant commercial interests make critical commentary less attractive than populist entertainment. Therefore it is important to work on maintaining diversity and objectivity in media, with sufficient awareness of civil society issues. Independent media involvement is inherent to successful social movements. Donors and international NGOs can facilitate developing media strategies, including capacity development and awareness of issues pertaining to public interests.

Ultimately, capacity development for CSOs and NGOs is essential to both organisational development and participation in national and international discourse. Civil society actors are often called upon to represent constituencies in different arenas, beyond the one they are familiar with. This requires a set of specific skills and access to a vast knowledge base. However, expertise with respect to content (e.g. on human rights, Aids…) does not necessarily bring along skills in lobbying or drafting policies. Development agencies can facilitate access to training or the expertise to address this gap.

The alternative solution to this challenge is through partnerships and alliances. Alliances help build critical mass, amplifying the African voice to oppose external inhibiting forces and capitalise on the great talent, creativity and potential contained in the continent. By increasing the database of human capital which individual organisations can access, we can innovate, learn from each other, build on experience, capitalise on knowledge, and find creative solutions beyond the enclosures of our horizons.

Finally, the changing political arena is forcing Hivos and its partners to address many challenges in view of thematic direction and activities. Although changing strategies, focusing on populist demands and generating a stream of concrete output to address the call for quick results is an option, this is clearly not the way which Hivos and its partners should choose. Rather, a clear recommendation is that we stick to what we are good at – and capitalise on this in a strategic and sensible manner, with a long-term focus on promoting progressive development in Africa.

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