# ISTR RePORT

# "Questioning Civil Society In Africa"

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Africa is in the midst of many and complex challenges. These challenges emanate from globalization, wars and conflicts, the search for appropriate processes and institutions of governance, increased poverty, devastating impact of HIV/AIDS, declining external aid and investments, and cultural and religious revitalization. The ongoing changes in sub-Saharan Africa have witnessed the emergence and multiplication of civil society institutions, and in particular the non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The processes, institutions and main actors that are involved in dealing with the dynamics and challenges of change are under close scrutiny to see how they impact on the African development. There is thus a prevailing mood of disillusionment, scepticism, and questioning of the role and functioning of the state and the civil society, the operation of the market, donor policies and conditionality, and the participation of grassroots communities in affecting and influencing development agenda.

The Second African ISTR Regional Conference held on November 6 to 8, 2001, in Nairobi on the theme of "Questioning Civil Society in Africa" is one of the many forums organized to analyse and reflect on the challenges and opportunities that face the continent. The conference was therefore contributing to ongoing debates, and in particular those initiated by the ISTR African Research Network in the first conference held in Johannesburg, South Africa in December 1997.

The Institute for Policy Analysis and Research (IPAR) in Kenya hosted the Second Regional Conference that was attended by 35 participants from Africa, North America, Europe and Asia. Sixteen presentations were made on the various aspects of the theme. True to the theme of the conference, the meeting provided an opportunity for many questions to be raised, and heated exchanges to occur on the nature, role, relevance, operation, and future of civil society in African development. Some of the debates focused on theoretical issues while others were based on ongoing research in a number of African countries. The conference however maintained a balance, that can be attributed to the fact that most of the theoretical work was anchored on concrete analysis and research that is emerging in this field.

## Debating the Concept of Civil Society

Adam Habib, Njuguna Ngethe, and Emmanuel Akwetey kicked off the debate by raising critical issues that eventually dominated the deliberations of the three-day conference. They urged the participants to go beyond fashionable terms and concepts articulated by donors and academics and seriously question the meaning and relevance of the concept of civil society in a predominantly rural Africa, echoing similar criticism ably raised by Mahmood Mamdani's book *Citizens and the Subjects*. Given the history and development of the concept of civil society in Europe and how it was introduced and practiced in colonial Africa the applicability of the concept to the African reality has been a subject of controversial debate, and the deliberations of this conference were no exception.

The paper by Elke Zuern, *Bringing the Civil Society and Social Capital Debate to the African Continent-Exploring the Interaction between Civil Society Organizations and Regime Change*, traced the development of concept in the North and indicated how it can be redefined and applied in the analysis of African reality and processes of democratic transformation of regimes in Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Zambia. The conference - through contributions of plenary speakers, participants and papers presented - in effect reopened and continued with the ongoing debate on the definition, history, relevance, appropriateness and application of the con-

cept of civil society to the contemporary dynamics of African change. Although the deliberations were cordial and collegial, sharp differences, doubts and attempts to redefine the concept to suit the African reality were quite evident.

Questions were raised whether a more inclusive concept could be utilized that go beyond "voluntary, self constituted organizations outside of the economy which are autonomous from the state and bound by a shared set of rules" (Zuern) to embrace the "associational life" and community based groups that are so pervasive in the African context. This would encompass various aspects of associational life that characterized both colonial and post-colonial Africa, and not limited to urban enclaves that were under strong colonial influences. A broadened concept that recognizes the prevailing reality would acknowledge continuities and discontinuities of traditional life, the creativity and institutional innovations that the people have shown in adapting to the changing circumstances of colonialism, nationalism, and globalisation.

The paper by Mammo Muchie and Susan Baca, *The Distinction between Self-organising Local Civil Society and The Global Constitution of Civil Society in Africa*, underlined how critical culture is in understanding the nature, orientation and rootedness of the concept of civil society in Africa. The writers introduced the concept of "cultural currency" as a vehicle that can be utilized by the people to shape the discourse on civil society by entrenching it into the dynamics of ongoing social and cultural change. This, in their view, would counter the external problems of donor driven definition of relationship between the African state and the civil society. The concept of "cultural currency" would thus restore the right of ownership of the discourse on the state and civil society to the African people, and counter the tendency of "manufacturing" of a new political economy that is characterized by tension between the state and the civil society. While the paper by Zuern adopted and utilized the concept of civil society in study of regime change, the paper by Muchie and Baca advocated questioning the global context of constituting civil society and state relationships. On the whole they questioned the nature of the global discourses and advocated a search of alternative forms of discourses that are rooted in African cultural freedom. The question was also raised as to whether civil society in Africa can be an agency for "freeing African society from being constituted by the global discourse of social and political actors" and thereby help in building a strong state, a strong market, and a strong civil society to form pillars for social and economic transformation of Africa. The discussions on the two papers tended to indicate the unfinished task of defining the concept of civil society and allocating it an appropriate

role in the rapidly changing African society. This questioning was continued in the other papers and conference of exchanges that were carried out during the plenary sessions.

The key speakers requested the researchers to overcome methodological weakness inherent in the study of the civil society organizations and come up with a holistic mapping of the sector to provide a well documented, informed analytical body of knowledge on the reality of African civil society. They went on to emphasize the need for understanding the historical and the contemporary changes the concept of civil society has been undergoing in Africa, and how the "African" civil society is related and impacted by the phenomenon of globalisation. While The appropriateness and relevance of the concept of civil society in Africa was questioned, suggestions were made for a focused critical analysis of the associational life that dominated the colonial situation, and forms part and parcel of the vibrant post-colonial Africa.

Presentations by Andrew Kiondo, Naino Abdoul Kader, Roch Mongbo, and Mwaka Bwenge Arsene focusing on Tanzania, Niger, Benin, and DR Congo demonstrated the value of analysing the evolution of each country to show how the concept has evolved and been redefined in different historical circumstances. These presentations indicated that the concept might mean different things at different times in light of historical challenges and space available. This was particularly noted in Benin and Niger where the transition from single party and military rule through the National Conferences impacted on the emergence and nature of the civil society in the two countries. These historical experiences and struggles have shaped the composition, outlook and development of civil society, and the way it has faced the challenges of democratisation and relationship with the state. Such historical and contextual experiences should inform the discourse and indeed the definition of the civil society in Africa.

It was also noted that some segments of the sector were undergoing transformation as a consequence of their relationship and impact of the dominant world financial institutions, the state, and the market forces. Some of the changes occurring in the civil society organizations have been documented in recent research and writings (see Nsibambi: 1998, Hulme and Edwards: 1997, Mutunga: 1999, Fowler: 2000, etc).

There were other issues that emerged in the course of discussions that followed the papers presented. These issues are analyzed below under participation in public policymaking and implementation, civil society contribution to the transformation of structures and process of governance, leadership, the impact of donor aid on civil

society, and possible contribution of civil society organizations in conflict transformation. Research questions crosscut all these areas.

## Participation in Public Policymaking

The relationship and interface between the civil society and the state on one hand and the market on the other, was intensely discussed. The discussions focused issues of the countervailing role of the civil society in the process of political, social and economic reforms, participation in policymaking, land reforms, local government reforms, decentralization, and economic empowerment. Five conference papers in particular highlighted various dimensions of interface, interaction, partnership, and tensions between the civil society and the state institutions.

Muchie and Baca paper argued that the ongoing global discourse on "failure" and "success" of the state in Africa has often impacted strongly on the way donors and international organizations have perceived shaped and promoted partnership between the state and civil society. But the great failure in this process is the inability "to supplant global colonial relic and imposition by developing an African 'cultural currency' for converting the post-colonial state into a free African state." As Archie Mafeje (2002) has argued in a recent paper the issue of transformation of the African state into a democratic state that ensures the sovereignty of the people as a fundamental right, embraces social justice and guarantees the livelihood of the citizens is far from being realized despite the recent efforts on democratisation.

The paper by Emmanuel Akwetey rather than questioning this postulate has pointed out how the civil society has utilized the autonomous space available to a segment of civil society to interact/interface with the state in the political and socio-economic reforms in Ghana. While recognizing the limitations of the post-colonial authoritarian state in the development of civil society institutions, he acknowledges the role that the current regime is playing in facilitating the interface between the state and the civil society and the private sector. Nevertheless the paper did identify the weakness of civil society in terms of institutional and organizational capacity to benefit fully from the emerging space, an issue that was re-echoed in other papers dealing with participation. The fundamental concern here is whether this capacity constitutes the agency and mechanism for "freeing African society from being constituted by the global discourse of social and political actors" and especially when it is recognized that the interaction is going on under the surveillance and control of the state and the World Bank and IMF. Hence the need to question whether the recognition which

the civil society has been accorded in Ghana by the state, UN organizations, and the World Bank in discussions related to political and economic reforms does not constitute legitimization of the global arrangements for policy-making and implementation. The marginal role that the civil society tends to play in policy formulation is well illustrated in the preparation of the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy, a position not unique to the country, as it is evident in other countries in the process of preparation of the World Bank supported Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers.

Susan Booysen's paper on *Civil Society and Participation in Public Policy-making in South Africa* provided a detailed and excellent discussion on participation of civil society in post-apartheid South Africa drawing on research findings from three case studies: local government restructuring, land reform policy, and black economic empowering policy. The three case studies have indicated "the extent to which different components of civil society are afforded some, but hardly ever continuous and consistent, opportunities for participation." The situation shows diversity of interactions in spaces that are varied by the phase of policy process, dominant interests, and nature of policy. While the paper provided very important insights into how participation works in various policy terrains and circumstances, the predicament of the civil society is not unlike that experienced in Ghana where public officials (donor or state) encourages participation, but in practice the civil society organizations are marginalized by the nature, operation, and dominant culture of state and donor institutions. The lack of institutional and organizational capacity is also evident in South Africa. Booysen's paper goes beyond recognition of this weakness in civil society to recommend strategies of enhancing capacities of civil society at various levels to participate and contribute to public policy-making.

Although no consensus was arrived at, there was recognition of the complexity, contradictory, and problematic nature of promoting effective participation in public policy-making, and the need for research to deal with it in concrete circumstances.

## Governance and Regime Transitions

In many African countries, civil society actors and institutions are viewed as critical players in the process of democratisation. The contribution of the civil society in democratic change is increasingly receiving research attention. The optimism that characterized the earlier period on contribution of civil society to this process is being replaced by more informed and realistic assessment.

The discussions at the conference showed this sober

attitude. Discussions evolving around the papers by Mwaka Bwenge Arsene, Roch L. Mongbo, Naino Abdoul Kader, and Elke Zuern helped to highlight the weaknesses and the limitations of the civil society in advancing the democratization agenda as well as the specificity of the conditions prevailing in Benin, DR Congo, Kenya, Niger, Nigeria, South Africa, and Zambia. However, civil society was acknowledged to have contributed significantly to public debates on democratisation and monitoring of elections in the above countries as well as in Ghana, Lesotho, Malawi, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe. They gave the citizens a voice that was not represented in the political and economic spheres of the society. The potential and the possibilities of utilization of civil society in defining what is fair and free elections, monitoring of elections and in general implementation of democratic reforms is providing citizens and communities with a window of opportunity to participate in the process of their governance. It was noted that the civil society is providing a critical organizational channel for inclusion, participation, and contribution in dealing with the challenges of political, social, and economic reforms. The experiences indicated in the papers presented and the discussions that emerged thereof showed the usefulness of the concept of civil society in attempt to understand, analyse, and come to terms with contemporary concerns of empowerment, consultation, contestation, and participation in process and structures of governance. The state, private sector, citizens and donors, it was indicated, are keen to see the concerns of poverty alleviation, corruption, governance, decentralization, and participation addressed by the civil society. Thus a critical mechanism for mobilising the citizens into the politics of reform and reshaping the power relationships in the society is to strengthen the space, autonomy, and institutional capacities of the civil society.

## Leadership

The paper by Alan Fowler, Njuguna Ng'ethe, and Jeremiah Owiti, *Determinants of Civil Leadership in Africa: Findings from an Exploratory Study of NGOs in Kenya* reported recent research on determinants of the development of NGO leadership in Kenya. As the paper noted this is an area that is neglected not only in Africa, but also in studies of civic leadership in the industrialized countries. While questions can be raised as to why there is serious neglect in studying the leadership of the sector, attention should rather be focused how this gap can be met through systematic and detailed research, and how studies of this kind can be utilized to enrich the discourses on the role, impact, and future of civil society in Africa.

Findings of this study seem to indicate that much can be learned about the functioning of NGOs, and in general the institutions of civil society, by analyzing the characteristics of leadership. Research of this kind can overcome the current poverty of knowledge on how NGO leadership shapes the interaction of the civil society and the state on one hand, and the communities served on the other. It is obvious studies of this kind can enrich theoretical debates by bringing practical insights of the leadership into the arena of civil society discourses. While this is a clear area for future research, the focus should however be widened to give the NGO leadership opportunities to reflect and give their practitioners' insights into the operation and dynamics of NGOs in the society. This would enormously contribute to theory and practice. There is, however, the question of ownership and funding of this kind of research. It is doubtful whether this is the kind of activities that donors of NGOs would like to support given their preoccupation with project activities rather than reflection. There are exceptions as the recent contribution to policy debates by international NGOs such as Oxfam and Action Aid have shown.

## Donor Aid and Impact on Civil Society

The relationship between donor aid and civil society in Africa figured prominently in the discussions and nearly all the papers presented at the conference. The concern focused on how donors dominated the discourse on the agenda, operation, programmes, capacities, relationships, and leadership of the civil society and its function. Questioning of this aspect revolved around the issue of how an "authentic" Africa civil society can emerge, operate, and retain its autonomy in the African terrain. Criticism has been voiced on the lack of independence and autonomy of the African civil society because of the heavy dependence on donor funding and agenda. Indeed donors have tended to fashion the dominant orientation, language, and activities of the civil society. This phenomenon has been critiqued by Hulme and Edwards in their book entitled *NGOs, States and Donors: Too Close for Comfort*: 1997. While this remains a thorny issue and was referred to in all conference papers, the debate did not advance far enough to take up the challenge that has been posed by Alan Fowler for NGOs to explore social entrepreneurship and civic innovation as a means of going beyond development aid (Fowler 2000b).

The papers presented evidence to show how donor aid shaped participation of civil society institutions in policy dialogue and policy implementation in Ghana, Namibia, Malawi, Zambia, and South Africa. Donor influences were not limited to the broad issues of decentralization, participa-

tion, poverty alleviation, and democratisation but also in the way NGOs are developed, professionalized, managed, and systems of accountability, evaluation, and reporting are implemented. In short, the donor relationship with civil society was critically viewed as a process of incorporation of local organisations into the global agenda and the priorities of Northern NGOs, which are themselves being incorporated into the official development model and priorities.

Research on how aid shapes the operation and characteristics of civil society in Africa is necessary so that the consequences of this process can be questioned and hopefully answers can emerge.

## Civil Society and Peacemaking

Many African countries are caught up in conflicts and wars that are absorbing enormous energies to wage and protracted efforts to resolve them. Angola, DRC, Somalia, and Sudan are some of the countries that are involved in intractable conflicts and wars. Efforts to end these wars have occupied the efforts of international actors and organizations as well as countries like USA, Britain, UK, Sweden, and Norway. Civil society organizations are also spending significant resources to encourage peaceful resolutions of conflicts and are encouraging actors to engage in the process of peace making and peace building. The role of civil society in these conflicts is hardly analysed or understood. A painful question on how to bring "civility" into the violent Africa was raised. However the papers that were presented at the conference and the discussions thereof did not do this. The conference deliberations only scratched the surface of an area that is not adequately studied from the perspective of the contribution of the civil society. The presentation by Arsene expressed the expectations of civil society organisations in dealing with conflicts in the Eastern part of DR Congo, but did not analyse how this expectation is being met.

In the past attention has mainly focused on the role of NGOs in delivery of relief and emergency services in the crisis situations. The equally important function of conflict transformation, peace making, and peace building that is being undertaken by civil society organizations is not however receiving the attention it deserves in terms of research and discourse in the African forums. This is in despite of the proliferation of NGOs working in the field of conflict resolution and peace building.

## Conclusion

The papers presented at the conference tried to grapple with the persistent theoretical and practical issues in the development of NGOs, a discourse that brought out contradictions and multifaceted nature of civil society in Africa. The potential and possibilities were also discussed. Most of the papers dealt with theoretical concerns but illuminated the discussions with research findings resulting from analysis of actual involvement of civil society in dealing with practical issues of development. Experience gained from countries such as Benin, Cameroon, DR Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Niger, Nigeria, South Africa, and Zambia was also shared.

Civil society as it emerged in the conference was instrumental in raising urgent issues of participation in public policymaking, promoting good governance, and the making of NGOs leadership. The interaction and contestation between state and civil society as well as the role of donors in shaping the agenda and operation of civil society in Africa were also interrogated as a means of coming to grips with the role, impact, relevance, and the future of civil society organizations as proactive actors in the African development. Underlying all these debates was the question as to what was authentically African civil society, articulating, and carry operationally an African agenda, and not playing to the tunes of the neo-liberal ideology and donor needs. Questioning the civil society in Africa is definitely an ongoing project, and we expect the debates to continue and especially as new efforts are made to revitalize the African economies through the proposed New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

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