ISTR Africa Network Conference
20 June 2017

Civil Society and Philanthropy in Africa:
Context, Contradictions and Possibilities

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Parts of this Keynote address is drawn from:

“State-Civil Society Relations in Post-Apartheid South Africa”, in Social Research, 2005, vol. 72, no.3

Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends, Colleagues

It is real pleasure to be here at this ISTR conference. I am also very touched that you asked me to do the keynote address to this 4th ISTR Africa Network conference. I have a long association with the ISTR and have sat on its board for two terms around the turn of the millennium. I played a big role in organising the conference in Cape Town, now more than a decade and a half ago, and have been part of so many if its international and continental conferences. So it is a real pleasure to be back among friends and comrades. I, of course, have had less to do with the ISTR in recent years, having become a bureaucrat at a university and so I now spend my days trying to create an enabling intellectual environment for many of you to operate in, in-between having to manage student protests and strikes. And so after spending many years of researching and writing about protests and civic action, I am now having the responsibility to manage such protests and action. It really does give one an existential identity crisis.

Let me return to the thematic concerns at hand. If we want to think through the role of civil society and philanthropy in Africa, we need to come to terms with the context of today. Africa today is in a developmental crisis. It was not always the case in recent memory. For two decades, the last of the previous century and the first of the current one, there was optimism about Africa. Between 1991 and 2007, Africa’s conflicts reduced by two thirds, and even as late as 2010, six of the ten fastest growing economies in the world were on this continent. A new African middle class was fast developing and new relations were being developed with China, India, Brazil and other emerging Southern powers. This plurality of inter-state relations enhanced Africa’s global negotiating position enabling it to affect better development outcomes from its economic growth.

But then the Great Recession descended. Initially it seemed that Africa would avoid the worse of its ravages but this was not to be. As China tried to organise a domestic restructuring of its growth model, and as other big powers focused on their internal challenges, resources for Africa began to dry up and terms of trade turned against it. The continent also scored a number of own goals. Its avaricious political elites soon returned to their old habits and their bickering once again resurfaced. The Pax-Africana under-written by South Africa and Nigeria in the first decade of the millennium unravelled as both Olusegun Obasanjo and Thabo Mbeki departed from office and were replaced by not only weak, but incompetent and corrupt leaders. African conflict is on the rise again, new civil wars have emerged, and the ‘war on terror’ and the cajoling of African governments to participate in it, has dramatically escalated the terrorist threat in societies like Nigeria, Mali, Kenya, Somalia, Egypt and many others.

And so we return to the familiar economic challenges of Africa. Economic Growth is weak and getting weaker. Much of the growth is exclusionary, and Africa’s young remain excluded from the benefits of its growth. There is a real fear that Africa’s demographic bulge will translate into a continental burden unless its youth are provided with an inclusive future. Too much of the continent’s growth is captured in rent seeking by both Africa’s political elite or by those close to them. Remittances to the continent have dramatically increased in the first two decades of the
21st century, but even today remain a paltry sum compared to those of other developing regions. At last count, it was estimated that Africa received only 4% of total remittances, the smallest share in developing countries and only 33% of that received by India.

Illicit financial outflows continue to plague the continent and are estimated to be in the region of $50 billion per annum. It is estimated that between 1970 and 2008, $854 billion left the continent. These, it is suggested, are conservative estimates since it does not include the mispricing of services and the effects of smuggling. If these were to be included, it is estimated that some $1.8 trillion has left the continent, far in excess of the official development assistance received by the continent in this period. While much attention is placed on corruption of government officials, it is worth noticing that this constitutes only 3% of illicit flows. Some 30% to 35% constitute drug trafficking, racketeering and the like, and 60% to 65% comprise commercial tax evasion, largely through mispricing. The impact of these illicit financial flows is devastating for it undermines investment, increases inflation, reduces taxes, all of which most adversely impacts on the poor and marginalised on the continent. The net effect of these illicit financial flows is to consolidate poverty and inequality and entrench the exclusionary growth path of the continent.

Reflections of civil society and philanthropy in Africa, and a research agenda in this regard, needs to grapple with this specific development challenge and dilemma. It needs to focus on how civic institutions can enhance the accountability of elites, both political and economic, to the citizenry, so that not only are illicit financial flows contained, but resources are disbursed in a manner that enables inclusive economic development. In this regard, there is much to learn from the global academic literature on civil society, but there is also much to enrich it with from the civic experiences within Africa.

State, Civil Society and the Consolidation of Democracy

About a decade ago, while I was director of the Centre for Civil Society at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, I published a conceptual article for the journal Social Research in which I explored the evolution of South African civil society. Much of the reflections of that article, I believe, speak to the realities of African civil society. Using the empirical study on the shape and size of South African Civil society, authored by Bev Russel and Mark Swilling, as part of the global Johns Hopkins project on The Third Sector, I concluded that there were three different blocs within civil society -NGOs, survivalist agencies, and social movements- that emerged in response to structural factors such as the democratization process and globalization’s neo-liberal manifestation. All of these distinct blocs also had very distinct relationships with the state.
On the one end of the spectrum is a powerful set of formal service related NGOs, which as a result of the more enabling environment created by the democratic regime, entered partnerships with and/or sub-contracted to the state. These organisations had more engaged and collegiate relations with the state. On the other end of the spectrum, there is a group of community-based structures, which actively challenge and oppose what they perceive as the implementation of neo-liberalism. These organisations, whose activists covet the status of social movements, also have an explicit relationship with the state. This relationship, depending on the organisation and the issue area, hovers somewhere between adversarialism and engagement, and sometimes involves both (Bond 2001; Desai 2002). But even when engaging the state, this is of a qualitatively different kind to that of the formal NGOs. The latter has a relationship with the state that is largely defined by its sub-contractual role, whereas the former is on a relatively more even footing, engaging the state in an attempt to persuade it through lobbying, court action, and even outright resistance.

In between these two sets of organisations is a third, more survivalist and informal, mainly in marginalized communities, who have no relationship with the state. These organisations are preoccupied with assisting people to survive the ravages of neo-liberalism. They receive neither resources, nor do they covet recognition, from the state. They are preoccupied with the task of simply surviving the effects of the state’s policies. Indeed, it is doubtful whether the majority of these associations even recognize that the plight of the communities they located in is largely a result of the policy choices of political elites.

Of course, these distinctions within civil society are not as stark and rigid as they are depicted here. In the real world, there are many organisations that straddle the divide and blur the boundaries between one and more of these blocs. But what was important in this study were two noteworthy features. The first, is the identification by the South African case study of the Johns Hopkins project of the third bloc of organisations; the informal survivalist agencies. The global literature in civil society ignored these organisations, yet they constitute the largest bloc of organisations in South Africa and on the African continent. A research agenda on civil society in Africa has to excavate these organisations; identify them, analyse their purpose and functions, and most importantly understand the particular contours of their developmental contribution. In the process you not only speak to the contextual realities of African civil society, but you also enrich the global academic literature on the subject and highlight what may indeed be hidden elements of civic interaction in the developed world, within its marginalized, disadvantaged and refugee communities.

The second worthy fact to note in the study is the plural character of civil society in all our communities and the inclusive development effects thereof. Most activists, politicians, and government officials recognize this plurality of civil society, at least at the rhetorical level. But in most cases its meaning has not been internalized for had it been, we would not have the constant demands from these actors for a single homogenous set of relations between civil society and the state. For state officials, and the leadership and politicians of ruling parties, the most appropriate
relationship between civil society and the state is one founded on collegiality. In this view, service related NGOs who contract with the state and community organizations which partner with the ruling party, are behaving in a manner conducive to democracy. Indeed, the state has gone out of its way to reward such behaviour, mainly through providing access to corporatist institutions and other public participation channels established by the state.

But the state is not alone in wanting to advance a homogenous state-civil society agenda. Radical activists within civil society also advance a homogenous vision, except in their case; the relationship should not be collegial, but rather adversarial (McKinley 2001, Desai 2002, Bond 2004). In any case, it needs to be noted that a single homogenous set of state-civil society relations is not conducive to the enhancement of accountability and thereby the consolidation of democracy. Whether it is the state’s view of collegiate state-civil society relationships, or the adversarial alternative of the radical activists, neither on its own would facilitate the accountability dynamic and the deepening of democracy. Indeed, it is only the plurality of civil society, and its consequent diversity of state-civil society engagements, that is beneficial for accountability, democracy and governance. The informal-based CBOs enhance democracy at the simplest level because they enable ordinary people to survive. The establishment of more formal relations between them and the state would subvert their character and thus compromise this role. The more formal NGOs collaborative relationship with the state is largely a product of the services they render for the state. And, in societies confronted with massive backlogs and limited institutional capacity, this role can only be to the benefit of democracy since it facilitates and enables service delivery to ordinary citizens and residents. Finally, the adversarial and conflictual role of new social movements and more formal CBOs enhances democracy for it creates a fluidity of support at the base of society. This can only be beneficial for it permits the reconfiguration of power within society, forcing the state not to take its citizens for granted, and effecting a systemic shift to the left which may create the possibility for a more people-centred, Keynesian-oriented developmental agenda.

These diverse roles and functions undertaken by different elements of civil society, then, collectively create the adversarial and collaborative relationships, the push and pull effects, which sometimes assist and other times compel the state to meet its obligations and responsibilities to its citizenry. The plurality of civil society and the diverse sets of relations that it engendered create the accountability dynamic which is the fundamental foundation for inclusive development in our societies. Extrapolating these experiences, explaining them and their development outcomes should then be the everyday agenda of researchers of civil society on the African continent.
Reflections on the Philanthropy Literature

A similar critical engagement is required with the global literature on philanthropy. I would like to highlight three distinctive characteristics and priorities which we should focus on. First is to challenge a dominant narrative which views philanthropy as an act undertaken largely by richer, more resourced sections of the community and is directed toward more under-resourced sectors. Yet anyone familiar with countries of the South would recognize that there are numerous collective instruments within marginalized communities that are either part of traditional or indigenous life (Moyo, 2004) or have been developed to assist in the harsh economic circumstances that people find themselves in. Much of this is captured in the sociological and anthropological literature on the Southern African region. A great deal, for instance, has been written on the place of stokvels, which are a well-known self-help phenomenon in South Africa that has assisted and allowed poor people to survive their economic circumstances. However, as Wilkinson-Maposa et al (2005: xiv) note, “we haven’t been able to tap into this tradition and don’t usually think of its various expressions as development tools.”

Stokvels are community-based financial arrangements, which have been used for different purposes. Some are directed to serving individual interests, like buying furniture that would have been otherwise unaffordable or paying for lobola, while others have broader developmental purposes oriented to the community. Burial societies are another well-documented expression of the intersection of economic necessity and associational giving traditions. Funeral costs are generally high in black communities because of the belief that burial has to take place in the land of the ancestors, which is the area where the person was born (Dandala and Moraka, 1990). Burial societies have also assumed greater importance in the lives of poor people in the context of increasing fluidity and flexibility of borders due to high unemployment and conflict in the region as a whole. For example, there are a number of burial societies formed by Zimbabwean refugees living in South Africa who pool money and other resources in order to transport the dead back to their home country (Moyo, 2004).

All of this suggests that giving in Africa must not be conceived in a unilinear direction from rich to poor communities. Indeed, giving must be assumed to occur in both the worlds of rich and poor. The crucial point to note, however, is that the form and character of giving in poor communities differs significantly from that generated in more well-off sections of society.

Two significant differences exist. First, given their lack of money, poor people tend to give more time. This is borne out by a number of studies on the continent. Second patterns of giving in poor communities in both urban and rural areas are fundamentally different from that practiced in better-resourced sections of society. Whereas patterns of giving are more individually oriented in the latter, they take on a more collective character in marginalized communities. In the poorer communities, they are also more survivalist in orientation — stokvels, burial societies, garden clubs, entrepreneurial stokvels, and collective buying clubs — all of which represent the pooling
of inadequate resources by poor and marginalized communities to enable them to survive the ravages of their circumstances.

A greater number of anthropological studies on the character and form of giving in poor communities, and how these could harnessed for inclusive development outcomes would be beneficial not only for the continent but also for the global academy.

The second characteristic worth reflecting on is the assumption in much of the philanthropy literature which tends to portray giving as a voluntary act inspired by generosity, religious conviction, or other more altruistic and selfish motives. Implicit in this depiction is the assumption that the nuclear family is the basic unit of all societies. Yet we do know that in large parts of the world, and in Africa in particular, nuclear families are simply a subcomponent of more extended families. Patterns of obligation therefore occur in ways fundamentally different to those of the industrialised western world. Family and informal networks are highly personalized and giving is influenced by specific identity categories such as relatives, friend, and neighbours. While there may well be altruistic or selfish motives, such giving is not motivated by profit, is not enforced by law, and is not entirely voluntary. And more often than not this informal system of sharing and caring is taken for granted (Report of the Wolfden Committee, 1997).

The report of the Wolfden Committee (1997: 22-23) distinguishes among three categories of informal sharing and caring: provision of care for the young and the weak, especially the sick, the handicapped and the elderly; the transfer of material resources, particularly between members of a family, from those with a surplus to those with a deficit; and the provision of advice and psychological support as from the experienced to the inexperienced. All three categories are neither regarded as philanthropy nor charity by the giver when the recipient is a member of their extended family, group or community. Rather, these actions are conceptualized in terms of mutual obligation, part of the responsibility of belonging to an extended family, group, or community. An underlying reciprocity is understood, even as givers do not literally expect gifts to be directly returned.

Hyden (1983:9) captures this experience by coining the term the ‘economy of affection’ which refers to “a network of support, communications and interactions amongst structurally defined groups connected by blood, kin, community and other affinities for example, religion.” These, he informs us, tends to be ad-hoc and informal, rather than regular and formalised. The economy of affection thus points us to an enormous amount of what would be considered giving in a western context, but would in our circumstances simply be seen as patterns of obligation and duty similar to those undertaken within the nuclear family. Again it is urgent that more anthropological and sociological research is undertaken to surface these patterns of relations and their implications for the development enterprise in our societies.
Finally is the issue of the political context within which giving occurs. Of course, it has long been recognized in the philanthropy literature that both the proportions of giving and their character is crucially influenced by the political systems of various societies. The philanthropy literature on tax regimes, for instance, maintains that tax concessions afforded by states has the effect of facilitating a philanthropic culture in society. Others like Donati (2003: 251) suggest that some tax regimes facilitate the social altruism of a society towards the needy by enabling government to tax the wealthy and thereby redistribute resources to those who are poor and weak.

This debate recently surfaced between Bill Gates and Thomas Piketty. In the wake of the publication of Piketty's book, Capitalism in the 21st Century, the billionaire and the celebrated author had a debate on the benefits of philanthropy for development. Piketty was sceptical of the benefits of philanthropy and advocated for higher levels of taxation particularly on the rich, to enable greater level of redistribution of resources from the state. Gates was of course critical of this, suggesting that if the state simply left wealthy entrepreneurs alone, they would donate their abundant resources to good causes and thereby promote inclusive development. Piketty, like Salamon and other researchers on philanthropy, noted, however, that this would leave the development project hostage to the whims and preferences of the rich and would not be directed to fundamentally resolving social problems. But Piketty's position itself is problematic in the African context where political elites are so avaricious and are likely to direct any increased tax revenues for their own enrichment.

Giving can, of course, be directed to challenging the structural causes of serious social problems. The literature often refers to these kinds of activities as 'social justice philanthropy' (Shaw, 2002). Social justice philanthropy involves radical challenges to existing wealth and power structures, particularly by advocating the interests of disadvantaged, marginalized or under-represented groups in society. It is founded on the implicit understanding that social and/or developmental services are the job of the government and should not be left to the mercy of private individuals or institutions. It emphasises a bottom up approach with the goal of encouraging democracy by involving those most affected by social problems in determining how to address the inequities they labour under.

If we are to be serious about addressing Africa's development agenda, then we need to orientate African philanthropy to such a social justice orientation. It would require transcending the polarized positions reflected in the Piketty-Gates debate and interrogating how African philanthropy could be integrated into a national and political system that is oriented to inclusion. This would require the state being recognized as the primary actor in poverty alleviation and development. But it also requires a socially responsible state and political regime which prioritizes the interests of the nations most dispossessed and marginalised. This then again returns us to the primary role of civil society being one of creating a culture of political accountability in which such a state is brought into being.
Again, this should be an important focus of researchers on civil society and philanthropy. Such a contextually relevant agenda would not only be of benefit to the global academy, but also to our respective societies. Let me use one final example to make the case. In much of the philanthropic work of the last two decades researchers and practitioners in South Africa were so focused on how to create an American form of philanthropy that they effectively missed the greatest opportunity to enable that same outcome; namely Black Economic Empowerment. This, whatever its failures, has been the most ambitious attempt by the post-apartheid state to shift resources in the corporate sector to enhance development outcomes. Yet most civil society actors, including universities, were oblivious of the potential and instead pursued more traditional approaches to encourage philanthropy. Had they moved early and captured even 20% of the hundreds of millions that was spent on BEE, many would have had endowments that would have allowed them to declare needs blind admission process or free education. Think of the inclusive development outcomes that this could have had. The lesson here is that instead of imitating outside experiences on philanthropy and civil society, excavate our own experiences, learn from them, develop contextually relevant solutions to their challenges, and then enrich the global corpus of knowledge in this regard. If we were to do this, not only would we produce world class research because of the unique analysis that we would offer, but we would also create the conditions for us to change our world. And is this after all, not why we were attracted to this work in the first place.