

ISTRAN Conference: My Personal Reflections Jonathan Makuwira, Professor of Development Studies, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa

I have always been fascinated with anything “civil society” not just because my doctoral study was to do with NGOs but also because the discourse around the concept of ‘civil society’ itself is, indeed, loaded with lots of contradictions. When I first read the 4th ISTR Africa Regional Network conference flyer, and to learn about the conference keynote speaker, I felt encouraged to attend the conference. Prior to attending the conference, I had already engaged with West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) website which, I must admit, impressed me not only because of their active facilitation for the WACSI-ISTRAN conference but also because of the manner in which the Institute articulates some of the issues around the role of civil society in development in general. Coming to Accra, Ghana for the third time was a huge motivation. When I first came to Ghana in 2011, the driver who picked me from the airport said “welcome to a free country.” Therefore, I came; very eager to listen to how issues of civil society and philanthropy were to be discussed. Having worked for a National NGO Coordinating body in Malawi was, in itself, a motivation as I prepared myself for the conference. It gave me an opportunity to compare and contrast what is happening in West Africa to some parts of Southern Africa region.

Looking at the program, I could sense that it was going to be a unique space for what I want to call a ‘special conversation’ because of the diversity of topics, presenters and, indeed, the obvious linkage between civic debate and the new push for African philanthropy. Very often the success of a conference is dependent on the tone set by the keynote speech. Professor Adam Habib’s presentation just did that. Personally the theme on “Civil Society and Philanthropy in Africa: Context, Contradiction and Possibilities,” would be a remiss if it did not make a strong statement as one by Prof Habib: Reflections of civil society 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 elicited 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 (Habib, 2017, p. 2).

As is usually the case with many conferences, ‘concurrent sessions’ are always a headache. One has to decide to stick with one theme or move around like a molecule (if I can borrow from my little Physics), in an attempt to capture as much interesting stuff as possible. When such a thing happens, there is often one conclusion; the topics are interesting and catchy. This was the case with me. I found many of the topics in the various themes very exciting and enriching. What was even more comforting was the relevance of some of the papers which I found to be responsive to the many issues in contemporary Africa. Like Adam Habib’s quote above, there is just too much academic literature (Theory) out there yet there is very little reflection on the ‘stories from the field’ (Practice). For me, as an academic and a development practitioner (Pracademic), there were two major highlights from this conference – the discussion on the Community of Practice, which allowed participants to reflect on the theory; and the PhD workshop. The time allocated to these themes provided a good platform for a deeper conversation to unmask the tension between theory and practice. Likewise, the study on civil society needs a strong impetus. This is why I commend ISTRAN and the entire conference organisers to have decided to have special session for postgraduate students. This is a ‘pool’ from where we can develop and nurture future theorists – people

who can advance and tease the tensions, contradictions and possibilities through research. As someone heading a Department of Development Studies, it is very difficult to find people who can either supervise any topics gravitating around civil society discourse or examine a thesis in this area of scholarship.

Lastly, I reflect on a few conversations I really wanted to accomplish – that of establishing networks. Often, this goes beyond just an exchange of business cards. This conference was perhaps one where I had meaningful networking not just because I was able to meet the Dean of the Business School but also the Pro-Vice Chancellor, Research, Innovation and Development at University of Ghana – incredible for a short notice. All in all, this was perhaps one of my best conference for a while. Keep it up folks and well done ISTR and WACSI. Email: jonathan.makuwira@nmmu.ac.za; jmakuwira@yahoo.com.au