Editor’s Note¹

This is the second edition of the Africa third-sector researchers network newsletter (Summer on the African continent) highlighting critical scholarly and activist work focused on African civil society.

The 2022 Civicus State of Civil Society report highlights current trends of global significance for the civil society terrain. Among these are: ‘democracy under attack’ and ‘pushback in challenging exclusion’ (Civicus, 2022: 4-5).² These themes are highlighted in African scholarly and activist spaces reflected below.

Conferences

The Activisms in Africa International Conference will take place from 25-27 January 2023 in Porto, Portugal underpinned by the philosophy ‘knowledge for social transformation’. Among the panels are land contestation, struggles for rights and resistance through shrinking civic spaces, democracy and social transformation – panels: https://activismsinafrica2023.weebly.com/approved-papers.html

The International Conference on Green Politics and Social Movements ICGPSM will be held on April 15-16, 2023 in Cape Town, South Africa including the theme of ‘ecological citizens and ecologically guided democracies’. Paper submissions: https://conferenceindex.org/event/international-conference-on-green-politics-and-social-movements-icgpsm-2023-april-cape-town-za

Further to this theme, the Political Ecology Network POLLEN Conference will be held in Durban, South Africa on 27-29 June 2023. The conference is pivoted on the contested notions of the Global North and South, comparative political ecology, and the production of political ecological knowledge: https://pollen2022.com/

The African Philosophy World Conference hosted by Makerere University and Gulu University will be held from 18-20 September 2023 in Gulu, Uganda. Among the conference themes are: gender and Ubuntu philosophy; gender and African socialism; gender and African negritude; gender and African socialism and ethnophilosophy and gender: https://philevents.org/event/show/102466

¹ Shauna Mottiar is Associate Professor of Development Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban South Africa where she directs the Centre for Civil Society. She is an ISTR member and currently serves on the ISTR Publications Committee.

Film & Documentary

The Royal Africa Society’s Film Africa showcased the rich tapestry of African narratives, cultures and experiences with a line up of films and documentaries of African and African diaspora cinema in its 10th edition from 28 October to 6 November 2022:

“From daring fiction titles, delightful shorts to documentaries that continue to shake up the format with their inventiveness, if there is a common thread that runs through the programme this year, it is perhaps a sense of return. This plays out in several ways; a return to self, to source or to persons and places that guarantee some safety. The films are in conversation with one another, interrogating structures of power, seeking healing and building communities. They go at the very heart of issues, connecting historical events with contemporary concerns.” Programme: https://www.filmafrica.org/

Selected Book Series and Journal Articles

The ISTR Book Club recently profiled Kees Biekart and Alan Fowler’s edited volume entitled: A Research Agenda for Civil Society highlighting David Sogge on financing; Roseanne Mirabella on uncivil and deviant civil society; Ali Hamoudi on autocratic and theological regimes; and Irene Guijt on virtual civil society. ISTR members can login to watch the book club event here:

The open access e-volume is available

About the book: Mapping a wide range of civil society research perspectives, this pioneering Research Agenda offers a rich and clear insight for academics and practitioners hoping to embark on future civil society research. Kees Biekart and Alan Fowler bring together over 20 expert contributions from researchers across the globe who are actively engaged in testing the old and generating new knowledge about civil society.

Beginning with a concise historical review of civil society research over the last four decades, the book provides a critical insight into the future of research, taking into account the domestic outcomes of major geopolitical changes and the increasing shift towards authoritarian and populist systems of governance. Exploring the norms and values of civil society, as well as key topics such as voluntourism, civil society mapping, democratization, and civic agency, chapters offer a unique overview of civil society research themes and agendas. Its comprehensive analysis of canonical civil society research provides a fertile basis from which novel research can be conducted.
NGO Failure: A Theoretical Synthesis
Nives Dolšak and Aseem Prakash

Abstract
An extensive literature identifies conditions under which markets and states work efficiently and effectively toward their stated missions. When these conditions are violated, these institutions are deemed to show some level of failure. In contrast to the study of market and government failures, scholars have tended to focus on non-governmental organizations’ (NGOs) successes instead of failures. This is probably because they view NGOs as virtuous actors, guided by principled beliefs rather than instrumental concerns, not susceptible to agency conflicts, accountable to the communities they serve, and working cooperatively with each other. A growing literature questions this “virtue narrative.” When virtue conditions are violated, NGOs could exhibit different levels of failure. In synthesizing this literature, we offer an analytic typology of NGO failures: agency failure, NGOization failure, representation failure, and cooperation failure. Finally, given NGOs’ important role in public policy, we outline institutional innovations to address these failures.

A Process Study of Negotiating Challenges of Managing International Development Projects
Nabi Zaher, Christopher Sykes and Lynne Keevers

Abstract
Despite the role that non-government organisations, including community development organisations, play in social transformation, their approach to managing projects has received little attention. Employing a processual approach and participatory methodology, this paper investigates how a small, distributed, community-based organisation negotiates the challenges associated with managing its geographically dispersed development projects. It examines lessons that this organisation’s project management approach offers for managing projects at a distance in ways that encourage community ownership, partnership with project beneficiaries and their maximum participation in the process. The paper underlines the need for positioning people’s participation in development projects as a key component of development, rather than as a tool for project implementation. It concludes by advocating a blend of participation and empowerment with technical assistance for recipient communities.
society’s involvement in migrant labour integration—a policy-contested field—based on the relationship between non-profit and public sector organisations. Such ideal-type models are traditional public administration delivery, co-management, co-production with a partial or non-existent role for public sector organisations, and full co-production. In the six countries covered by the special issue, the existing relationship between the public sector and the civil society sector is affected by the specific social, cultural and economic contexts that underpin both their labour markets and welfare states. Although one model predominates in each of the six countries, in different ways and with different mechanisms, in all of them there is a trend towards the development of coproduction whereby the state plays either a central or a residual role.

Márcia R. C. Santos and Raul M. S. Laureano

Abstract

During crises such as the present coronavirus disease-19 (COVID-19) pandemic, nonprofits play a key role in ensuring support to improve the most vulnerable individuals’ health, social, and economic conditions. One year into the COVID-19 pandemic, an extensive automated literature analysis was conducted of 154 academic articles on nonprofit management during the pandemic—all of which were published in 2020. This study sought to identify and systematize academics’ contributions to knowledge about the crisis’s impact on the nonprofit sector and to ascertain the most urgent directions for future research. The results provide policymakers, nonprofit practitioners, and scholars an overview of the themes addressed and highlight the important assistance academic researchers provide to nonprofits dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Humanitarianism as civic practice? Humanity, politics and humanitarian activism
Henry Radice
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ABSTRACT

This article explores the intersection between civic activism and humanitarian action, two sets of practices which, in conflict settings, involve protecting life, supporting people’s ability to survive, and upholding dignity. Yet the logics that govern professionalized humanitarianism sometimes limit or work against the kinds of civic activism and political agency that enable resistance to powerful conflict dynamics. This article elaborates a concept of humanitarian activism that recasts the humanitarian encounter as a problem of political estrangement, to be overcome through a recognition of the political agency of humanitarians’ interlocutors. The starting point of humanitarian action in all its guises should be to see the human in the other, but it should also accept that humanity is political in both its construction and realization. The humanity of the other must be honoured, among other things, through the support of the other’s political voice through civic engagements in the fora relevant to those goals of protecting life and dignity. As contemporary conflict fuels itself by dehumanizing and depoliticizing, so must humanitarian activists situate themselves against both these dynamics, materially and discursively, from the level of local activism to global humanitarian funding flows, to open up genuine humanitarian space for change.
Palimpsests of civicness: Spontaneity and the Egyptian Uprising/Cairo 2011
Heba Raouf Ezzat
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ABSTRACT

More than a decade after the 25th of January 2011 uprising in Egypt most of the research that examined the multifaceted dimension of the uprising focused on the political dynamics of change, addressing issues of contentious politics, constitutional change, local governance, political participation and representation, civil–military relations and counter-revolution. This paper examines the forgotten role of the people who formed the multitude that led to the occupation of Tahrir Square on the 28th of January 2011, and the role of citizens who formed popular committees in their neighbourhood till the 11th of February when Mubarak was ousted. The analysis highlights the significance of spontaneity in the rise of civicness during the 15 days of occupation when the absence of effective sovereignty in spite of the presence of tanks on the streets led to the emergence of forms of collective action that can highlight the complexity of the uprising dynamics. Notions of conviviality and political friendship are introduced to draw a more complex picture of these days, building on previous ethnographic research and political analysis.

Student movements in sub-Saharan Africa: Key socio-political stakeholders from corporatist mobilisations to avant-garde positions
Pascal Bianchini
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ABSTRACT

Although they have played a key role in socio-political mobilizations in sub-Saharan Africa, and sometimes even in some revolutionary processes, student movements on the continent have not attracted a substantial academic interest. The main argument of the article is that in Africa, student movements structurally stand as counter-hegemonic actors who have strongly influenced the political field, a phenomenon conceptualized through the notion of ‘generative function of the political’. Then it summarizes the historical evolution of African student movements through a periodization into ‘three ages’. Finally, in reviewing the existing literature, it addresses certain debatable issues that deserve to be enlightened, in particular the scope of the demands of these movements between corporatism limited to the academic sphere and political avant-gardism or the use of violence on campuses.

MIXING WITH THE CROWD: HOW MOBILIZATION AFFECTS DIVERSITY IN DEMONSTRATIONS
Joost de Moor; Ruud Wouters

Abstract

The internal diversity of demonstrations speaks to fundamental debates about voice and equality, solidarity, social capital, and social movement success—yet is rarely empirically investigated. We study how mobilization distinguishes between internally diverse and homogenous demonstrations in terms of education and class. We use unique protest survey data from 16,134 participants in 76 demonstrations in nine European countries. We find that mobilization processes explain variation in internal diversity for education but hardly for class. Whereas informal mobilization decreases internal diversity, organizations’ involvement increases
diversity. Diversity is also negatively affected by the presence of transmitters—protesters who are both asked to participate and who ask others. This homogenizing impact of transmitters is more pronounced in demonstrations more strongly dominated by informal mobilization processes. Our findings support recent arguments against the association between informal mobilization and demonstration diversity and stress the enduring relevance of formal organizing.

PICKING A FIGHT WITH A DRAGON: RESISTING OIL AND GAS EXTRACTION IN A MEXICAN PEASANT COMMUNITY

Svenja Schöneich


Abstract

It is well known that oil and gas extraction projects cause protests in many communities around the world, particularly in Latin America. However, not every community affected by the negative consequences of extraction engages in resistance. Based on the theoretical framework of social movement studies and anthropology, this article draws on findings from in-depth ethnographic fieldwork to examine why and how the members of a Mexican peasant community affected by oil and gas extraction engage in resistance. It does so by following Fletcher’s (2001) plea to reclaim the focus on the origins of resistance movements by adopting a nuanced understanding of the relevant factors regarding its emergence. The article argues that changes within external and internal power structures and social dynamics are crucial factors for the emergence of different forms of resistance, emphasizing the pluralistic and processual character of resistance.

RESOURCES

The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) is a research institute in Africa focusing on the social sciences and humanities. It produces and disseminates knowledge that contributes to policies and programmes to alleviate poverty, reduce inequality, and stimulate innovations for employment creation. More than knowledge production, the HSRC works towards the uptake of research for policy and impact. Collaborations and partnerships are critical and include local, regional and international public, private and community entities. Based in South Africa its data sets and research findings are accessible at: https://hsrc.ac.za/who-we-are/our-mandate/

About the Newsletter

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Contributors:

Shauna Mottiar, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa
Neville Mangwiro, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa
Kennedy Musyoka, James Madison University School of Strategic Leadership Studies, United States