In 1845, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote in their book, The German Ideology:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is, at the same time, its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it...The individuals composing the ruling class possess, among other things, consciousness, and therefore think. Insofar, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it is evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things, rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch (p. 64).

I found myself reflecting on the above citation on the evening of 26 August 2011 after being besieged at a dinner table by a group of do-gooders who are on the African continent to save us Africans from misrule, misery and destruction. (I use the term ‘Africans’ to refer to every inhabitant of this continent.)

The conversation at my table had been triggered by certain observations made in some of the papers delivered at the regional ISTR Africa Civil Society Research Network Conference in Stellenbosch (23-27 August 2011), some of which gave quite a bashing to civil society in Africa, or, more precisely, the NGO behemoth and its network of aid organisations that criss-cross the continent. Several put forth the idea that aid and the demobilisation of indigenous civic agency has, in fact, done a lot of damage to Africa’s development ideas, agendas and trajectories. So some of my dining companions turned to me for an opinion on, firstly, where Africa would be if it were not for aid and, secondly, what would become of poor, starving, badly governed and self-destructing Africans if all the do-gooders packed their bags and went back to wherever they came from?

I retorted then, as I have always done in such discussions, that perhaps this is exactly what Africans do need in order to awaken from the slumber created by an expectation that some benevolent force or other will bail them out of their self-inflicted maladies. But after about an hour of discussion, I realised my arguments were futile. My companions remained convinced that Africans need them and that we have no future unless we are not only shown where to go and what to do, but also have it all done for us! How else can we continue to blame colonialism, neo-colonialism and other structures in the global political economy if we, as Africans, envision a future without external
support? These arguments advanced by the other parties simply confirmed the power of ideas and how domination has been produced and reproduced on the African continent.

Slightly over a year ago, immediately after the ISTR Istanbul Conference, I reflected on the dearth of autonomous indigenous knowledge and ideas in the African continent on many issues – civil society included. At the time, my feeling was that perhaps some of us do not do enough. But my experience of trying to raise money to organise last month’s ISTR Africa regional conference, and the many ensuing discussions, have forced me to rethink some of my stances in relation to the generation of ideas and knowledge in Africa. In many instances, Africans fail to generate our own ideas and knowledge because we are bidding for someone else’s and, as the saying goes, he who pays the piper calls the tune. But it is more complex than this. Sometimes, alternatives are never tolerated. The discussions at the afore-mentioned dinner table seem to suggest as much. I have concluded that this is because these powers want to see their ideas continue to dominate, while placing Africans where they want them to be – always dependent and in need of aid. Little wonder that UK motoring journalist Jeremy Clarkson concluded in a recent article: “Africa is basically screwed.”

But I beg to disagree. I am aware that the challenges are many. But if the conversations in Stellenbosch last month are anything to go by, there is the possibility of critical self-reflection in the way knowledge is produced, by whom, and for what purpose – at least in the area of research in civil society. Specifically, it is clear that there is a solid intellectual leadership emerging in the continent that recognises that civil society is a contested space that may allow for alternative hegemonies to emerge. We are refusing to just ‘sidonluk!’

This is the message we took home. It is also the message stressed by the four reflective pieces written by participants who attended the conference, which we bring you in this third issue of the ISTR Africa Newsletter.

Paul Okumu’s piece titled “When Activism Meets Knowledge: Reclaiming Africa’s Civic Movement”, bemoans the apparent disconnect between civil society in Africa and citizens, as well as the compartmentalisation of society. As a result, he writes, “The verdict from the researchers’ assessment is that civil society in Africa has been killed and buried by the very thing intended to make it stronger – aid and professionalism.” He however concludes on a positive note, emphasising the need to work closely together to confront our collective challenges.

Hippolyt A.S. Pul’s “Elephantophobia and Pracademic Theorisation” sees dangers in the fear the big organisations that dare to fill the civic void on the African continent. He argues that “NGOs and the Church are, and will continue to be, with us and, whether we like it or not, we cannot prevent them from entering the civic space. Should we avoid dealing with them? Shouldn’t we be trying to figure out how to make the best out of what we have? In other words, he concludes the Africa scenario demands an “I’ve got to use what I have to get what I need” type of response.

Fundi Nzimande’s piece, “Reflections of a first-timer on the ISTR Africa Civil Society Research Network Conference”, reflects mainly on what she took away from the plenary sessions, as well as other key themes during the conference. She concludes that the conference was enlightening and useful from a wide variety of viewpoints.

In her article, “I loved every moment of it”, Maryanne Iwara reports that, “I found that the conference presented an unparalleled opportunity to encourage regional commitment to indigenous and context-based research, promoted interdisciplinary understanding of development theories, and created an environment for interaction with academics, and local and international donor communities.”

Enjoy reading them.

Of course the conference would really never have picked up without the financial support of four key funders who trusted us to deliver. These were: the University of Stellenbosch, the Southern African regional office of the Ford Foundation, Southern Africa Trust and Trust Africa. As those of us who have been behind efforts to fundraise will attest, it was no walk in the park. Despite numerous promises by multiple would-be donors, there were several last-minute disappointments. We therefore thank you most sincerely for believing in us.

One of the outcomes of the conference was the need to continue building the network. As such, some fresh blood has been ejected into the steering committee. The new faces in the committee include: Maryanne Iwara, Paul Okumu, Beniam Gebrezghi, Tim Adivilah, Gerard Tchouassi and Priscilla Wamucii. We hope to tap on their energies in developing the network further.
Respective of your protests, this is the impression I have of South Africa, real or not, and I would like to preserve it that way. The mountains surrounding Stellenbosch immediately evoked the academic side of me and set me thinking about the theories I learned in secondary-school geography on how the world came to be split between rivers, seas, valleys, forested mountains and bare deserts – theories of how ice-age glaciers, floods and droughts shaped the earth.

Beyond filling our emptiness and making us feel like the masters and mistresses that we were meant to be over the rest of nature, these theories about how the world came to be shaped as it is and, indeed, cause Stellenbosch to sit between the feet of more than one mountain range, have another equally important purpose. They bear testament to the creative powers of the human imagination – powers that set us apart from all other beings in creation. After all, what other categories of nature’s creations have their own theories about us humans? And thank Goodness they don’t have this ability because, if they did, these abused, degraded and hunted elements of creation would surely have conspired to wipe us off the face of the earth in order to ensure their ever-lasting peace.

Perhaps, though, the lesser creatures of the earth need not worry about devising theories to subdue us higher ones. For, aren’t we scared enough about our own inventions? This, at least, is the strong impression I had at the conference as I listened to the various presentations by members of Homo sapiens debating the goodness and illness of civil society. We cheered when one of us theorised that we needed to discard the notion of the Third Sector and look to understand how civic energies can be marshaled, engineered, and put to use in restructuring society for the better. We needed strong, purpose-driven civil society organisations that would champion the agenda of truly transforming society so that the common good would take precedence over private gain in whatever we did. Almost as instantaneously, however, our fears gripped us as we booted and pointed fingers at the NGOs, especially the large national and transnational ones, as well as the Church. They are too big for our liking, we sang in unison, even if they do some good work in filling the civil space and providing pointers to how we might use their networks and insights to focus the civic energies in other directions. No, they are too big and we fear them; just as we might fear getting too close to an elephant.

Fear of the elephant, or elephantophobia, put pracademically, is what confronts us. We fear the big organisations that dare to fill the civic void. But what other options do we have? “Sit, don’t look”? NGOs and the Church are, and will continue to be, with us and, whether we like it or not, we cannot prevent them from entering the civic space. Should we avoid dealing with them? Shouldn’t we be trying to figure out how to make the best out of what we have?

For me, I continue to be inspired by the beauty of Stellenbosch and the words of the Jamaican reggae musician Jimmy Cliff, who says, “I’ve got to use what I have to get what I need.” Viva Stellenbosch, Viva ISTR.
This forum lived up to my expectations — and beyond. The first day was dedicated to Ms. Bev Russell. The idea of civil society in the African context was presented in a refreshing way, with the caveat that we consider whether there is an African civil society or, in fact, a universal civil society with an African complexion. The second discussion was one that asked the question: is there “norm-full” or “norm-free” qualitative research. The last presentation focused on the challenges of capturing the core dimensions of civil society in a quantitative framework. All the discussions on this day showed me that there is a need for a certain level of activism within the research community. It is important for civil society researchers to play a role in the generation of knowledge and in influencing the methods used, as well as challenging underlying assumptions that all researchers use in this noble pursuit. I found this an important idea, as it helps in improving the quality of the knowledge generated, minimising gaps and broadening the paradigms within which researchers work. In a context where most research on Africa is conducted by outsiders, it is critical for African researchers, in particular, to begin to create knowledge and write about the results of their research. Hopefully, through this exercise, the African perspective will shine through.

Papers presented at the plenary sessions were extremely eye-opening and it was a thrill to have scholars of such high calibre present to us. One of these esteemed scholars was Adebayo Olukoshi, whose input was truly inspirational. What found resonance with this author was his reference to a demobilised and depoliticised civil society. In his input, there were also echoes of a civil society that has been whitewashed (my term) into abandoning any relationship with political rights and political activism, or any claim to the political space. Considering that almost everything we do and do not do relates to access to power, or lack thereof, this is one area where I feel African civil society may be failing. The very idea that you can abandon political space is a political one. This was a critical input for us at a period when political appetite amongst the continent’s elite seems to be waning fast and the media seems to be advancing a message of amnesia relating to the atrocities that Africans have experienced at the hands of their colonisers.

Another paper presented in the plenary session was delivered by Adam Habib. He reflected on the contradiction between the massive growth of organised civil society and the concurrent growth in inequality. To this author, the idea mentioned in Olukoshi’s paper of a depoliticised civil society explains this contradiction. Habib also reflected on the tensions between the global human rights movement and progressive nationalist governments on the continent. The case used was that of South Africa’s role in the Security Council when it comes...
to decisions taken around some countries, such as Myanmar. This presentation suggested some innovative moves that could have been considered in dealing with these matters without denting South Africa’s record on human rights. This author felt that there are severely constraining factors to the role of progressive nationalist governments that limit creative interventions in responding to human rights abuses across the globe.

The third paper presented in plenary was delivered by Alan Fowler. He explained that his motivation for writing the paper was located in the “lack of a critical mass of African scholars”, which resulted in “making Africa a battleground of … foreign ideas and prescriptions.” This further emphasised, for this writer, the need for improving the role of African researchers in knowledge generation to better inform the understanding of relationships between state and society in the African context, public and aid policies, and the correct interpretation of African data.

The other sessions had a powerful dual purpose of introducing new or fledgling ideas and at the same time strengthening the emergence of a critical mass of researchers on the African continent. This session helped us first-timers, and others who are PhD students, to fill in the gaps in the projects that we are working on. There were reflections on uprisings and protests in different parts of the continent, not least Egypt. Whilst the private sector in ICT is rushing to claim a role in the transformation taking place in Egypt, civil society organisations still take a different view.

Other sessions reflected on the role of religious organisations within the civil space. The discussion on this topic revealed some suspicion that the research community has of the religious community. This author feels that a lot of power resides in the religious community leadership and needs of poor communities in the context of a similarly impoverished state. While this may be a scary new concept, it may prove a better tool in the future with more ideas on how to improve it.

The discussion on women and gender was informative but, to this writer, it showed that a lot of work still needs to be done, even amongst Africa’s intelligentsia, to ensure women’s development and the eradication of gender and economic inequality that women face. There was an admission that women are not a unitary organism but diverse actors within society with differing views about how women’s questions needs to be dealt with. This author is of the view that it is this divergence that allows the exploitation of women to thrive.

The ISTR Africa Conference in Stellenbosch was fruitful and a great space for individual and collective growth. Not all the wonderful (and weird) ideas floated in the conference have been covered here but for people looking to improve their research skills and seeking to expand their knowledge horizons, ISTR is the space to utilise. ISTR Africa has outdone itself in putting together such a conference. Perhaps more pan-African gatherings under the auspices of the ISTR could contribute to the entrenchment of “One Africa, One Love”. All kudos go to the conference organisers.
I should say, as a disclaimer, that I pretty much loved every second of my time at the ISTR Africa Civil Society Research Network Conference in Stellenbosch and truly hope I can attend many more conferences like this in the future. These are just a few specific moments that stand out in my mind.

**The talks**
The programme’s approach was down-to-earth and extremely issue/context based. It started off by building a sanctuary of learning for researchers and non-researchers. Caught in the nexus of developmentalism, peace and conflict resolution, I did not know much about the workings of CSOs. I found that the conference presented an unparalleled opportunity to encourage regional commitment to indigenous and context-based research, promoted interdisciplinary understanding of development theories, and created an environment for interaction with academics, and local and international donor communities. The plenary sessions fostered the cross-fertilisation of different ideas among participants through the prism of national, regional, and international standards.

**The hotel, the friends and the food**
I was super-happy when I found out that I was nested next to a snoring Nigerian, a happy-go-lucky South African, a bustling Kenyan and a party-loving Brazilian-Danish woman. I was not only appreciative of our time together but also grateful to be able to share the experience of a new fellowship with everyone, making time to socialise between the busy conference sessions. What a privilege to be amongst this great group of individuals.

**The Vision and Vibe**
The most significant achievement of this conference is its most simple aspect – it brought together leaders, researchers and academics, activists and government officials of different groups and backgrounds from across the world, and provided a space for them to discuss critical issues that have received little attention at regional level.

I was also impressed by the pragmatism of most of the delegates. Yes, there was activism, enthusiasm and a lot of ambition, but these can only come from experienced leaders, assessors and beneficiaries of CSO activities who understand the severity of the challenges their continent faces.

I was also impressed that delegates were not only prepared to raise really difficult issues but also demonstrate their willingness to tackle them.

Since I have returned home, I have had the desire to be in an environment where I can pursue and promote this kind of developmental initiative. There is just something both surreal and “extra-real” about sitting in a room agitating for marginalised interests and discussing the future of CSOs in our continent. It is exhilarating to share a space with young men and women of different traditions and ethnicities who all share a passion for change. It gives me hope. It helps me feel connected. It sent me back to my community in a thirsty state with a vision for what ISTR can – and will – achieve through this network.

**Recommendation**
I would say that our challenges to advocate for indigenous CSO research and encourage government ownership are so immense, that they cannot possibly be taken up by three or four active members. The ideal needs to be built holistically, involving every member and from the “bottom up”. We need to empower the under-served groups and create an enabling environment for civil society and advocacy, especially local and indigenous groups. As such, with the convening of such a diverse group of stakeholders, we have enabled the beginning of a dialogue that will start to promote interdisciplinary understanding of research with the potential for long-lasting impact in the region, especially through the launch of a new working group. Indeed, the recently concluded conference served as point of departure for establishing a formalised network of regional stakeholders, including me.

Blessings to you all!

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**BY MARYANNE IWARA**

INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION, MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, NIGERIA
At a meeting of the fragile states and donors in Kinshasa, DRC, earlier this year, a delegate from a European country walked up to me and asked: “Do you think the uprising in North Africa will trigger a ripple effect in Sub-Saharan Africa?” Without thinking much about the question, I said, “Hell no!” I went on to tell him why The West’s greatest failure in its work with Africa lies in its constant thinking that Africa is one homogenous mass of citizens separated by imaginary lines we call borders.

Five months after that encounter, researchers, academics and civil society leaders from over 11 countries gathered in Stellenbosch, South Africa, to reflect on the state and future of a sector that, until January 2011, was seen as the catalyst and engine of change for the continent – civil society. And the verdict from the researchers’ assessment is that civil society in Africa has been killed and buried by the very thing intended to have made it stronger - aid and professionalism. The series of events that have come to be known as the Arab Spring confirmed that citizens, not professional or funded organisations, hold the power of change in their hands. And they do not need to be organised and funded in order to implement it!

So what happened to that great wave and hope that kept Nelson Mandela smiling for 27 years?

The seventh ISTR Africa Civil Society Research Network Conference was unique in that, for the first time to me, it offered a rare glimpse into the history of civic movements and how they have given hope and motivation – motivation that has helped people withstand some of the most autocratic leaders in the continent. Presenters showed how trade unions challenge big business and big governments. They showed how researchers, academics, actors, activists and ordinary citizens come together in solidarity, with nothing more than books, pens and voices, to challenge great military powers.

So what happened to that great wave and hope that kept Nelson Mandela smiling for 27 years? Why did the leaders transform into villains so soon after coming to power? Why is it that the mass mobilisation for independence, once so strong, collapsed so soon after independence? Why is it that, so soon after independence, Okot Pbitek had to write the following about a woman who mourned the loss of Africa’s liberation?

“Leave me alone...“Leave me alone! We liberated ourselves so that you could take us to the Promised Land... Instead you are sitting at the same table as the white man, eating from it and using the same fork the white man used. At least leave me alone. The constitution says so, and you can’t also take that away from me!”

The answer provided by delegates at the Stellenbosch conference was as honest as it was brutal: Cannibalism! We, the academics, researchers and activists began to professionalise our work and “sectorise” our relationships. Where there were movements; we now have NGOs. Where we had keepers of knowledge, we now have professional institutions. And we became prime candidates for the destructive power of aid and donor funding. We started competing for aid but forgot to aid the people we had fought so hard to liberate. Instead of aiding communities, we were busy persuading them that they needed external funding to get out.
of poverty. Researchers began to write papers based on who provided the funding rather than what needed to be changed. One of the conference’s keynote speakers, Prof. Adebayo Olukoshi, invoked a famous retort to summarise the tragedy that ensued from this compartmentalised nature of relationships in society: “Can you imagine freedom fighters of yesteryear walking on the streets of London with proposals asking for funding to liberate Africa from the British?” Yet this is what we have become. Researchers have become consultants; activists have become NGO leaders and we are driven by where the money comes from. We cannot claim to be the voice of citizens if we are no longer connected to that voice. In an attempt to be effective, we have professionalised ourselves to a level where we are at the mercy of external actors – the funders. Ever-vigilant politicians have rushed in to occupy the space we have left. Today they are rallying citizens against NGOs, claiming that they are instruments of imperialism, agents of instability and promoters of alien ideologies. And they are winning the hearts of citizens.

The ISTR conference was sobering and at the same time offered an exceptional chance for delegates to not only challenge their own place in leading Africa out of the “Aid and poverty industry”, but also offering a glimmer of hope for researchers and activists. The solution, agreed the participants, lies in returning to the unity and synergy that once existed between knowledge providers and public actors. Civil society and academic institutions must begin to work together again.

Delegates wondered why so much knowledge generated by researchers was gathering dust in journals and web portals, while civil society continued to carry out shallow advocacy lacking in knowledge. In the end, civil society leaders admitted that they had indeed lost touch with the very people they set out to liberate. Only a complete rethink of their relationship with the people who hold power – the citizens – will stop them from being bypassed, as seen in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Morocco. Prof. Alan Fowler proposed a radical shift to citizen-driven change and not “aided” aid! Prof. Ebenezer Obadare implored activists to go back to history and appreciate the power of silence: “Sidonluk! Sit down and keep quiet!” Sometimes the loudest voice is the voice of silence. Dr. Ronelle Burger showed that aid is not always driven by the desire to aid communities.

Citizen power has been strengthened by a new power – media is no longer just a tool for change; it is the new vehicle for citizen action. As Prof. Adam Habib, another keynote speaker, reminded us, “No state is born democratic and no state remains democratic if it is not held to that ideal of democracy by citizens.” Two studies from Sudan and Nigeria showed the power of religion in creating unity among citizens. In the end, delegates appreciated the power that comes when activism meets knowledge. And when that power is de-professionalised and its energy channelled to mobilise and empower citizens, no force will withstand its impact.

After all, development first happens in the mind before we see it in the systems and structures. Researchers have the power to capture the mind. Civil society has the power to tear down structures and systems. If the two come together with the energy and passion that took predecessors to prisons and concentration camps, Africa will transform in ways beyond the impact of the Arab Spring. That unity began in Stellenbosch.