

(Not to be quoted)

Harvest of Thorns?: Whither CSO Policy Advocacy in Africa post-9:11

“Who then needs ‘civil society’? It is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for democratic struggle to occur; indeed civil society may more often need democratic struggle than the reverse.....Thus apart from grant-seeking NGOs and the academics, it is proponents of the ‘liberal project’ who need civil society: western governments, their associated agencies, multinationals, and International Financial Institutions (IFIs). Africanists can dispense with it : ‘civil society’ forms part of a large body of general concepts that have appeared briefly to illuminate analysis but which are too diffuse,inclusive and ideologically laden to sustain illumination: nation-building,modernization,elites,dependency,disengagement-even perhaps ethnicity. ”
Chris Allen [1997], Pp.260-267

Introduction

This paper is a general reflection on the writer’s experiences in doing policy advocacy work across Africa. The paper will reflect on the precarious relationship between the African state and civil society. It will also reflect broadly on the possibilities and limitations of campaigns and advocacy in addressing “structural causes” of poverty in Africa. The paper will further reflect on the structural causes of Africa’s underdevelopment as the possibilities and limitations of the ‘Civil Society’ project in addressing these.

The paper will argue that there is a direct link between –on the one hand- social identification and exclusion and on the other, social recognition and citizenship. In essence that citizen participation in the policy and governance processes of any polity is a right equal to true citizenship. Experience has taught us that genuine participation should go beyond mere inclusion or endorsement of pre-conceived government or CSO positions.

We argue that the starting premise of any genuinely transformative participation is the recognition of the right of each individual, community and class of people “to be, to become and to belong”. Recognition conceptualized in this sense becomes the link between identity and right claims. In other words, recognition should not merely consist of an acknowledgment of one’s existence, presence or plight. It must grant the recognized subject or citizen a status and respect. That status should be epitomized in practice by respect for one’s human rights, and an responsibility by the

state to protect the subject/ citizen as well to provide the means by which all can live a dignified life free from want, fear and discrimination.

The paper acknowledges that ideas are critical in shaping national and world affairs. That, therefore, true participation by the poor and excluded must relate to the place that is accorded to their ideas of “being ,becoming and belonging”. As is the case with any reflections, a measure of meandering is inescapable. The meandering in this paper will reflect on several issues including the following:

- The conception of development ,under-development, empowerment and poverty
- The different forms in which people organize and resist their marginalization within and beyond the nation-state
- Unpacking how development CSOs and governments acquire and retain accountability, legitimacy and representation
- The risks of doing policy advocacy work in authoritarian states or contested political spaces
- Unpacking the hypocrisy of “branded” philanthropy and its claim to give voice to the “grass roots”. Unmasking how international campaigning-as important as that function is-often inadvertently dignifies the IMF/WB, WTO and G8 as paragons of virtue in the struggle to eradicate poverty.
- Asking the critical question whether the “poor and excluded” have inadvertently become victims of the state, the market and civil society? These forces struggle to own, patent and brand the “grassroots” as their own? One might argue that there is complicity between NGO advocacy and International media to objectify the poor and turn poor people’s misery into a business?

It is not the intention of these reflections to be academic but rather to indicate intersections, contradictions and gaps between contextual realities (local, national and global) on the one hand and development practice on the other. Ultimately it is our hope that this paper will inspire reflections on the disjuncture between theory and praxis.

Africa : Unscrambling the Omelet?

In the journalistic world the African crisis consists mainly of a failure of ethics; human spirit; initiative, government and governance. The solution is characteristically ‘more ethics, more governance, less government, more investors, more fast food outlets, more tourists, more westernization, more markets, more education, more money, more technology and etcetera’. The development industry or NGO sector would add to this more charity and more attention and care towards the ‘ailing dark continent’ or as Tony Blair once suggested ,’the Scar on the conscience of humanity’. Essentially the idea is that Africa’s developmental chasm is inversely proportional to its dissimilarity to the west or its lack of appropriation of western civility and

enlightenment. The magical cure starts with literacy and ends with 'awareness'.¹ When finally the development interlocutor realizes the obscene gap between enlightenment and genuine empowerment, there is always the automatic resort to the ultimate antidote, namely 'micro-capitalism'. When the 'ultimate' cure fails, we blame the "usual suspects", namely 'African culture and mindsets'. But are they really? We argue that Africa is faced with both structural and super-structural causes of under-development.

Quantitative and qualitative poverty indicators across Africa reflect situations that are in themselves the outcomes of the complex local inter-play of the underlying factors that enable(or undermine) livelihood activities and coping strategies. These dynamics relate to and are shaped by the political economy of poverty and livelihoods: the local configuration of asset distribution and social power relations that make up the context within which people make their living. Some aspects of these local formations of power are cross-cutting, and relate to larger structural and political context of national, continental and global society and economy.² These broader contextual realities, patterns and dynamics are always locally mediated. The basic experience of Africa post-structural adjustment regimes is that benefits from economic growth hardly ever "trickle down", rather there is a constant "sucking up" that maintains the concentration of wealth in the hands of a minority whilst widening the inequality gap. Evidence abounds across Africa that more resources should be invested in education, health care, sanitation, providing clean drinking water, and other basic services. This responsibility should ideally be borne by the state as well civil society/non-state actors. Civil society is yet to critically engage the question 'who will pay the cost of providing free public services to the poor and how'? It is arguable that meeting basic needs is a good starting point to alleviating poverty, but falls far short of the interventions needed to eradicate poverty, let alone address its structural causes.

The realities and full needs of people living in poverty will require no less than the disruptive, costly and painful exercise of restructuring our economies (local, national, regional and global). African lives generally continue to be characterized by insecurity and uncertainty, due to-amongst other things- economic shocks, political instability, social fragmentation, conflict, greed, corruption and environmental factors associated with climate change. These factors are doubly felt by the poor who have very little –if any-income or savings, assets such as land, or skills and opportunities to avert suffering and destitution. These realities contrast with the grand debates about national growth rate figures, liberal democratic ideals and continental

¹ Learning to read and write is important ,only to the extent that in the Western world the "written word" has primacy over the "spoken word". In reality ,literacy- or numeracy for that matter- does not address structural causes of poverty. It helps to alleviate one's plight within the iniquitous structure. It allows one to negotiate for better treatment within structures that are owned and driven by "others". Literacy is a great starting point for poverty alleviation projects. Poverty eradication requires much more than literacy and numeracy, it requires "critical consciousness".

² See **Andries du Toit**, 'Chronic and Structural Poverty in South Africa: challenges for action research'. CPRC Working Paper 56, 2005.

integration often pursued religiously by pockets of 'civil society'. Addressing the full dimensions of structural poverty and therefore under-development in Africa requires that the Africa tackles four key issues simultaneously, namely: Industrialization, the Agrarian question, the national question and regional integration. The commitment in most African countries to deal with the national and agrarian questions is almost non-existent.

In Africa post-structural adjustment there are several discomfoting realities that contradict the mythology of predictable solutions parroted by many NGO representatives. The first is that increased trade has not always led to economic growth let alone poverty eradication. Even where it can be argued that economic growth has resulted from increased international trade this has not necessarily always translated into decent secure life-long jobs. Over 70 % of the African economies will not be able to grow and restructure sufficiently in the next 20 years to create enough jobs for all able-bodied Africans to be able to support themselves through work. In many industries, plantations, mines and factories work is temporal and it hardly pays a living (decent) wage. It is highly unlikely that people in rural areas will be able to support themselves in what is –globally- a very hostile market. In the result, integration of Africa into the global economy in light of these challenges is no panacea to the continent's developmental crisis. If anything the uncritical integration of the continent into the global trading system- free, air or otherwise- might widen rather than reduce the inequality gaps that characterize Africa's uneven development. This is why European Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) are opposed by certain sections of civil society.

Africa has over the last twenty years experienced rapid and chaotic urbanization. As such within the "urban bulge" causes of poverty are characterized by insecurity within labour markets, low pay, lack of a source of income, a largely proscribed informal sector, inability to meet basic needs, lack of basic services, and in some instances discrimination³. Neo-liberal economic policies have resulted in the forfeiture of control over personal, community, and public assets and resources. Unpredictability, fear and want are increasing despite the proliferation of NGOs doing self-help projects, micro-finance and literacy. The dominant approach in the development sector is normally to focus on the vulnerability and insecurity of the individual, and such individuals' responsibility to work, read or talk themselves out of poverty (with aid of the market and its NGO collaborators and programmes designed to bring such poor into markets). The fascination with 'aiding' peasant/small holder farmers to trade ignores the fact that systemic insecurity and vulnerability generated by the self-same markets, political and economic systems is what has kept Africans poor for so long. More and better aid ,fair trade and etcetera has reduced its critique of the fact that poverty and inequality in Africa have increased owing to 'uncritical'

³ Chronic Poverty in urban areas, Environment and Urbanization Brief(12), IIED 2005

integration into the global economy. This is contrary to the belief that poverty and inequality are the result of not participating enough in the global economy as well not liberalizing markets⁴. Yet it would also be overly simplistic not to acknowledge the role that markets and incentives have and continue to play in the generation of wealth and stimulation of economic growth in some African countries. We, therefore, argue that the real panacea to Africa's developmental crisis lies in appropriately mixed economies that balance welfare and growth concerns.

The problems discussed above are systemic and not just random incidental by-products of a good system. For instance 'casualization' of labour as a result of 'globalization' is a foreseeable consequence. In many countries the liberalization of the financial services sector has essentially removed the protection to prevent traumatic economic shocks such as experienced in the crush of Zimbabwe's currency in 1997-98. Many African markets have under trade liberalization opened up to global competition before building the capacity to add value to their primary products. This has –in many instances- led to de-industrialization and undue dependence upon low-value primary products. The control of labour markets by trans-national corporations has led to corporate abuse of human rights in many sectors across the continent. The present global production patterns have resulted in an over-supply of goods and services in some instances coupled with depressed demand. This has led to less job-intensive growth in countries such as Kenya, Rwanda, Namibia, Swaziland, Mozambique and Ghana. Oversupply of goods has – in some instances- displaced local markets and livelihoods, further depressing demand.

Sub-Saharan Africa has experienced a phenomenon where countries record impressive growth, but absolute poverty has also risen. The deflationary prescriptions contained in some IMF/WB policies have resulted in caps on public expenditure, wage ceilings and consequently the collapse of social services, social spending and subsidies to the poor. This has increased the burden of-for instance health care-borne by women and girls. Consequently we are witnessing across the continent a reversal of the human rights gains made by women and the poor generally over the last two decades. The general depressed state of lives and livelihoods as well income inequality have regenerated ugly manifestations of patriarchy such as violence against women, discrimination against women and girls, early marriages, etc. Add to this cauldron global terrorism(state and non-state); erosion of civil liberties in East Africa and the Horn under the guise of a "war on terror"; hostile natural conditions such as floods,drought,earthquakes and climate change. There seems to be a conspiracy brewing against Africa led by nature, corporate led neo-liberal globalization, undemocratic regimes, a largely externally driven civil society project and exploitative markets. Is this a 'Harvest of Thorns'?

⁴ Raphael Kaplinsky(2005), 'Globalization, Poverty and Inequality,' Polity Press

Clearly, many African economies are in crisis not because of 'African Culture' or the 'African Psyche'. Economic growth remains erratic and for the majority of countries growth rates are well below targets. The IMF/WB Economic Structural Adjustment Programmes (ESAPs) failed to redress inequalities inherent in many African economies. The Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) have also failed to deal with the structural issues adverted to above. As a result, the majority of Africa's poor cannot take advantage of the meagre opportunities that are offered by various regimes of debt cancellation, direct budget support and foreign direct investment. Even where these result in some benefits these are often short-lived and not sustainable over a long period of time. This is the classic case of universal primary education and free access to primary health care in Uganda, Kenya, and Zimbabwe. As demonstrated above, Africa's majority poor are still at the mercy of manmade as well as naturally occurring emergencies and insecurity.

Many of Africa's economies have a dual character: often a minority (foreign or domestic) dominates the formal sector economic activity and owns/controls the majority of high-potential land, industries and service sectors. On the other hand the majority poor are concentrated in rural areas and urban informal sectors. These factors are hardly ever addressed when countries plan economic reform. Tragically, even CSO's tread carefully when it comes to questions of resource ownership and redistribution between and within these two internal economies. The focus on the formal sector, in terms of economic planning neglects the sectors, which arguably have the greatest potential for employment creation and poverty eradication, namely rural informal, small and medium-sized entities. These critical sectors need protection and not the sort of disruption and criminalization witnessed in countries such as Zimbabwe, Kenya and Nigeria⁵. Except for Malawi's intervention in the agricultural sector, very few African governments still consider subsidies for those most adversely affected by the structural maladies described above.

African poverty worsened between the years 1990 – 2001. Statistics indicate that 77% of African citizenry survived on less than US \$ 2.15 per day during this period⁶. Wittingly or otherwise, CSO advocacy in most countries still supports increased market penetration of Africa as the panacea to the continents under development. Evidence at hand demonstrates that wealth flow out of Sub-Saharan Africa to America, Europe and Asia occurs primarily through exploitative debt and finance, phantom aid, capital flight, regimes of trade, unjust taxation and revenue regimes, and distorted investment. This plunder of African resources has its historical roots in slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. In present day Africa, neo-liberal policies are the biggest causes of poverty, injustice and inequality.

The neo-liberal mantra of privatization of basic services, leaner states and protection of private property and finance capital tend to widen and amplify inequitable

⁵ In Zimbabwe, Kenya and Nigeria evictions of the 'Urban Landless' is often carried out under the guise of 'clearing trash' or restoring the cities aesthetic beauty as well as fighting crime and social ills.

⁶ Commission for Africa Report.

development. In African communities and countries that were already stratified along class, race, ethnic gender and age lines, these policies portend to disaster. They increase rather than diminish the inherent contradictions and disparities. In this context liberal democracy with its emphasis on procedural as opposed to substantive equality, becomes a source of socio-economic and political disruption as opposed to integration. Social and resource conflicts essentially become anarchies born out of democracy. Primarily, because finance, trade and foreign direct investment remain the key drivers of Africa's under-development there is need to address their impact.

Africa requires alternative sources of Finance to ensure her development. This means that Africa has to curb the present high incidence of tax fraud, transfer pricing and other MNCs, techniques of plundering the continent's resources. In 1994 alone, an estimated 14% of the total value of exported oil went unaccounted for. Most FDI coming into Africa is targeted at privatized assets (14%), the extractive industries (60%) and the service sector (13%). Extractive and privatization related FDI poses serious ecological and human rights violations. Clearly one would expect that this rapid depletion of natural resources would be factored into any calculation of national wealth. Most MNCs engaged in the extractive industry sector (oil, diamonds, gold, forest, rubber, tanzanite's etc) make very little investments and provide very limited royalties. As the Jubilee South Movement has declared 'the North owes the South a vast amount in historical, moral and ecological debt'.

CSO Policy Advocacy Focus

The focus of many advocacy efforts by CSO's has been on the following:

- Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals
- Stopping violence against women and children
- Electoral issues and constitutional reforms(liberal democracy concerns)
- Political space for opposition, on-state actors generally and media
- Sexuality and reproductive rights issues
- Micro-finance and basic income grants
- The protection of human rights, including private property
- Rationalization of trade tariffs to enhance the viability of the productive sector
- Anti-privatization (especially of key parastatals)
- Stamping out corruption in the public sector
- Global Commodity prices
- Fair trade agenda between the north and south
- Responsible Corporate citizenship(focused on supermarkets and mining sector)
- Global Aid architecture reforms(e.g. removal of conditionalities)
- Debt cancellation(especially of illegitimate and odious debt)
- Tax Justice and Financing for Development reforms
- Building an environment free of intrusive and obstructive policy interventions

The African Union NEPAD Implementation committee in 2002 estimated that the financial gap between what African countries can raise, and what they need to spend on development is about US \$ 64 billion per year. Although the premise upon which this estimate was arrived at is contested, it is arguable that closing the leakages of financial outflows from Africa could easily fill this financial gap. The financial outflows out of Africa are estimated at between US \$ 75-300 billion per annum⁷ which includes trade losses of over US \$ 60 billion, illegitimate debt of over US \$ 10 billion, money laundering, corruption and tax holidays account for over US \$ 90 billion, barriers to markets of US \$ 5 billion per year. These factors raise the need to pay attention to the question of alternatives to financing Africa's development such as debt repudiation, ecological debt, Diaspora remittances, tax justice, equitable Foreign Direct Investment and Trade⁸. Africa presently generates less than 2.5 % of global trade. A combination of these potential alternatives-if well thought out and properly implemented- could give Africa what development has failed to provide, sustainable development.

It is arguable that a national, continental and global level CSO advocacy and policy interventions on these issues has had a telling effect on both the content and process of policy making, implementation and evaluation. African governments have more to gain than lose from the activities of CSOs trying to ensure trade, Aid, Tax and ecological justice for Africa for instance. But why has this reality not endeared States and Civil Society in Africa to each other? Why do we continue to witness a relationship based on mistrust, repression and confrontation?

The African State and Civil Society

"Those who profess to favour freedom and yet depreciate agitation are like people who want crops without ploughing the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning, they want the ocean without the roar of its many waters. The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both. But it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand, it never has and it never will" **FEREDRICK DOUGLASS**

Civil society work is essentially the product of passion, consciousness, and conviction. Africa's modern history bears testimony to the vital role played by civil society in shaping national ideologies and societal visions. One needs only consider the anti-apartheid movement, liberation struggles in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Eritrea, Angola and Namibia as well pro-democracy initiatives in Kenya, Malawi, Zambia, Nigeria and Zimbabwe post-1980. In these historical epochs the relationship between the state and various elements of civil society has been one that has

⁷ See AFRODAD(2004) , REALITY OF AID ,Africa Edition 2003/4

⁸ Since the introduction by the Clinton administration of the Africa Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA) in 2000, through which selected African countries qualify to export 6,000 products to the United States duty and quota free US imports from Sub-Saharan Africa increased by close to 60%. AGOA resulted in the creation of employment in places such as Kenya(20 000 jobs), Lesotho(15 000 new jobs),and Malawi(4 500 new jobs).As already intimated above these are often casual jobs or minimum wage pegged.

ranged from collaboration to confrontation. Thus the relationship between the state and African state has been both a symbiotic and fraught one, hence the title of this paper, "A Harvest of THorns".

Many factors have shaped and defined the forms of civil society in different historical moments in Africa. Primary amongst these constitutive forces has been the nature of the state and market in any given polity. Conversely civil society has also played a critical role in shaping the modern African state, by amongst other things: recording narratives of history from an indigenous perspective, interpreting the present and envisioning the future, intervening to assist in literacy and self-help projects. It seems impossible to imagine the modern African state without civil society and vice-versa. There has been and continues to be a dialectical cross-fertilization of the state and civil society. This relationship is –at times- incestuous as leaders of civil society cross-over into government and vice-versa. These realities create profound difficulties for those seeking to theorize African civil society and its relationship with the state. Elites criss-cross the state-civil society divide with great ease.

Arguably, therefore, the state in Africa is meaningless without a civil society dimension. One cannot discuss the national question in Africa without reference to the elements in civil society that conceived the idea of a democratic African state. Equally so, civil society in Africa-as heavily influenced as it might be by its northern funders- has only attained full meaning and relevance through its imagination of; critique and embrace of the African state. On the whole the African civil society project- as problematic as that concept might be- has become identifiable through the actions of the state. Consequently the emergence of social movements in Africa, their ideologies and public manifestations carry enormous implications for the meaning and form of civil society and the state in Africa. If one accepts that any 'civil society' without a liberation dimension is a hoax, one must also accept the contradictions that arise from trying to conceptualize oppression and liberation in present day Africa where the sources of un-freedoms are both internal as well as external ; state as well as non-state; national as well as global; class as well gendered.

All African state-elites claim that all their actions are motivated by a concern for the liberation of Africa from foreign domination and under-development. In reality , the same elites have often auctioned off chunks of the continent for a pittance.