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Obstacle, Bridge or Promised Land? The Role of Civil Society in the Challenges Confronting Africa

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PREAMBLE

The third conference of the African network of civil society researchers was held at the Hotel Du Lac, Cotonou, Benin Republic, between May 7th -10th 2004. Hosted by the Benin Centre for Environment and Socio-Economic Development (CEBEDES-XUDODO), the major aim of the conference, as expressed in the initial call for papers, was to "provide a forum for debate on the extent to which rhetoric, practice, activism and social engagement within Africa's civil society have yielded any outcome as far as political emancipation and people's livelihood are concerned." This objective informed the conference theme: *The Role of Civil Society in the Challenges Confronting Africa*. Three broad challenges—good governance, poverty, and regional integration—were identified. They provided thematic anchors for the contributions by scholars and practitioners from both within and outside Africa. The overall concern was both to determine the extent to which civil society in Africa has responded to these main challenges and its "potential for significant achievement in the decades to come."

For many reasons this was no easy task and I will outline briefly two constraints that arose. The first concerns the conceptual status of the idea of civil society itself. The theme of the conference clearly betrays a certain optimism on the part of the organisers with respect to the social utility of civil society in general, and more specifically its potential as a technology of social progress in Africa. One obvious problem with that (and this was recognised in the discussions during the plenary sessions) is that civil society (whether in theory or practice) is not one thing. Expectations about its possible usefulness necessarily needed to be tempered by an awareness of its essentially heterogeneous nature. A second point relates to the nature of the problems confronting Africa

itself and an acknowledgment that, their apparent salience and ubiquity notwithstanding, issues of good governance, poverty and regional integration are mere expressions of what appears to be the main issue in Africa's ongoing development crisis—the centrality of state power and the imperative to humanise it in the cause of socio-economic justice and popular empowerment.

Nevertheless, participants were minimally deterred by these constraints. There was definitely a measure of 'realism' induced by the problems generally associated with civil society and civil society analysis in Africa (and indeed globally). However, there was at the same time a virtually infectious confidence in the emerging agency of civil society to at least map out the trajectory that rescue efforts might take. To this end, sustained attention was paid to the possible ways in which civil society might influence social transformation on the continent as well as the mechanisms that could make this possible.

This critical optimism in the agency of civil society—plus the attendant exploration of the mechanisms through which social transformation might be realised—is itself remarkable for one important reason. For many years, relevant literature on civil society in Africa languished in the shadow of theoretical scepticism regarding the applicability of the idea to Africa's socio-political dynamics. However, if the dominant tone of discussions at the conference is a reliable barometer, a significant milestone seems to have been reached. Researchers and practitioners seemed more eager to investigate the assumed potential of civil society to add social value rather than belabour whether it is theoretically useful or not.

In this regard, one cannot fail to observe the shift away from the 2001 research network meeting in Kenya during

which considerable time was devoted to "questioning the meaning and relevance of the concept of civil society in a predominantly rural Africa" (see Kinyanjui 2002). In time, Cotonou may well come to symbolise that 'moment' in which the 'conceptual ownership' of the idea of civil society that scholars like Jean and John Comaroff have always urged (1999) received much-needed practical and conceptual certification.

Challenges of Civil Society Development in Africa

Across the continent, different modes of public action emerged in response to the economic crisis which precipitated, and was in turn worsened by, the IMF-led Structural Adjustment Programmes of the 1980s (Olukoshi 1993, Beckman and Sachikonye 2001). One common factor in this remarkable upsurge was the role played by ordinary citizens who were partly inspired by developments in other parts of the world, particularly Eastern Europe, to challenge the existing economic and political order in their respective countries. Central to this radical momentum were women's groups, which emerged as a formidable aspect of what was a general social movement for change. Roseline Achieng's paper, *Developing Civil Society's Capacity to Influence Social Transformation: Intellectualism, Strategic Use of Place and Articulation of a Common 'Voice'- The Case Study of Two Kenyan Women Groups* is clearly an attempt to tell this fascinating *herstory* using Kenya as contextual background. By comparing two women's groups—the elitist Kenyan Women Political Caucus and the peasant Kenya Rural Women Peace Initiative—Achieng explores how civil society groups, "especially women groups…create new visions of society and constitute a force capable of establishing and advancing changes necessary for societal transformation" (Achieng 2004). The methodologies favoured by these women's groups seem to resemble those used by other women's groups in the continent as a whole. Some of these include the necessary transformation of the private into a public domain, the gradual capture and the politicising of religious spaces like mosques and churches, and in total the formulation of a both cross-cutting and specific agenda aimed at undermining the seeming solidity of entrenched patriarchy.

In different African countries, this process of feminisation of radical dissent (or what other authors have called the rise of political motherhood) continues to assume many interesting forms, the most intriguing perhaps of which is the marked willingness to expose the naked female body in the struggle to right perceived social wrongs. A good example is Nigeria where, beginning from the mid-1980s, protests involving women have seen them use their nudity as a totem

of disaffection. This process of making public what ordinarily belongs to the domain of the private draws on a powerful cultural symbolism and has been crucial to the process by which women in the country have sought to articulate 'voice' amid the prevailing male domination.[1] By focusing attention on this unfolding, even though within the specific ambience of Kenya, Achieng covers a glaring hiatus at the centre of civil society discourse in Africa—gender. Suffice to say that this is an area brimming with both theoretical and practical possibilities but which remains relatively under-investigated.[2] That being the case, gender and civil society researchers must have a thing or two to learn from how women's groups in Kenya have sought to seize the constitution-making process as a platform for critically debating, discussing and ultimately transforming, the Kenyan society.

The conceptual interface between citizenship and civil society is probed further by Ahmed Thabet in his paper, *African Civil Society and Citizenship Challenges in Africa*. While Achieng's paper can, with some merit, be said to have focused solely on the transformative potential of civil society, Thabet adopts a bi-nocular vision in his treatment of the way in which civil society simultaneously strengthens and/ or 'deteriorates' citizenship. His analysis draws its philosophical sinews from Peter Ekeh's famous analysis (1976) of colonial 'citizens' and the two publics - the 'civic' and the 'primordial'- in Africa, and it is partly on this account that he explores and emphasises the quite ambivalent relationship between civil society and citizenship. While the paper also traces the linkages between civil society and democratisation, aided by illustrations from different parts of Africa, Thabet uses these examples as a platform to dampen the almost universal enthusiasm concerning the positive role of civil society in the process of democratisation. In the case of Egypt for example, he reminds us of the sobering conclusion from recent research findings. Evidence indicates that, while patronage-based political economies may generate a potential for civil society actors to organise platforms for gaining power, this does not necessarily translate into the actual pursuit of reform which in fact is often relegated to the back burner. In what is arguably a testimony to the pertinence of the relationship between civil society and power, and between civil society and democratisation, several other presenters also alluded to them in different ways in their contributions.

That civil society and citizenship are conceptual siblings is beyond any reasonable doubt. The exact nature of the relationship between the two has been the focus of a bourgeoning theoretical literature (Janoski 1998, Caragata

1999, Kymlicka 2000, Keane 1998, 2003; Mamdani 1996). Some—Beteille (1999) is a good example—have even suggested that the idea of civil society, particularly in its original Western articulation, is inextricably bound up with citizenship. For Keane (2004), such is the linkage between the two that "where there is no civil society there cannot be citizens with capacities to choose their identities, entitlements and duties within a publicly accountable, political-legal framework" (pp. 45-46). A cursory inspection of the African landscape would confirm the partial truism of this position.

In its purest form, civil society provides the critical space (both physical and conceptual) for citizens to become part of the process by which their *lifeworlds* are 'disciplined.' It is this fundamental function that leads many scholars to conclude that there can be no citizenship properly called without a civil society. Yet, in the blinding glare of everyday life, the picture that emerges is one in which both citizens and civil society mutually reinforce one another, rendering the clinical divisions in the literature superficial indeed. In the particular case of Africa, it is also significant to understand that the general flourishing of civil society, both as a tangible movement and as an idea, owes in large part to the search for a more responsive social order by ordinary citizens in respective countries. For many people, civil society was merely a means through which they could find actualisation as *real citizens* of their different countries. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), which are in danger of becoming a short hand for civil society, are mere organisational expressions of this fervent desire (see also Pinkney 2003 and the collection of essays in Burnell and Calvert 2004).

Thabet's other main point relates to the relationship between ethnicity and civil society, and between ethnicity and democracy. He rightly observes that in general, the liberal theory of democracy sees ethnicity as a hindrance to (Africa's) political and economic development,[3] but rejects (rightly I think) the suggestion that the relationship between ethnicity and democracy in particular could be rigidly conceived in unilinear terms. He therefore shows how ethnicity has made a positive contribution in several African countries by managing to serve both state and civil society, although in different degrees. Finally, he proposes an alternative understanding of the relationship between the state, civil society, and ethnic formations using the conceptual lens of what he calls 'hegemonial exchange.' While the debate about the relationship between ethnicity and democracy rages, it seems unarguable at least that ethnicity has played a significant role in the general process of widening the civic sphere in many African countries. In Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya to name just a few, ethnicity has emerged as a category of mobilisation in contexts where existing power arrangements have closed the window for the emergence of credible alternatives.

Mammo Muchie's paper, *Can Civil Society Revive an Emancipatory Project in Africa?* seeks for even more ways of widening this civic sphere. Intellectually speaking, his main concern is about how to evolve a strategic socio-political project for civil society in Africa, a task which, he believes, cannot be embarked upon until the ideological left creates its own definition of civil society. Until then, in the short term, critical attention must be paid to the conditions that can enable existing civil society to exercise agency to fulfill the 'emancipatory project.'

Implicit in Muchie's paper is a critique of the assumed neo-liberal provenance of the dominant understanding of contemporary civil society and in particular the role it is supposed to play in the general social process. For him, the ultimate goal of civil society ought to be the emancipation of Africa. This goal which will continue to elude both researchers and advocates of civil society across the continent for as long as they refuse to challenge the dominant 'econocentric rationality' and replace it with what, controversially, he calls 'pan-Africanist logocentrism.' To this end, Muchie enjoins the building of bridges between civil society and the state *within* respective African countries, and more importantly, between civil society organisations *across* different countries in order to work towards the ideal of pan-African emancipation.

Muchie's presentation received support and criticism in almost equal measure. But its major contribution was to refocus the conferees' collective mind to larger questions about the explanation for the sudden popularity of civil society, and the need to 'reappropriate' the idea for the common good. In linking these concerns with some of the themes which emerged from the previous presentations, Muchie set the tone for a discussion which centred on: the degree of questioning civil society as a concept; the nature of the emerging public space in African countries; the location of civil society in the social matrix, and how best to delineate its boundaries with other realms; and finally the need to devote more attention to the increasingly pertinent issue of the agency of women's groups.

Decentralisation and Integration

Current development discourses in Africa are in the main infused by the twin tropes of decentralisation and integration, the former in the domain of politics and the allocation of power, and the latter with respect to economics. It is

generally held that civil society has a crucial role to play in facilitating both. This is the analytic context of Roch Mongbo and Peggy Tohinlo's paper, *Societie civile et pouvoir des elus dans les processus de decentralisation an Afrique : Une analyse a partir de cas au Benin*. Extrapolating from specific developments in Benin Republic, Mongbo and Tohinlo suggest that the legislative and institutional frameworks of democracy are less favourable to local participation, a condition that appears to present a natural agenda for civil society organisations.

With the emergence of democratisation as a 'growth industry' (Wiarda 2003), scholarly interest in the formal liberalisation and expansion of the political space in African countries has grown. Over the past few years, this enthusiasm has been on the wane following the failure of democratisation to 'deliver the goods' and bring prosperity to those on the lowest rungs of the societal ladder. In any case, a glaring 'participation deficit' has continued to ensure that even social policies which are driven by the best of intentions have not necessarily translated into magical cures. Mongbo and Tohinlo's paper constructs the narrative of how the discourse of decentralisation has emerged from the ruins of this social impasse, the stress being on the imperative of citizen activism and participation for democratic success. They also describe how, in the case of Benin Republic, not too long ago the paragon of citizen activism (Omitoogun and Otite 1996), democracy has been steadily emptied of popular participation.

Decentralisation—especially when conceived broadly in terms of its strategic aim as the democratisation of both economic and political power—looks like a good solution to this problem, and it was generally agreed that civil society has a role to play in bringing this about. The only drawback however is that in reality, and Benin Republic provides a good example, tensions often arise between civil society and elected representatives, leading unwittingly to a situation whereby the solution proffered becomes part of the problem to be solved.

More light was thrown on this and other cognate issues in the papers by Anselme Guezodje and Jean-Bosco Some respectively. Guezodje's paper, *Le Role de la Decentralisation dans le Strategies de Reduction de la Pauvrete en Afrique de l'Ouest: Cas du Benin et du Senegal* compares the impact of decentralisation on poverty reduction in both Benin and Senegal. Bosco-Some's paper, *Le Nous comme differentiel d'integration et de citoyenne* probes the interface between integration and citizenship.

Two main issues arguably course through the three presentations, and these were taken up in the subsequent plenary discussion. First is the extent to which decentralisation

can be said to improve the situation of the poor in terms of granting them access to increased opportunities; and second, the connection between decentralisation and the integration of citizens into the mainstream of public life. A majority of discussants urged caution that decentralisation, has its own limitations as a tool of poverty alleviation and cannot be regarded as a magic wand. There was also a general warning against assuming that concepts like a poverty reduction strategy, or even civil society, which have become undeniably famous, are neutral concepts. With Poverty Reduction Strategies, for instance, there was a general disappointment at its growing uncritical use by development activists to naively legitimise a notion of development, thus ignoring issues of power, both locally and internationally. It was agreed that in order to make progress, important questions about ideas like civil society, decentralisation, integration and citizenship must always be in the forefront of critical attention. For example, how is decentralisation altering or shaping the way the public space is used? Is decentralisation resulting in integration? How does decentralisation affect the way in which the identities of people are shaped as citizens?

Civil Society and Conflict

Arguably the most controversial issue in emerging perspectives on global civil society is its role in the conflict process (compare for example Kaldor 2003 and Keane 2003). The thinking that civil society is the antithesis of conflict belongs to a distinguished intellectual ancestry. Gellner's (1994) famous insistence on civil society as a 'condition of liberty'; Dahrendorf's (1990) characterisation of civil society as 'the anchorage of liberty'; and Locke's (1970) conceptualisation of it as the moral antipode of the state of nature embody this in part. So also does Tester's (1992) description of civil society as "a condition of education, refinement and sophistication as opposed to a condition of barbarism." Drawing on a whole range of contradictory social experiences however, more recent literature (Keane 2004, Edwards 2004) is beginning to come to terms with what Sjorgen (2001) captures as "the relations of domination and conflict that exist within civil society" (p. 40) itself.

This emerging attempt to uncouple the normative understanding of civil society from the evidence of its actual existence could be said to have informed the three papers presented during the session on civil society and conflict. In terms of a rational process of self-understanding, it can also be said to mark a significant milestone in civil society's acknowledgment of its own immersion in the very society, that it earnestly seeks to change. To this end, the three

papers by Hippolyt Pul, Suleiman Khalid and Ebenezer Obadare make use of scenarios from the West African sub-region to suggest the implication of civil society in a whole range of conflicts.

Hippolyt Pul's paper on *Exclusion, Association and Violence: The Civil Society Factor in the Conflicts of Northern Ghana* attempts to answer three important questions: Why are some locales in northern Ghana more prone to violent conflicts than others? What makes some ethnic groups in this part of the country more likely to engage in violent conflicts than others? And why is the Northern Region of Ghana home to ethnic groups that are more likely to engage in violence? In contrast to the overall regrettable tendency in the print and broadcast media to trivialise these conflicts through putting easy and misleading labels on them (for example using such terms as the 'mango war', the 'fish war' and the 'guinea fowl war'), Pul locates the origins of these conflicts in historical factors, including the chieftaincy and land ownership arrangements instituted by the colonial authorities. In addition, he describes how ethnic elites in the uniform of state actors have fomented and/or condoned ethnic wars. Pul also suggests, contrary to the dominant understanding, that recurrent ethnic violence can be properly understood only by bridging analysis at the level of structure and agency with the context of national political evolution.

His most significant contribution however (a fact which equally applies to both Khalid and Obadare), is to transcend the easy characterisations that continue to haunt most analyses of conflicts in Africa, and specifically the role of civil society in them. As Pul rightly points out, civil society organisations, especially those with 'development' agendas, can be "innocent accomplices" in both the generation and sustenance of conflicts.

Suleiman Khalid follows a similar conceptual trajectory in his analysis of *Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Northern Nigeria.* His paper draws its data from a survey of ethno-religious conflicts in northern Nigeria between 1980 and 2002 and examines the overlapping presence of religious, ethnic and economic factors. Most important however, and very much like Pul, he focuses special attention on the role of the Nigerian state and ethnic and faith-based organisations in conflicts and their resolution. If the overall accent of the literature on civil society and conflicts has been on the role of the former in conflict resolution, the value of Pul and Khalid's presentations lies in their joint re-direction of attention to the way in which civil society *simultaneously* stokes and douses the embers of conflict. The implication of this is clear - there are several dimensions to the involvement

of civil society in conflicts which social research must begin to interrogate. These range from civil society as protagonists, to civil society as mediators, or even as victims.

What seems to be even more interesting however is the array of theoretical dilemmas thrown up by this finding: for example, how should we characterise a civil society that is itself conflict-bound and steeped in corruption and nepotism (as in Rwanda for instance), the same ills which it is normatively expected to combat in the state? Is there a completely *civil* civil society? How *civil* should civil society be? And what is the label for that thing that is not civil society but is civically organised? From discussions which ensued, it was clear that there are no infallible answers to these posers, although there was general sympathy for the view that politics in general variously 'instrumentalises' civil society organisations as protagonists, victims and mediators. If this claim is valid, civil society clearly has many properties, of which civility is just one. Depending on the situation, civil groups and the critical mass in general also have a propensity to be 'uncivil.'[4]

This is the theoretical departure point for Ebenezer Obadare's paper on *The Fundmentalist Challenge to Civil Society in Nigeria,* which attempts to account for how civil society is manifested in a society that seems incurably religious. Using the riots spawned by mass protests in the Muslim-dominated north against the Miss World 2002 beauty pageant as backdrop, Obadare teases out the epistemic contradictions between Islamic fundamentalism and the project of civil society. Drawing on Goldfarb (1998) and Habermas (1992) respectively, he argues that fundamentalist violence simultaneously obstructs the forging of, and endangers a truly independent public sphere of critical deliberation constituted by equal citizens. Most important however is his contribution in terms of suggesting that violence, rather than being the opposite of civil society as many have canvassed (see earlier discussion above) is actually one of its ineluctable properties. Obadare's general position on the phenomenon of violence is thus provocatively ambivalent, for while on the one hand he recognises the capacity of violence (particularly fundamentalist violence) to contract the very space that civil society is in principle dedicated to opening up and expanding, he also argues that this should not blind us from seeing the utility of violence as one possible means of actualising citizenship.

There was a general affirmation that besides the mandatory treatment of civil society and conflict, the three papers also provide a framework for a discussion of issues bordering on group rights and entitlement across Africa, and also of ethnic and 'religious citizenship.' As such, the general

debate centred unsurprisingly on the rise of 'political Islam'; on the global clash of secularist and fundamentalist ethics; on the increasing politicisation of religio-ethnic identities, fostering emergence of a diaspora created solely out of ethnic and religious wars; the growing linkage between immigration, conflict and civil society; and the challenges posed to civil society by this chaotic spectacle. It was generally agreed that ethnic heterogeneity on its own does not inevitably produce conflict, a perspective which is strengthened by the case of the Somali state which, though ethnically homogenous, has nevertheless managed to descend into normlessness and clan-based genocide.

Methodological Issues

One consequence of the muddled history of civil society in Africa has been the uncritical conflation of civil society as an idea and as a thing. This problem reared its head time and again during the conference, most famously in the discussion of the role of civil society in conflict situations when discussants made seamless transitions between civil society and civil society organisations (CSOs). This conceptual confusion largely prefigured the debate on methodological issues in civil society research, although it was itself embedded in the broader dilemma of what the idea of civil society suggests in Africa. How do you *look for* civil society in Africa or anywhere for that matter? Is civil society something a researcher might possibly *find*? What unit(s) of analysis are best employed? Is a value-free civil society research possible these days given the huge sums of money being currently poured into civil society 'empowerment' by Northern-based NGOs and governments? And last but not the least, why study civil society at all, and how do we ensure that the outcome of any research is geared towards understanding or creating the right environment for change in Africa?

To be sure, none of these questions are exactly new, given that doubts have even been expressed about the extent to which the study of civil society in the West and Africa for example could be said to be about the same phenomenon. As Fowler once observed,

"The dominant theoretical Anglo-American lens on civil society typically searches for a definition in relation to other dimensions of modern society, most commonly government, business and family. Here the definitional image of civil society is one of a bounded functional domain, sector, sphere or space inhabited by configurations of freely formed associations serving purposes that do not belong to, or are not adequately taken care of, by what is operating outside the boundaries. Typical units of analysis in this structural-functional approach are the number, types and tasks of associations located within the civic boundary" (2002, 5).

The debate at the conference was both timely and useful in terms of providing greater clarification as well as a rare opportunity to hear from both practitioners and scholars who have been involved in civil society research in Africa. In addition, there was also a wide recognition that issues of research validity and reliability rarely enjoy the kind of prominence that they should within the general context of knowledge production in the continent.

The discussion on methodology was prefaced by four presentations across intellectual generations and methodological preferences. Roseline Achieng and Ebenezer Obadare —who are both doctoral students who have recently conducted qualitative research into different aspects of civil society—reflected on their experiences. While Obadare drew on his ongoing research into *The Theory and Practice of Civil Society in Nigeria*, Achieng's presentation focused on *Grounded Theory and Research Methodology*. On the other hand, Anne Floquet's presentation focused on *Action Research*, while Alan Fowler shared some of the challenges faced in conducting a funded research into *Building Community Philanthropy*.

Although no clear 'answers' emerged apparently due to the fact that many of the issues raised *do* not simply admit of 'answers' in that objective sense, the overall discussion was illuminating in terms of drawing attention to the mutually reinforcing issues of the politics and economics of knowledge production. The conference generally agreed on the important constraining role that resources play in determining the method used by researchers, and the fact that more often than not, who determines the 'why' of research automatically determines the method to be used. This realisation has especial significance not only for the study of civil society, but also for social research in Africa in general. In the case of the idea of civil society, it was sadly observed that a large part of the credit for its flourishing goes to external funders who seem interested in imposing a certain vision of state-society relations on the continent as a whole. Wiarda (2003) and in a different context Fowler (2002) have described the dynamics of this process in some detail. It entails, *inter alia*, defining what civil society is and is not, building up the capacity of favoured (mostly urban-based) organisations which are fetishised as embodying the popular weal, and in general determining and shaping the direction of (civil society) research. With regard to valorisation of NGOs and other civil society organisations (CSOs) as alternative agents of development, the fear was expressed that, in the search for their sustainability, external donors (and indeed local recipients) may be unwittingly obviating the emergence of a developmental state in Africa. More significantly, the skewed

master-servant relationship between Northern funders and Southern researchers mimics larger unequal distribution of power and resources between North and South in the contemporary global order.

This power relationship has impacted general social research in some interesting ways. An example is a general discussion about, first, the assumed universality of methodological approaches 'imported' from the West and second, about the difficulties of applying the characteristics of natural science to the social 'sciences.' This discussion should be understood in the context of (1) an emerging imperative to rethink the ways in which knowledge of and about Africa is generated and constructed; and (2) the way in which we construct knowledge in the social sciences in general. Because these issues are themselves traditionally ideologically charged, it was difficult to reach a common ground about how best to proceed. However, the very process of debating them helped underscore how the research process itself is a site of struggle, and some of the most controversial points centred on the transition from methodology to knowledge, the issue of subjectivity, ethics in social research, the sensitivity of subject matter, the language or terminology of research, and how best to separate and distinguish data, information, knowledge and wisdom.

As posited earlier, the discourse on methodology is a global one, although as the foregoing account clearly shows, there are particular reasons why an African debate is especially urgent. Cotonou flagged off a debate that will continue in the foreseeable future, but some comfort can be drawn from Fowler's statement that in this, as in other matters, "people usually have the last say."

Civil Society Engagement in Democratic and Development Initiatives

Part of the initial attraction of the idea of civil society in Africa lay in the expectation that it might act as a vehicle for long-held popular development aspirations. In the early 1990s, it was common to regard civil society as the key to understanding and addressing the political and socio-economic crisis in Africa (Harbeson et al, 1994). Much faith was also invested in the capacity of civil society organisations to engage with authoritarian regimes, expand democratic space (Ibrahim 1997) and assist in the consolidation of democratic ethos. This trust in the ability of civil society to bring about democratic renewal across Africa apparently set the stage for the continuing process of 'strengthening' civil society organisations by major Western donors.

Famously, the empowerment of civil society has not brought the expected social rewards, partly because the very

idea of civil society as *the* source of democratic activism is itself riddled with ambiguity. This paradox is at the heart of the papers by Bertha Chiroro on *The "Civic Limitations of Civil Society" in an Authoritarian State. The Case of the National Constitutional Assembly's (NCA) Struggle for Democratization in Zimbabwe* and Bhekinkosi Moyo on *The Changing Face of Civil Society in Zimbabwe and South Africa*. In both cases, context is of added significance because of the nature of developments currently taking place in the sub-region as a whole, but even more particularly in Zimbabwe, and, to a lesser degree, South Africa.

Chiroro uses the travails of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), the umbrella body of human rights, church and women's organisations to ponder the collective experience of civil society groups struggling for democratic liberation in the context of what, in Zimbabwe, appears to be a genuinely frightening case of 'democratic dictatorship.' She appears to focus exclusively on the limitations of the NCA against the background of its institutional objectives and popular expectation. However, the obvious theoretical value lies in the largely successful attempt to detail the challenges faced by actual civil society in the context of a state that has appropriated all the powers to set the parameters for its operations. The dilemma here is an obvious one. The authoritarian state against which civic organisations take a stand is often the same state that provides the legal and political setting for their existence. While this insight may be generally applicable to state and society globally, the nature of the regime in power is also a crucial factor, for it is this that defines the moral ambit within which civil society and NGOs are allowed to operate. Thus, the insidious attention paid by the Robert Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe to civil society organisations has largely resulted in the shrivelling of the civic space. In South Africa, Moyo suggests that the challenge seems different because civil society organisations are caught between the Scylla of what Zuern (2004) calls a dominant party democracy and the Charybdis of a donor community which is overly prevailing in defining a role for civil society.

Overall, in both countries, and Chiroro and Moyo make this point powerfully. The early euphoria about the progressive possibilities of civil society has largely evaporated to the extent that at the moment, even the idea that civil society represents the public good is itself being questioned in the face of disputation over what constitutes the public good. This issue caused a vigorous debate in the plenary session with questions asked about the identity of civil society and whose interests it ought to defend. Contributors to the debate noted with regret the emergence of what was com-

monly referred to as a 'civil society comprador elite': a middle class elite for whom the 'civil society industry' is just another opportunity to gain a meal ticket (see also Boussard 2003).

Given what has been said earlier about the tendency to attribute magical qualities to civil society, this debate could not have been more welcome. In the event, uncomfortable but necessary questions were asked about the identity of civil society and whose interests it defends or should defend. It was observed that in most of Africa, civil society tends to coalesce around opposition to authoritarian *regimes* at the expense of *issues* that are trans-temporal in nature. As a result, regime types tend to play an undue role in determining the type of civil society that emerges in different countries. There was thus a clear recognition of the imperative to, first, pay increased attention to making civil society organisations more proactive than reactive, think more deeply about the role of external donors in configuring the civic landscape in Africa, and lastly, reflect rigorously on issues of power and its formative effects on civil society.

Incidentally, the question of power enjoys some prominence in Todd Lester's paper on *Media Flows and Community Access to Public Information: Re-Visioning Media Democratization in the Global South*. In broad terms, the paper examines "the processes by which liberalization of the media—as experienced at the local level—can contribute to citizen participation in alternative information systems" (Lester 2004, 1). As processes of globalising continue to sweep societies across the globe, the need for countries of the geopolitical South to preserve their identities and 'tell their own stories' has never been more pressing. Lester's paper is about the intricacies involved in this inexorable process, particularly the challenges of democratising the media, promoting and enabling 'community informatics,' and recognising the value of community access to information as a powerful tool of mobilisation. These issues resonate powerfully across the African landscape in the light of the increasing role that new information and communication technologies - for example the Internet and mobile phones—are playing in the organisation of the public space. A good example is Nigeria where, despite or because of the notorious inefficiency of service providers, mobile phones are emerging as a powerful tool in both the mobilisation *and* organisation of civil society.[5]

Civic Landscapes: The State of Research in North, West, South and East

One fascinating innovation in the conference as a whole was the decision to devote a special session to an overview of the civic landscape in the four geo-political regions of Africa.

This gave participants the opportunity to reflect on developments in their specific regions and compare the situation in others. At the same time, it enabled them to stand back and observe patterns which are common to the continent as a whole. To this end, Roch Mongbo, Ahmed Thabet, and Mammo Muchie gave excellent summaries of developments in the west, north, and in the south and east of the continent respectively. Mongbo's presentation focused on the 'different layers of civil society' in West Africa. He noted the qualified success that has been achieved in terms of mapping the civic landscape in West Africa and defined the practical challenges for actual civil society in terms of the worsening incidence of state-civil society armed conflict, the rising HIV/AIDS pandemic with its potentially disastrous demographic consequences, and the resilience of authoritarian ethos despite the formal end of military rule across the subregion. He concluded, in a notably abstract manner, that what is needed in the sub-region at the moment is "a perspective on the visible and invisible parts of civil society. The challenge is to make the invisible visible with out doing it any harm."

Ahmed Thabet's presentation scours the realms of what is possible in the identified challenge of negotiating between the primordial and civic publics amid the marked predominance of a 'moral' primordial public. More important, he sheds considerable light on the issue of trust and explores what moves trust from the primordial to the public realms. What is it for example that mediates how and whether the state is trusted, and under what conditions do people renounce the primordial to start trusting the state? Furthermore, how do political systems do/not generate/dissipate trust, and how might public confidence be re-captured. According to Thabet, answers to these dilemmas are important because trust is proving increasingly crucial in understanding state-civil society relations in Northern Africa (and indeed the rest of the continent). In fact, according to him, growing state-society mistrust is a contributory factor in the development of civil society organisations in the region.

According Mammo Muchie, the most significant development in Eastern and Southern Africa as a unit is the achievement of civil society in carving out a political space for itself, a pattern which is acknowledged in Bhekinkosi Moyo's paper on *The Changing Face of Civil Society in Zimbabwe and South Africa*. As a result of the expansion of the public sphere, debate is becoming more routine which is a good thing by itself. The obvious blot on what is otherwise an inspiring landscape is the situation in Zimbabwe where opposition to Robert Mugabe's land 'redistribution' policy has set the state against the rump of civil society. Still, there

is evidence that in the sub-region as a whole, civic protest as a means of engagement is rapidly becoming the norm, while the space for democratisation has been nominally, though remarkably, expanded.

Civil Society and Governance

The preceding text shows that civil society has had a growing influence on the political landscape in Africa. Most importantly this manifests in holding power to account, especially in those contexts where there is an obvious democratic deficit, and the mandate of civil society is thus pre-determined. However, what becomes of civil society *after* the establishment of a new democracy is often ignored in the democratic debate. This is the scholarly void that Elke Zuern, drawing on the emerging scenario in South Africa, tries to fill. In her paper titled *Formal Democracy and the Fate of Participatory Governance: Contentious South Africans*, Zuern identifies a fundamental shortcoming of general post-democratic transition literature as that of taking for granted both the *influence* and *content* of the actions of popular associations and movements. This is no doubt an important concern, and many of Zuern's anxieties are beginning to feature in the emerging literature on what has now become known as 'consolidology.'[6] Given the nature of contemporary social transformation in South Africa, particularly the many untold pressures being experienced by social movements and associations, there is every possibility that this relatively new area of democratic study will be enriched. This prospect is increased further by the undoubtedly universal nature of some of the questions that Zuern poses: what role does civil society play in the construction (and this is a vital term) of a new regime after the first democratic elections? How should civil society respond in a 'dominant party democracy' with a strong propensity for the centralisation of authority?

It would seem that Zuern's ultimate fear is about the negative capacity of young democracies with weak institutional roots to retrench and foster the kind of ethos that makes them no different from formal dictatorships. Her tentative answer to this problem is a framework which investigates formal democracies "through an assessment of the opportunities available to and actions taken by opposition actors, including new social movements, the challenges they face and the ways in which they work to construct a new regime through formal as well as informal channels."

If popular associations and movements are finding life difficult in post-apartheid South Africa, the fate of Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) in Kenya is hardly any different. The effect of the political environment on their collective contribution is the focus of Fredrick Wanyama's paper, *Civil Society Organizations and the Challenge of Sustainable Livelihoods in Africa: The Political Context of Community-Based Organizations in Kenya*. This political environment has two dominant features: a 'politics of patronage' which sees politicians patronise the CBOs as "a means of recruiting political support as well as exercising political control at the local level; and a dependence on external funding that literally strips them (the CBOs) of any shred of autonomy." Taken together, these features have raised serious questions about the sustainability of these CBOs, although interestingly, participants could not agree on whether this is a desirable thing or not (see 'Methodological Issues' above). This and related issues also featured in the subsequent sessions on civil society's engagement in development initiatives.

Civil Society's Engagement in Development Initiatives

Constantly hovering above much of the discourse on the role of civil society organisations, particularly NGOs, in initiating and supporting social development is the larger question of what capacity they have in effecting change in the long-term. This question has become even more pertinent with the continuing rise in the number of NGOs in Africa. Kenya, where the total number of voluntary nonprofit organisations was put at over 150,000 two years ago (World Resources Institute 2004, also Opoku-Mensah 2004) is indicative of a continent-wide organisational boom. However, the past few years have seen a rising concern at the fiscal dependence of even the best NGOs. This anxiety—accompanied by deepening scepticism about their ability to muster any influence outside the 'output end' of the political process - has opened a debate about NGOs in the African context. This was the background context of the papers by Anne Floquet, Dossa Aguemon, Peggy Tohinlo, Adefemi Isumonah, and Malick Traore respectively. The papers grappled with the question of civil society/NGOs' involvement in the development process in three African countries— Benin, Nigeria and Mali. There was a common acknowledgment of the paradox of increasing NGO/CSOs' presence as socio-economic conditions in the continent as a whole continue to worsen. While this may not be sufficient to indict development NGOs as a unit of intervention, the paradox was however deemed to be worrisome enough to stimulate a rethink of their role and contributions.

At this juncture, discussions turned again in the direction of the state. It was agreed that its shenanigans notwithstanding, normative capabilities (never mind the reality) still give the state a better chance of delivering development to the people. At the very least, the need for both state and

civil society actors—which in reality are often difficult to separate—to combine efforts was recognised. This has become particularly urgent in those situations where state failure and decay of infrastructure have made both categories of agents/actors necessary partners in the cause of state and societal reconstruction.

How this imagined collaboration unfolds in reality is of course a different matter entirely. Hakan Seckinelgin partly demonstrates a collaboration gap in his paper, *Who Can Help People with HIV/AIDS in Africa?* which uses the relationship between the state and civil society as its theoretical basis. Seckinelgin questions the popular tendency to equate the increased *numbers* of civil society groups in Africa with their *efficiency*. He tests this hypothesis through an appraisal of the intervention of civil society groups attempting to curtail the spread of HIV/AIDS. One of his major findings concerns the glaring disconnect between policy and the actual needs of African communities battling with the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Drawing on a wide empirical canvas (Seckinelgin has been involved in field research in Uganda, Rwanda, Zambia, Botswana and South Africa), he suggests that the intervention of civil society groups is vitiated by the poverty of "sustained and structured frameworks" which are necessary to understand the everyday practices of concerned communities. There are critical continuities between the aims of Seckinelgin's paper and those of more recent literature on foreign intervention in the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa (references). But the core issue, and one which participants explored in some detail, seems to be a more ontological one about the essence of civil society activity and how, as Seckinelgin puts it, it tends to 'produce particular outcomes.'

Civil Society: Resources and Relations

The marked explosion of civil society organisations in Africa, especially NGOs, has been intimately linked to the dynamics of funding. In the same vein, donor caprices have shaped research priorities both for NGOs in particular (Fowler 2000) and civil society in general (Wiarda 2003). Yet, the implications of donor support of NGOs and CSOs remain relatively under-investigated. The papers by Paul Opoku-Mensah on *Restructuring African (Development) Politics: NGOs, the State and Donors in Ghana* and James Senokwanyane on *Statutory Funding Institutions and their Relation to Civil Society: The Case of South Africa* respectively address different facets of this problem. While Opoku-Mensah examines the extent to which the Ghana Association of Private Organizations in Development (GAPVOD), the country's main NGO coordinating institution, is able to

"influence the politics of development in the country," Senokwanyane highlights the challenges faced by South African non profit organisations (NPOs) in accessing statutory funding despite the availability of such finance. In the process, both provide deeper insight into state-civil society relations in the two countries, where broader conceptual ramifications of their studies remain evident.

In the case of Opoku-Mensah, it is about how the dominant, normative literature has "ignored fundamental issues of power that are critical to understanding the role of NGOs in the changing nature of Africa's development politics," a situation which he thinks might be rectified with a historically anchored analysis that privileges the role of donors. This is particularly important in the case of Ghana where "neither the state nor NGOs are autonomous institutional actors, as their policy preferences (including relations) are largely determined by the donor system."

While Senokwanyane's paper reinforces Opoku-Mensah's position about the importance of funding and "assigning analytic primacy to the role of donors," he critically complicates the issue by showing how the challenge is not just limited to the shenanigans of external funders alone. As many NPOs in South Africa are coming to understand, even a seemingly positive development as the liberalisation of the political system can have untold consequences for the regime of funding. As a result of the new democratic dispensation in South Africa, foreign donors continue to re-direct to the state resources which hitherto had been used to directly support civil society. As a result of this shift in funding path, many NPOs have found themselves in a financial crisis which even the establishment of statutory funding institutions has failed to ease. This situation is unlikely to improve for as long as civil society organisations and most states on the continent continue to rely on the same external sources for financial muscle.

Conclusion: Scholarships and Capacity Building for Civil Society Research and Funding in Africa

The final plenary session saw an attempt by participants to draw out critical issues in civil society advocacy and research that had emerged in the course of earlier presentations and discussions. It was acknowledged that more research is required to enhance understanding and deepen collective knowledge of the role civil society in a variety of social contexts. For instance, while the role of civil society organisations in expanding the civic space in African countries received general commendation, there was also a concern at the tendency to view the involvement of civil society within the entire process of social transformation in over-

whelmingly positive terms. Yet, as several examples from various parts of Africa have shown, such is the moral diversity (Lewis 2004) of civil society that it is capable of either facilitating or hindering development, a fact which goes to show how civil society itself is inextricably implicated in the larger social configuration of which it is a part. To further understand this dynamic, participants agreed on the imperative for more comparative research that places developments within individual countries within a larger philosophical stream.

The need for more comparative research inevitably raises the issue of resources, and while the ISTR may not be in a position to fully catalyse this, it is at least a pointer to the fact that more work than is currently possible is needed to advance knowledge of both civil society and African social conditions. While there is little doubt that civil society can be mobilised to intervene positively in Africa's social and economic crises, this is unlikely to happen if our knowledge of the nature and possibilities of civil society itself remains static. Thus, knowledge of civil society must grow if social formations themselves are to be properly understood.

Endnotes

1 See also Fatton, 1995
2 For an overview of the intellectual landscape, see for instance Howell and Pearce 2001.
3 For a variety of perspectives see for example Barber (2001) and Campbell (1997)
4 See Whitehead (2004) for more on the political uses of 'incivility.'
5 For a global perspective on the interface between mobile phones and citizen mobilisation, see Pertierra 2002.
6 See for example Beetham 2002 and Held (1993).

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