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Struggles for systems that nourish: southern Africa civil society contributions and challenges to the creation of flourishing societies

Mutizwa Mukute and James Taylor

This paper discusses the concept, contexts, evolution, contributions, and challenges of civil society in the southern Africa based on three case studies of Malawi, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. It concludes by identifying common patterns and their implications for civil society and civil society organisations in southern Africa.

Luttes pour des systèmes qui nourrissent : contributions de la société civile en Afrique australe et défis pour la création de sociétés prospères
Ce document traite du concept, des contextes, de l'évolution, des contributions et des défis de la société civile en Afrique australe sur la base de trois études de cas menées au Malawi, en Afrique du Sud et au Zimbabwe. Il se conclut en identifiant des schémas communs et leurs implications pour la société civile et les organisations de la société civile en Afrique australe.

Luchas a favor de sistemas de fomento: contribuciones y desafíos enfrentados por la sociedad civil de África del Sur para crear sociedades prósperas
Centrándose en tres estudios de caso realizados en Malawi, Sudáfrica y Zimbabue, el presente artículo examina el concepto, los contextos, la evolución, las contribuciones y los retos que enfrenta la sociedad civil en el sur de África. Finaliza identificando los patrones en común y las implicaciones que éstos tienen tanto para la sociedad civil como para sus organizaciones en el sur de África.

Lutas por sistemas que alimentam: contribuições da sociedade civil do sul da África e desafios para a criação de sociedades prósperas
Este artigo discute o conceito, contextos, evolução, contribuições e desafios da sociedade civil no sul da África baseado em três estudos de caso de Malauí, África do Sul e Zimbábue. Ele conclui identificando modelos comuns e suas implicações para a sociedade civil e organizações da sociedade civil no sul da África.

KEY WORDS: Civil society; Conflict and reconstruction; Governance and public policy; Labour and livelihoods – Economics; Rights; Sub-Saharan Africa

Introduction

This paper explores the role of the social and economic justice aspect of civil society in Southern Africa at a time when global economic and political forces are re-aligning around the need to access resources to fuel economic growth. It links the development of this aspect of civil society to the history of countries in the region: a history shaped by previous extractive regimes that have concentrated (and exported) wealth while impoverishing the majority of indigenous populations. It posits that the history of the region is important at this time as a reminder of who pays the real cost of economic development. The paper looks at how civil society responds to this injustice and to the impoverishment of human and ecological systems that accompany it. It ends by raising questions around the challenges facing civil society in its ongoing attempts to establish systems that nourish as opposed to impoverish.

Although not an exhaustive study of the whole region, in this paper southern Africa refers to the region that includes the 15 member states of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). While the major focus is on civil society activities over the last 20 years, the paper also covers prior developments that have given rise to the contemporary issues that civil society is responding to. It highlights the civil society organisations' (CSOs) responses consolidating around human rights and good governance; and economic justice associated with the redistribution of productive resources. It links the current structural economic injustice to colonisation and the resultant dispossession and displacement of indigenous peoples. This continued after independence as the former master said to the black man, "*You take the crown and I will keep the jewels*" (Mandaza 1999, 81). The established systems of wealth extraction and concentration have been sustained partly because of present day corruption by the elite (Pellicer et al. 2011) and a new wave of land grabbing (Palmer 2008).

Human rights and governance issues have arisen from the entrenched culture of violence and impunity that was cultivated during colonial conquest, and continued through the military liberation struggles, and authoritarianism and (self-righteous) intolerance by post-independence governments (Edwards 2009; Sachikonye 2012). Strong traditional hierarchical and conservative systems in countries like Swaziland further result in human rights abuses that civil society is driven to confront.

The concept of civil society

Generally civil society refers to the arena outside the family, the state, and the market which is created by individual, voluntary, and collective actions to advance shared interests (Belay, Firmin, and Pegus 2012). This paper focuses on the formal and informal, traditional and modern, secular and religious actions of civil society, aimed at the development of a society with greater social and economic equity and democracy (Edwards 2009). Civil society works towards achieving this by promoting accountability, democracy, and the rights of citizens, and creating alternative solutions to the distribution of power and resources (Beauclerk, Pratt, and Judge 2011). It exists alongside and in relation to other societal systems such as government and business (Perlas 2000).

In southern Africa CSOs are a heterogeneous community that includes humanitarian charities, trusts, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community based organisations (CBOs), women's organisations, faith-based organisations (FBOs), professional associations, trade unions, credit and burial associations, self-help groups, social movements, neighbourhood associations, business and economic empowerment associations, youth organisations, student unions, farmer organisations, coalitions, independent media, independent research institutes, and advocacy groups (Kaapama et al. 2007; Edwards 2009). The concept excludes political parties.

Key societal issues and civil society responses

The nature of civil society and its interventions is determined by context. This paper identifies three interrelated phases that created different contexts for civil society in southern Africa: colonial; decolonisation; and independence. Civil society contributions in these contexts inform our conclusion that it has struggled for systems that nourish to replace those that impoverish. It is worth noting that the evolution and associated contributions of civil society are not neatly bound, but rather iterative and messy.

Colonial period and the struggle for racial justice

During colonial and minority rule, governments and the business sector worked together to promote systems that enriched the minority and impoverished the local populations under different forms of racial discrimination. Civil society in the region responded by tackling racial discrimination and associated policies and laws. For example, in Zimbabwe, in the 1950s the Inter-Racial Association of Southern Rhodesia was formed to address inter-racial issues while the workers unions such as the African Workers' Voice Association embarked on strikes and demonstrations for improved wages and working conditions (Mlambo 2009). The net effect of the colonial period on present-day issues that civil society has to deal with is the skewed distribution of productive resources, which are largely in the hands of non-indigenous peoples (Shivji 2007).

Decolonisation and the struggle for majority rule

During decolonisation, which took place from the 1960s to 1994, southern African countries used three avenues to gain independence and majority rule: peaceful negotiation and handover involving little or no violence; armed struggle; and mass resistance. The responses of civil society in these different circumstances varied, but the unmet rights and needs of the oppressed were a significant driver in the organising of civil society. One of the current negative issues that emerged from the decolonisation process is a culture of violence and impunity that accompanied liberation struggles (Bourne 2011), which has given rise to the need for conflict transformation and reconciliation (Colvin 2007). African nationalism and armed struggle bred intolerance of opposing voices and nurtured authoritarianism (Sachikonye 2012). During the negotiations and struggles for independence, civil society's contribution included the provision of humanitarian assistance, civic education, and building political consciousness. CSOs that played a key role during this era included women's clubs such as *Jekesa Pfugwa* (enlighten the mind), in Zimbabwe; FBOs such as Catholic Commission of Peace and Justice (CCJP); and trade unions such as the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), in South Africa. Decolonisation processes had the negative effect of perpetuating cultures of violence, impunity, and intolerance that civil society must deal with today.

Independence, transitional justice, expansion of political freedoms and economic justice

In the last 20 years, nearly all SADC member states have achieved independence: countries such as Madagascar, Zambia, Malawi, Botswana, and Swaziland gained independence in the 1960s; Angola and Mozambique in the 1970s; and Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa in 1980, 1990, and 1994 respectively. For most southern African countries, the immediate

post-independence period was a honeymoon period because people believed that the new governments would deliver on the people's aspirations. Consequently, CSOs tended to collaborate with majority rule governments. They continued to provide humanitarian assistance, capacity development, and engaged in developmental work to support government initiatives. In some countries they went further and provided input in peace and reconciliation initiatives.

During the post-independence period disillusionment emerged with majority governments that did not deliver on the liberation promises on economic and political emancipation. For example, in Zimbabwe at independence, 67 per cent of national income and the bulk of the resources belonged to 3 per cent of the population, mostly white farmers and a small black bourgeoisie, and in the nine years after independence, 97 per cent of bank loans went to white-owned businesses (Orner and Holmes 2011, 479). In South Africa economic power remains in the hands of a small (largely unchanged) elite with the gap between rich and poor one of the highest in the world and growing (Pellicer et al. 2011). In general these governments made improvements in social services such as education, health, and housing; and ending systems of racial discrimination. Governments' limited achievements have been linked to the uneven international playing field, difficulties in managing structural adjustment programmes, corruption by the political elite and different forms of favouritism, and inability to redistribute national wealth fairly (Pellicer et al. 2011; Sachikonye 2012). Some governments such as those of Malawi, Swaziland, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Zimbabwe have had challenges in good governance and human rights. People's lack of access to land and mineral resources is a commonly recurring issue in the region. Consequently a vital part of civil society action is currently concerned with constitutional, political, electoral, and economic reforms, including in some countries reforms of the judiciary and security, and reconciliation and conflict prevention (Godsäter and Söderbuam 2008; Church and Civil Society Forum 2010).

Notable contributions of southern African civil society

Focusing on civil society contributions over the last 20 years, during which all southern African states were independent, these contributions can be organised around (a) expanding political freedoms; and (b) increasing access to productive resources.

Struggles to expand political freedoms

One of the most important areas in which CSOs have made a meaningful contribution is in constitutional reform and protecting gains made in that area. For example, in South Africa CSOs participated in drafting the constitutional framework for the new government. In Zimbabwe the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), and the Church and Civil Society Forum have contributed to the rewriting of the constitution (Church and Civil Society Forum 2010). Civil society in Malawi also successfully used mass protests to stop the second post-colonial President from changing the constitution to introduce an open term system for the presidency (Malunga 2012). Efforts to protect the rule of law at interstate level are exemplified by the work of the Civil Society Forum, the Southern African Litigation Centre (SALC), and the SADC Lawyers Association (SADC LA) who have been fighting to save the SADC Tribunal, which SADC member states suspended. The SADC LA and the Pan African Lawyers' Union (PALU) submitted a request to the African Human Rights Court to review the legality of limiting the mandate of the court from inter-state to intra-state matters (Freedom House 2012). The ruling on this is still awaited at the time of writing this paper.

Other important areas in which southern African CSOs have contributed are civic education, democratic citizenship, and human rights. The Namibian Institute for Democracy has

championed civic education, as has the Zimbabwe Civic Education Trust (ZIMCET), which has, in addition, set up peace committees to spearhead peace and tolerance of divergent views. FBOs in Madagascar have been key in promoting civic education, democratic culture and conflict prevention. Against a background of gender injustice, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, civil society in southern Africa has fought for the rights of women and children and for state-supported treatment of those infected. The Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa and the Southern African Network of AIDS Service Organisations (SANASO) have successfully lobbied governments to expand their responses to the pandemic (Godsäter and Söderbuam 2008). CSOs such as Women for Change in Zambia, Women and Law in Southern Africa (WILSA), Gender Links, and the Southern African Gender Protocol Alliance (SAGPA) have successfully lobbied their respective governments to implement health and development programmes that are gender sensitive and increase the share of women positions in strategic institutions. In the DRC, where over 200,000 women have been raped by armed men since 1998, CSOs such as Search for Common Ground (SFCG), are effectively working with the armed forces to prevent sexual and gender violence (SFCG 2012).

CSOs have also worked to enhance the credibility of the democratic electoral processes. In Malawi, around 30 years after majority rule, civil society used mass protests to press the first post-colonial President to expand their political freedoms (Immink et al. 2003), which resulted in the ushering of formal democracy and holding of multiparty elections in the mid-1990s. In Namibia the Council of Churches of Namibia, the Namibian Non-Governmental Organisations' Forum, and the Namibian Society of Human Rights have fostered public confidence in the electoral process by ensuring transparency (Kaapama et al. 2007), work that has also been undertaken by the Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network to a limited extent.

After a sustained history of human rights abuses southern African CSOs have contributed to national healing and reconciliation initiatives in the post-independence period. These initiatives include truth recovery, trauma counselling, victim support services, memorialisation and reparations, and the development of cultural models of reconciliation (Colvin 2007; NANGO 2010). Such CSOs include the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum and the Nairobi-based Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD), which operates in 20 post-conflict African countries, including Mozambique, DRC, Tanzania, and Angola. In South Africa, the Institute for the Healing of Memories is one example of a number of organisations involved in this work.

Struggles to increase access to wealth

Economic justice remains a key theme for southern African civil society. Some of the focus has been on addressing relations between southern African states and the developed world. Civil society work is focusing on debt cancellation, better trade terms, and land resource rights. Within countries, civil society has been lobbying for more transparent budgeting and equitable distribution of national income; against corruption between government and the private sectors; and towards increased local ownership of means of production. Examples of CSOs driving this agenda are the Southern African Centre for Economic Justice (SACEJ), the Southern African People's Solidarity Network (SAPSN), the Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development (ZIMCODD) (Godsäter and Söderbuam 2008), Zimbabwe's Affirmative Action Group (AAG) and Indigenous Business Women's Organisation (IBWO), and Namibia's Indigenous People's Business Council. The difficulty is that across the region, the benefits have tended to accrue to the elite.

In agriculture, genetic resources and land have become important economic justice issues. This explains why CSOs such as Participatory Ecological Land Use Management (PELUM) Association, the Eastern and Southern African Small Scale Farmers' Forum (ESAFF) and Biowatch are

lobbying against corporate takeover of the agricultural production chain, where corporations create farmer dependence on them through terminator technology which ensures that farmers cannot recycle seed (Mzinga 2005). There is a new wave of land grabbing by foreign companies and governments (from the West and the East), which has partly been inspired by finite nature of oil and the demand for biofuel to replace it, and the surge in food prices which expose developed countries with low natural resources to food shortages (Palmer 2008; Hall 2011). When the government of Madagascar tried to lease over half its arable land for biofuel crop production to an Asian company, civil society responded with demonstrations in the country, contributing to the overthrow of the government (Ramiaramanana 2010). Biofuel-based land deals have been made in countries such as Zambia, DRC, and Angola (Hall 2011).

The Pan African Programme on Land and Resources Rights (PAPLRR) and LandNet Africa are two leading CSOs that have provided a framework for civil society engagement with land rights (Saruchera and Odhiambo 2004). However, PAPLRR has been forced to close because donors withdrew funding (Palmer 2008). The Land Campaign Coalition of Mozambique has participated in national land advocacy issues with some degree of success (Saruchera and Odhiambo 2004). In Zambia, Oxfam successfully lobbied for local people to secure land rights over land that had been previously the property of mining companies and absentee landlords in the Copperbelt (Palmer 2008).

Conclusion: major dilemmas faced by civil society in southern Africa

This paper shows the growth of a sector of civil society in southern Africa has been a response to the evolving needs and issues of society in the region – through colonialism, de-colonisation, and the honeymoon period of early independence into the present. Struggles to expand political freedoms, and increase access to wealth, have been at the heart of this growth. Although progress has been made in these areas, much work remains for civil society to do.

Over the past 20 years southern African CSOs have been formalised as a part of the funded development aid sector. In the process they have become highly dependent on international funding, which does not enable them to strategically tackle structural economic injustice, beyond short-term service delivery projects or social enterprise initiatives (Berkhout 2011; Civil Society @ Crossroads 2012). Donor dependence has sometimes led to a disconnect between CSOs and citizens, resulting in citizens' mass actions involving new and traditional forms of activism (CIVICUS 2011). This is illustrated by recent mass actions in Madagascar and Malawi. Southern African CSOs therefore face the challenge of contributing to fundamental and systemic societal change, which involves confronting powerful and dominant political and economic societal forces. This challenge is made more difficult as independent advocacy for reforming democratic governance "*does not have much resource support*" (Civil Society @ Crossroads 2012, 15).

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