

CIVIL SOCIETY EFFORTS IN IMPROVING ACCOUNTABILITY IN AFRICA

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Introduction

You cannot expect what you do not inspect

‘Chaos is king and human rights go begging’ in sub-Saharan Africa today, according to Peter Schwab (2001: 67). Commentators believe countries like Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Northern Uganda, Darfur, Somalia, Ivory Coast and Zimbabwe epitomize Africa. In many countries, state institutions have been eroded and there is no effective government to impose order, administer justice, or guarantee human socio-economic rights. Civil society faces a massive challenge to address these issues. A strong civil society is needed to introduce, encourage and cultivate a culture of performance and accountability by service providers.

This paper will discuss the status of civil society in Africa, civil society efforts in social accountability, their opportunities, challenges and issues facing them in their social accountability efforts.

What is civil society?

Ants united can carry a dead elephant to their cave

Fowler (2002: 287 – 300) describes civil society as an area for voluntary formal and informal *collective* citizen engagement distinct from families, state and profit seeking organizations.

Civil society comprises organizations of citizens that come together to pursue interests and purposes for the good of all. They include NGOs, community groups, labor unions, professional associations, faith based organizations and parts of the media and academia. They operate at all levels from grassroots levels at village and community to national and international levels (The Commonwealth Foundation, 2004: 11).

A common mistake is to equate civil society to NGOs. Obviously NGOs are a major player among civil society organizations but they are not the only ones. Of late it is being observed that other players including social movements, social organizations, nationalist and religious groups are gaining ascending prominence in civic engagement with government and other power holders (Nkwachukwu, 2003: 1 – 15; Kaldor, 2003: 12). Social organizations, social movements, religious organizations and various forms of traditional organizations tend to have more social legitimacy than NGOs. They are an

expression of the people's own values. They are institutionalized as they form part and parcel of the people's life. The people's attachment and ownership of them is higher. One evidence of this is that people are willing to voluntarily support the institutions' continued existence through their own contributions. NGOs on the other hand are usually seen as transactional organizations. People expect the NGOs to give them rather than making contributions to them. They are less attached to the NGOs and they see the NGOs' core business as resource provision rather than a means to express who they are. Most NGOs rarely become entrenched as institutions among the people. When an NGO cuts off resource provision to the people, it almost always loses its relevance among the people it serves. What the foregoing means is that rural people's membership organizations are better able to represent the poor than NGOs and that grassroots organizations are preferable to those induced from outside (Agriculture and Natural Resources Team, 2004: 3). But a key challenge bedeviling these types of organizations in contexts of poverty is lack of capacity due to low political consciousness and lack of economic power. Building capacity for civic engagement with power holders therefore must not be limited to NGOs and NGOs should not monopolize discourses on social accountability.

Fowler (2005: 2) observed that NGOs may be displaced as agents of structural change by member based activist and other civic entities, such as religious institutions. For instance, the church played a crucial role and succeeded in thwarting the unconstitutional third term campaign by the former president in Malawi strengthening the argument that the church or religious institutions may be the most powerful civil society expression in Africa. Though many African presidents have managed to break the spirit and dreams of their people, none has ever succeeded in breaking the church (Lamb, 1987: 143).

The foregoing however does not mean that the church in Africa always plays an active civic role. For example, a recent study by Dorman (2002: 75 – 92) on relations between the church and state in Zimbabwe revealed that although the church may play a critical role in opening up space for debate, the state may still co-opt and weaken churches in its effort to retain hegemony.

What is the contribution of civil society?

Civil Society organizations contribute to development in many ways. According to the Commonwealth Foundation (2004: 11), they can:

- raise awareness and understanding of development policies, laws and regulatory institutions.
- provide opportunities for stakeholders to communicate with governance institutions and elected representatives. In particular civil society organizations can help give voice to marginalized groups.

- provide enriching input into discussions about development policy and implementation strategies. They can suggest and advocate for new perspectives, policies and methodologies.
- make citizens more aware of what social and economic development decisions are being taken, by whom and from what options, on what grounds with what expected results and with what resources to support implementation.
- can play a crucial ‘watchdog’ role in monitoring the implementation and effects of national and international programs and policies. By increasing public accountability in this way civil society organizations are promoting both democracy and development.

What is accountability?

When you point a finger of blame at another, the remaining four are pointing back at you

Accountability for civil society can be seen in three ways. The first one is the civil society’s efforts in holding government and other power holders accountable for their decisions, actions and results. This is known as *social accountability*. The second form of accountability is to donors who finance their work. This is also called *upward accountability*. The third aspect is how accountable the CSOs are to the people they serve. This is referred to as *downward accountability*.

Integrity is a key issue among civil society organizations’ efforts in social accountability. There is often more energy and enthusiasm in efforts aimed at holding government and other power holders accountable as compared to their own accountability. It is important to remember that *when you point a finger of blame at another, the remaining four are pointing back at you*. This means that there is more work to do in terms of ensuring own accountability in order to be effective in holding others accountable. Efforts aimed at holding government and other power holders accountable therefore cannot be and should not be separated from efforts at own accountability. Some observers believe that CSOs efforts at social accountability are being undermined because the CSOs themselves are facing an internal accountability crisis (Fowler, 2006: 2).

Finally, accountability means being accountable to the mission and values of the organization or group. The mission articulates the identity of the organization or group, why it exists and whom it serves and how it will serve them. The values articulate what behaviors the people must embrace in order to serve their constituents better. The values articulate the high quality societal standards the people in the organization or group must embody.

What is promoting civil society engagement in accountability?

The river that forgets its source will soon dry up

This paper will concentrate on social accountability. It is important to understand the factors that are giving rise to social accountability efforts in the world in general and in Africa in particular. McNeil and Mumvuma (2006: 7) identified four key developments on the continent that have given rise to social accountability efforts in Africa. These are: the decentralization and structural adjustment reforms implemented in a number of governments, the antipoverty strategies that many African governments adopted in the 1990s, a history of poor service delivery as highlighted by the MDGs and lastly the need to fight corruption. These trends have led to creation and revival of civil service alliances and coalitions on the continent.

Decentralization and structural adjustment reforms

Most countries in Africa have adopted decentralization but differ in their degrees of implementation. Generally the adoption of decentralization has not enhanced public service delivery mostly due to low downward accountability. In much of Africa, there has been and continues to be more upward than downward accountability. For instance, Isooba (2005: 46) observed that,

“In Uganda, public accountability is an upward issue – towards the direction of where the money is coming from. Local government officials account to central government, the providers of funds. They see no reason to account to local people because they do not have power – the money they can give”.

This observation and the poor performance of structural adjustment reforms have led to the birth of a number of civil society organizations to bring social accountability. Examples include the Gender Budgeting Initiative of the Tanzania Gender Network Program. The initiative was started to take advantage of the opening up of the Tanzanian economy to the world by campaigning for democratization of the budgeting process and more gender sensitivity in the budgeting process.

Mohan (2002: 146) however, observed that strengthening civil society organizations in Ghana for example, led to alienating the local government and civil organizations and actually undermined the longer term aim of building citizen rights. Decentralization efforts and strengthening civil society must be harmonized to create synergy.

Anti poverty strategies

Poverty reduction strategy papers instituted mostly by the World Bank and IMF in the 1990s was supposed to be a participatory process with the civil society playing a key role. This led to the birth of many social accountability initiatives in Africa.

In October, 2000, civil society in Zambia galvanized itself by forming the NGO network, Civil Society for Poverty Reduction (SCP) in order to enable it to interact more meaningfully with government and provide systematic and compelling inputs into the PRSP process (Mpepo and Seshamani, 2005: 59).

In 2001, the Social Enterprise Development Foundation of West Africa formed the HPC Watch to mobilize the Ghanaian civil society organizations to take part in demanding transparent and equitable distribution of the HIPC fund (Kamara and Yeboah, 2005: 32).

Public service delivery and Millennium Development Goals

The challenge to meet the millennium development goals and the realization of poor service delivery as a norm in most African countries has led to the birth of a number of social accountability initiatives. In 1994, civil society organizations formed the Civil Society Coalition for Quality Basic Education (CSQBE) in Malawi. The aim was to reverse the eroding standards of basic education after the introduction of free primary education mostly through tracking and monitoring expenditure on education to ensure that adequate funds are allocated and that they are used appropriately. Similar initiatives were established in Tanzania and South Africa.

Corruption and general mistrust of government

Misuse of public funds by public servants and politicians is rampant on the continent. In addition most elections on the continent leave a good proportion of the population with feelings of disillusionment strengthening feelings of mistrust in government in general. With many governments resisting the need to win elections with at least 50%, many current governments do not enjoy the legitimacy they require from the people.

Though governments have formed structures that are aimed at strengthening democracy like the office of the ombudsman and anti-corruption bureaus, these structures are often toothless. This perceived gap has led to the birth of many civil society organizations on the continent. For instance, recently, soon after the president fired the director of the anti-corruption bureau and the Director of public persecutions for arresting the former president on corruption and theft of public funds charges, civil society organizations galvanized themselves to form the Civil Society Coalition Against Corruption.

In Ghana, the Centre for Budget Advocacy (CBA) was formed to provide information on the budgeting process to local people as government had shown little interest in demonstrating transparency on the budgeting process and letting ordinary people participate in the process. The Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN) in Malawi was formed with economic and budget literacy as its core business.

What difference has civil society made in social accountability?

The cricket finished a long journey by hoping

Though generally weak institutionally, CSO networks and coalitions have made some contributions to social accountability in terms of representing civil society, developing relationships with policy making structures and even in achieving some results. In many

countries an alternative voice and opinions to government now exist and are acceptable and expected. A part from a few countries with a robust civil society like South Africa and Kenya the magnitude of these contributions, however is open to debate. In a research carried out in Malawi some government respondents were at best ambivalent about the value of CSO networks – they questioned their capacity on both organizational and individual levels which they said needed to be surmounted before they could earn the confidence of government before they could truly listen to them. One government official observed,

“the role of CSOs engaging with government is taken seriously but not the actual CSOs which are there” (James and Malunga, 2006: 3).

However, like the journey of a thousand miles that begin with the first step, McNeil and Mumvuma (2006: 18) identify four main areas in which civil society has achieved some notable results. These are enhanced citizen awareness and participation, increased civil society influence, upgraded analytical and financial reporting capacity, and improved government practices.

Enhanced Citizen Awareness and Participation

MEJN in Malawi and CBA in Ghana for example have managed to raise the awareness of the ordinary people on the budgetary processes. Live radio and TV phone in programs, use of print media and public meetings have contributed to public literacy on the budgeting process and people’s critique on the budget performance by government. A number of think tanks have also been established. NGOs in Mozambique were instrumental in making local communities aware of the threat of land reforms. Their subsequent campaign for the law to be revised was largely successful (Agriculture and Natural Resources Team, 2004: 22).

Increased civil society influence

Governments are becoming more aware of the importance of being pro-poor in the budgeting processes for example. According to a representative of MEJN, lobbying for increasing the pro-poor budget lines in the budget lines of the national budget, the government increased the pro-poor budget lines from 9 – 22. Similar results were observed in Zambia, Zimbabwe and Ghana in budgetary allocation shifts in favor of the poor (McNeil and Mummvuma, 2006: 19). In Kenya, the CSO Pastoralist Strategy Group lobbied successfully for pastoralist areas and concerns to be covered by the Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPA) and then incorporated into the PRSP (Agriculture and Natural Resources Team, 2004: 22).

Upgraded and Financial Reporting Capacity

Because of the need to be more accountable, governments are being forced to upgrade and improve their financial reporting especially to the public. McNeil and Mumvuma (2006: 19) reported that as a result of South Africa’s Institute for Democracy’s research,

the provincial government in Eastern Cape acknowledged weaknesses in existing financial management as a result of the findings leading to a strategic planning process.

Improved government practices

Poverty monitoring committees promote dialogue between ordinary people and government officials and politicians to encourage accountability. McNeil and Mumvuma (2006: 20) for example observed that Zimbabwe's Center for Total Transformation has helped reduce corruption within rural schools in Mazowe district and led to the improved delivery of educational services. School authorities are now aware that community members are closely monitoring them and that they must be publicly accountable for the decisions and actions they take. James and Malunga (2006: 11) in their study of CSO networks in Malawi observed that though the magnitude and sustainability of CSO networks' contribution to improving government practices is open to debate, it is impossible to tell how government would behave if they knew that no one was acting as a watchdog to its behavior and activities.

An observation on civil society and civil society organizations

The above examples on the performance of social accountability efforts do not give a clear difference between *civil society organizations* and *civil society*. A difference should be made between civil society and civil society organizations because the rise of civil society organizations does not necessarily mean a corresponding strength in civil society. A number of factors account for the strength of civil society. For example, in South Africa 25% of the population is part of the informal sector; in most of Africa it is more than 80% (Labuschagne, 2003: 19). Despite the rise of 'civil society organizations' in these countries these people are rendered powerless as a traditional group because of illiteracy, poverty and lack of access to economic and political power. This also explains why, in addition to its unique historical context, civil society in South Africa is stronger than in the other African countries. This also explains why civic empowerment efforts and basic service provision need to strengthen each other. The real challenge in much of Africa is *not to develop 'civil society organizations' as such but to transform a poor, passive, frightened and easily manipulated people into a vibrant civil society that is able to engage the state productively.*

What influences the impact of civil society?

When the beat of the drum changes so must the step of the dance

Despite the on-going challenges, there is a growing collective momentum for a culture of democracy and accountability. Governments and public institutions are increasingly coming to realize that they are expected to be accountable. The relevance and legitimacy of civil society is beyond doubt. This growing space is their greatest opportunity.

Civil society organizations however are facing a number of challenges in their social accountability role. According to the World Bank (2005) on their study in 3 countries Angola, Guinea Bissau and Togo, found that:

- ***Socio-economic contexts affect the ways in which citizens, CSOs and states interact.*** The three country cases represent different stages of conflict to stability among African countries and the distinct challenges for CSOs in each situation. In Angola, extensive donor presence during conflict has led to an extensive yet uncoordinated CSO landscape dominated by high capacity international NGOs. There is a wide range of community based organizations implementing projects. In areas with less NGO presence political parties and religious groups fill the vacuum. Guinea Bissau with a weak state, its citizens compensate by creating CBOs to provide basic services which were supposed to be provided by government. Support to these initiatives by local and international NGOs is characterized by a lack of investment in institutional development and sustainability. In Togo, repressive state leading to donor cutbacks has created a situation in which both the government and civil society are not able to provide basic services. The situation has also led to a proliferation of fraudulent NGOs taking advantage of poor communities.
- ***The context determines the role of the CSOs*** – when public services have broken down due to conflict or a weak public sector, NGOs, religious groups and other CSOs tend to concentrate on providing basic service (a role normally played by government) instead of advocacy and governance work. In addition communities with insufficient basic services do not put much value on advocacy work and governance efforts. High poverty levels in much of Africa make advocacy work among the people a lower priority. A workshop on pro-poor budget tracking with participants from Zambia, Tanzania, Malawi, Kenya and Ghana observed that while there are many CSOs in Africa very few of them are committed to social accountability efforts as most concentrate on meeting the basic needs of the people.
- ***Donor funding practices are characterized by fragmentation and short termism and do not promote institutional development.*** This reinforces upward rather than downward accountability. Social accountability efforts however will only make rapid progress if they consciously and actively make ‘power reversals’ to downward accountability from donors and CSOs themselves as part of their core business.

Outstanding issues

Many people smear themselves with mud and then complain that they are dirty

An Africa wide conference held in Accra, Ghana on 3 – 5 May 2005 on civil society and social accountability concluded that,

“African people have political, social, cultural and economic rights to demand social accountability from public officials and those rights have antecedents in traditional and cultural values and beliefs. The conference observed that social accountability initiatives in Africa have gone beyond the incipient stage and that a critical mass of practitioners

now exists and what they need is more networking and support to sustain and scale up their achievements”.

As civil society organizations ponder how to scale up their achievements, a key issue that they need to think through is what leverage they have in holding the government to account. What if government chooses to ignore them? What power do they have to bring sanctions or ‘punishment’ on government so that government can be forced to listen? If there is no sanction or punishment not much can happen. In order to exert this leverage over government and other power holders, civil society organizations need to*:

- ***Put their house in order*** – they must ‘be prepared to be done to them what they are doing to government’. They must demonstrate downward accountability just as they demand government to be accountable to the people. When they demonstrate downward accountability the people will identify with them. Government will only listen when they fear that the people identify with the civil society organizations. When the people identify with the civil society organizations, the civil society organizations can use civil disobedience – the ability to bring popular unrest is the real power of civil society. Currently, not many civil society organizations have this power.
- A precondition for social accountability is ***information that must be placed in the hands of empowered people who can act on it***. CSOs must be able to say, “this official has stolen your money amounting to so much and here are the options you can take to recover your money or to get him or her to account and here are the support mechanisms when you want to take action”. Civil society should be able to use information to mobilize civic power and exert leverage on the government. Most activities like radio and TV phone ins to discuss an obvious problem or drama are not effective. They often leave people ‘laughing more than fired up to take popular action’. Accurate information is the most powerful tool and the most scarce resource in social accountability efforts. Most CSOs are constrained by low capacities in research, documentation and dissemination skills. Most local CSOs cannot attract and retain high caliber personnel. In addition, getting access to accurate information from public institutions is a big challenge in many countries in Africa.
- ***While donors are interested to fund social accountability, they are at the same time too careful not to be perceived to be ‘using local civil society to undermine government’***. This limits their funding to social accountability efforts. In addition, because of the relationship of dependence between the CSOs and donors, CSOs find it difficult to challenge the donors and international NGOs to surface and confront contradictions in their funding and other practices. Social accountability efforts must be directed at donors with the same zeal and pressure as they are directed at government. CSOs must help donors and international NGOs to see that *many people smear themselves with mud and then complain that they are dirty* i.e donors and international NGOs put blockages to CSOs through their funding patterns and practices and then complain that there is no impact from the CSOs. According to Edwards (2005: 7) for example, donors and international NGOs need to change

power relations on a scale large enough to create shifts in the areas of class, gender and race – they need to support efforts within themselves and among the CSOs in change in personal attitudes, values and behavior. They need to establish strong connections with social movements and other players that are more entrenched in the political processes that are essential to sustained change. They also need to get to grips with the rise of religion as one of the most powerful forces for change in the world today.

- Korten (198: 147 – 148); 1990: 115 – 127) identified four stages of CSOs as: relief and welfare, local self-reliance, sustainable systems development; and people's movement that promote a broader social vision. The first stage involves the NGO/CSO in direct delivery of services to meet an immediate deficiency experienced by the beneficiaries. Local self-reliance, on the other hand concerns involvement in long term development work or capacity building. Sustainable systems development converts involvement in the larger institutional and policy context affecting the people. They work beyond individual communities and seek changes in specific policies and institutions at local, national and global levels. People's movements promoting a broader social vision- this involves political advocacy and campaigning on issues such as third world debt, military spending and international trade regimes in so far as these affect the development prospects of particular communities, countries and regions. Social accountability engagement is most effective with organizations at the sustainable systems and social movement stages. ***Most NGOs have not yet developed the capacity to operate at this stage.*** This justifies the need to work with the players of civil society who are already operating as social movements and to build the capacity of NGOs to become social movements and sustainable movements.

* I am indebted to a discussion I had with Professor Alan Fowler recently for some of these ideas.

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