

*Meaningful democracy presupposes the ability of all people to pull their limited resources, to form and develop ideas and programmes, put them on the political agenda, and act to support them. For it is in the learning life of associations, organisations and movements that common problems, which reverberate first in individual life histories are distilled and transmitted in amplified form to the public sphere.*

**GTZ/UNECA PROGRAMME ON  
CIVIL SOCIETY AND POLITICAL CONSENSUS BUILDING**

---

*Foundations, development and potential of*  
**CIVIL SOCIETY IN AFRICA:**  
**AN ASSESSMENT AND STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>**

*Volume II*  
**THE CONTEXT OF  
STATE - CIVIL SOCIETY NEXUS**

---

BT Costantinos, PhD

*Report prepared as part of the*  
Assessment of Lessons Learned for Popular Participation in  
Political Consensus Building and the Current State and Potential of CSOs in Africa:  
Foundations of New Strategies and approaches

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a consultancy report presented to GTZ as part of a contractual fulfilment. It is made of four volumes. Volume I is a theoretical construct for civil society development in Africa, volume II is the context of state-society relations, volume three is an analysis of the influence of the project on political transition in Africa, volume four is the strategic perspective and way ahead.

## **THE CONTEXT FOR STATE, CITIZEN, AND CIVIL SOCIETY RELATIONS**

The relation between state institutions, civil society organisations and the citizen have hitherto been characterised by invasion of civic space by the state and its structures. Indigenous organisations already present a substantial challenge to the state who liaise with them with extreme caution especially given the growing conviction that they are a component of a cohesive, purpose oriented, social and organisational people's base. Some People's organisations are even looked upon in many countries as 'anti-state organisations'. Typically, single-party states neither tolerated nor recognised any other centres of power within society apart from the party and state which had become almost synonymous. People's organisations were tolerated only as long as they adhered to the State's definition of development or existed to provide alternative conduits of foreign aid.

When over-centralised governance was finally seen for what it is -undemocratic, corrupt, and a complete failure in poverty alleviation - donors signalled their change of heart by diverting increasingly larger sums of development aid from states and channelling it through people's organisations. Donors' demands for greater democratic governance and popular participation have further transformed the relations between states and organised civic institutions. The problem now is where to locate the legal basis of such new relations between state and civic society?

As we stand on the watershed of the Third Millennium, the relations between citizens and state institutions have to be situated within an overall analysis of their roles. Today, as in the early days right after the 1984 great African famine, states became interested in the NGO movement and began to take them seriously. In some countries, the contribution of the sector reached to more than 50% of foreign earning including ODA. International NGOs and peoples organisations in the form of humanitarian action groups, co-operatives and village help committees flourished; some with genuine interest in civil society empowerment, others under the guise of socialist development.

The main issue in state-citizens relations is whether the state has the capacity and the will to relate to citizens and citizens groups based on mutual respect, autonomy, equality and trust. The relationship between people's organisation and state is characterised by positions of unequal power, making it very tempting for the state to dictate conditions and terms of relationships. The real problem is when the states have to figure out how to relate advocacy, people's organisations which are engaged in championing environmental issues, consciousness raising on the root causes of their problems and institutional development among the indigenous communities. In several countries, the relationship has not been smooth sailing. In the past, the institutional strife between the two actors was quite visible, at times assuming national dimensions, while in Africa; NGOs have been systematically discouraged from building grassroots connections.

States have responded to increasing pressure from citizens and people's organisations with intimidation and harassment. The nature of this harassment could be indirect using existing

legal instruments and machinery to serve the interest of the state. The most common state harassment comes in the form of anonymity of people's organisations contribution to relief, rehabilitation and development. A further kind of harassment is the laying of false charges against voluntary agencies and their leaders. The most fashionable of these is that the agency is attempting to "convert" people to another belief or is supporting or is against socialism and militarism as agents of foreign powers.

On the other hand states have also co-opted civic leaders towards their ends. Where people's organisations such as Ethiopia's Orthodox Tewahido Church that has 30,000 dioceses and 40,000,000 followers and Kenya's "Maendeleo ya Wanawake" with over 30,000 groups throughout the continent were perceived as politically strategic, they were annexed to the state machinery because of their potential as a tool for mobilising support. In most states, legislation was put in place to control people's organisations and to define what they could engage in without transgressing into "politics" and challenging the absolute authority of the party and state. This way of relating between states and people lasted for as long as the international donor community tolerated it - thanks in part to the East-West rivalry, the so called cold war".

## **STATE, THE CITIZEN, AND THE POLITICS OF RIGHTS**

What is important in the political economy of democratisation is not so much the problems of the current political transition from authoritarian rule to pluralistic engagement than what various, competing organisations and groups conceive them to be, in comparison to how the agencies of development and political organisations "settle" their conceptual differences. On another plane, notwithstanding the doubts and worries it has raised, ethnic-nationalism remains the bedrock of the transition strategy in many emerging democracies in Africa. The preoccupation with the "liberation" and "self-determination" of ethnic and cultural communities in Africa represents a larger issue having to do with the restructuring of the African polity as a whole. It concerns the democratisation of Africa as the understood and operational concept of liberation, not one of simply changing or improving the position and status of "nationalities", or, in simpler terms, ethnic groups, within Africa; but the radical transformation of the values, traditions and institutions of the African nation-state itself in their historic and contemporary forms. It is wrestling at once with the question of the self-determination of nationalities and the problem of national unity connected with it. For the liberators of Africa, popular unity was deeply flawed. A forced unity, it was established and maintained at the expense of nations, nationalities and peoples by

1. the subjugation of ethnic communities in military conquests;
2. economic exploitation and political tyranny in which the machinery of a centralised state was used as an instrument of national oppression; and
3. cultural domination, which devalued and suppressed the languages, customs, and religions of diverse peoples in the country. African unity was not based on the distinctive identities, interests and aspirations of various nationalities. Rather, it was based on the domination of a small ruling class.

Because pressure for regime transformation and transitions to democracy has come from civil society, society yields the spontaneous interests, demands and institutional mechanisms of democratic transition, the state has only a limited role to play. Its function will not be to manage society's democratic aspirations and activities, but to create the enabling conditions for their free play. Institutions and groups in civil society must form and run themselves. When they begin to address longer socio-economic and political issues beyond their limited sectional concerns, or to co-operate with the state on certain matters, they should be able to do so in terms of their specific interests and competence, not as mere instruments or extensions of states.

Alternatively, the underdevelopment of civil society in Africa and the incapacity of institutions within it are seen as major barriers to democratisation. The activities of some social institutions may have the salutary effect of bringing into transparency the work of state, and of opening up state institutions and practices to public scrutiny. Nevertheless, the overall weakness of African civil societies is often cited as a fundamental structural constraint on democratic transformation in Africa. Rather than offering agents and arenas of transitions to democracy, African civil societies are generally seen as objects and problems of reform. Indicators of their weakness include low levels of economic, technological, professional and cultural development and high levels of illiteracy. On account of this view, the state assumes a large role in democratisation. It is assigned the task of nothing less than "cultivating civil society" itself through political education and mobilisation.

In reality, a rich associational life characterises African society. However, the richness of such forms of associational life does not imply the presence of a strong civil society as concealed here. The kinds of associations prevalent in the context of African authoritarian or hegemonic regimes tend to reflect the weak character of the state. Informal associations are characterised by fragmentation and disengagement from the state. In these senses, civil society in many African countries is weak. While associations exist, they have not developed structures that are more formal and not openly presented themselves in the public area. The weakness of the African state meant that few incentives existed to form autonomous organisations to engage with the state rather the 'exit' option prevailed as individuals preferred to remain outside the reach of the state. We have then divergent representations of civil society accompanied by somewhat conflicting conceptions of the role of the state in the African passage to democracy.

- The perception of society as producer of the spontaneous interests, demands and institutional resources of democratic change to some degree conflicts with the view of civil societies in Africa as weakly developed social and institutional structures in need of cultivation and support by the state.
- The conception of the state as creator of the enabling environment for the free democratic activities of individuals and groups diverges from the view of state as political educator, mobiliser and democratiser of civil society.

Moreover, these conflicting perspectives commonly tend to confuse representations of "civil society" and "the state" as conceptual or ideal categories with actual communities and regime fuelling the transition. The categories are often conflated into the immediate stuff of African political and social experience. This is not to deny that there are representations of civil society and the state in current perspectives on democratisation in Africa; where the elements

categorised are more evidently those of really existing African social formations. It is to note a disabling analytical tendency in which the actualities of African politics (tribalism, the state of individuals and groups rather than the rule of laws and so on) tend to be pre-empted and displaced by the conceptual categories used to describe them otherwise.

A major problem inherent in the political transition local conflict resolution in Africa is the extreme weakness of the social movements and their failure to develop coherent strategies for promoting broad based and well organised citizenry. For the lack of opportunities for self-organised civil associations, whose functions are to preserve basic rights of its constituents and the society at large, educate the citizens and advocate popular claims, build a consensus and promote political and moral ethical values, and disseminate them among the populace. It has become difficult to nurture a sense of civil society. Practices such as free elections, the formatting of political parties, free and open discourse on public issues are all foreign concepts that need to be installed in the minds of the majority of the populace. The lack of democratic culture is also clearly manifest in the disarray and inability of the "opposition" forces to achieve internal unity. This programme is an attempt to address the question civil society empowerment and enhancing its role in governance.

Organisations of civil society operate between the state and the citizenry and give structure to the representation of interests of a diverse body of the populace. It is an essential prerequisite as it facilitates the opportunity for participation in the political life for the citizens at large. The contemporary reality of Africa is that the various social and economic organisations such as self-help groups, NGOs, professional associations, etc. are very weak and generally dominated by the elite, denying them effective venues to fulfil their historical mandates as CSOs.

What does this leave the transition to democracy in Africa and the hope that all of us have for pluralistic rules and institutions of democracy as represented by political contestation and elections on a level playing fields? Practically nothing. The African nation-state needed to be built - and built democratically - virtually from scratch. Politically, its past is more a liability than an asset. Because citizenship was imposed on nationalities by force, it was inauthentic and unstable, chronically beset with rebellions and civil wars. Because it contradicted the rights of people's to their own identity, culture, political life and sustainable livelihood security, it was undemocratic and a drag on the development of the country. The brutal military dictatorship, which in the end brought the countries they ruled to the edge of disintegration, was in essence a continuation of all kinds of previous dictatorial regimes.

## **THE LIMITS TO CITIZEN'S ACTION AND PARTICIPATION!**

The UN ECA's major initiative, the Arusha Declaration and Charter on Popular Participation has helped in focusing attention and forging a consensus on the critical question of development in Africa. The Arusha Charter was right to imply that democracy underpinned successful development and that successful development was the outcome of popular participation of not only popular participation not only at the project level, but far more importantly - participation in citizenship.

Participation in citizenship is the basis of all other forms of participation in development. Divorced from participation in citizenship, the concept of popular participation in development becomes a mere administrative strategy-- a callous manipulation of the innocent and ignorant even if the end result might be a "successful project" - but the end can never morally justify the means. Sadly, much of the current jargon about popular participation is based on the administrative desire for project success and effectiveness.

The evidence for this assertion is the virtual absence of civic education training as a key component of many development programmes and projects. It is the fundamental argument of this paper that civic education - learning about and appreciating one's rights, duties, obligations and responsibilities as a citizen and the immediate rules, laws and governance structures within which one exercises citizenship is the first and fundamental step in development participation. Without it, Africa will make no significant headway either with new strategies for development or with its tentative lurch towards democratic governance. Democracy could easily degenerate into anarchy if popular participation in citizenship is not viewed as a critical factor in both African development and democratic governance without popular participation in citizenship. There are limits to popular participation in development. These might be imposed by such factors as the poverty level to which individuals and communities belong.

- a) For the very poor are often precluded from participation because they are preoccupied with searching for food from day to day. Others are precluded because of illiteracy, physical handicap, inadequate clothing for public appearance at formal gatherings, lack of social and political 'connections' and cultural traditions such as those that discriminate against women's participation in public meetings and affairs.
- b) The first point to note when considering the question of state-citizen relations is the fact of these very basic limitations. These limitations are imposed by the technical nature of the issues at stake. Most citizens organisations simply do not have the technical capacity to engage in serious dialogue with states on issues, which turn out to have a highly technical and complex arguments to arrive at meaningful solutions. Many, classified as 'macro-issues' such as debt servicing, international trade and bilateral agreements, fiscal and economic policy issues. Even though these 'macro-issues' definitely affect the 'micro-projects' and activities of people's and community based organisations, their organisations have yet to demonstrate capacity to master the technical skills to meaningfully engage in dialogue with these s issues.
- c) Beyond platitudes and good intentions, many civil institutions cannot participate in dialogue with states because they lack the personnel with requisite skills and facilities such as research centres and Think Tanks, to inform their arguments or present credible data to support their assertions. Far more critical in determining both the level and quality of dialogue between states and civil society is the political and economic context in which African states find themselves. To be quite frank, the context for dialogue, co-operation and interface between African states and people's and community based organisations has so far been determined to a large extent by the rules and wishes of the international donor community. African states enjoy limited sovereignty.

The attitude of the international donor community from aside formal rhetoric is that the African states, today, are solely responsible for the current sorry condition of the continent. Increasingly, therefore, the conditionalities of foreign aid have aimed at limiting the operational scope of the state. States have been steadily losing their formerly unchallenged status as intermediaries between local social forces and dominant economic and political powers on the international scene.

The international donor community now distrusts the African states and are unwittingly chipping away at their institutional credibility and capacity. For instance, what is the likely outcome of the donor imposed structural adjustment programmes whose measures include reduction of public sector imports devaluation of national currencies, abolition of customs barriers, wholesale privatisation of the public sector, cutbacks in social welfare expenditures? These measures will give rise to a host of social forces, some of which will challenge the legitimacy of the state. These structural changes will gnaw away at the integrity of the state already weakened by dwindling public revenues and extreme dependence upon foreign aid.