

Civil Domains in African Settings: Some Issues

A discussion paper prepared by David Sogge
for the Hivos Africa Consultation
7-9 June 2004, Arusha, Tanzania

This paper was drawn up at the request of Hivos staff¹ as a basis for reflection, discussion and debate, with the hope of enriching interchange among participants in the Arusha Consultation.

As an idea-in-action, “Civil Society” has enjoyed a meteoric career in the past fifteen years. It has given rise to think-tanks, university degree programmes, foreign aid units with large budgets, a cascade of books and articles and many seminars -- some of them bringing together grantmakers and grantees. The roots of this idea and why it has become so prominent today are beyond this paper’s scope. Instead the paper seeks merely to review to some issues arising in current debates and thereby offer some talking-points about the idea as applied in African contexts.

If this paper seeks to probe and question received ideas about civil society in African settings, it does so under the inspiration of writings such as those by Amilcar Cabral (1924-1973), one of Africa’s leading activist-intellectuals. As a Cape Verdean Foundation bearing his name recently argued:

More than many of his contemporaries, Amilcar Cabral valued the imperative of freedom of thought -- perhaps the first and primordial of the many kinds of independence. Conversely, he deplored as a source of dominance and manipulation the denial of confidence in one’s own critical and analytical thinking. For Amilcar Cabral, “To think with our own heads, starting from our own reality” was a principle from which flows the whole process of liberation. With this operative concept, he referred to the capacity to give meaning to our own history. In effect, when we uncritically reproduce categories for interpreting the world, or simply values foreign to us, we deny the need to formulate other meanings more consistent with the reality of our strategic interests².

The paper is organized in three parts:

I Concepts matter, but do they matter in the same way in all places?

¹ Thanks are due to Karel Chambille and Ireen Dubel, Hivos staff members in The Hague, for their useful observations on earlier drafts. All shortcomings of this paper rest, however, with the author alone.

² Fundação Amilcar Cabral 2003, Simpósio Internacional Amilcar Cabral, Praia, 9 à 12 de Setembro de 2004 (announcement posted on Internet; translated from the Portuguese).

- II Dilemmas, tensions and possibilities on the ground; and
- III Topics worth probing and debating further.

Part I Concepts Matter

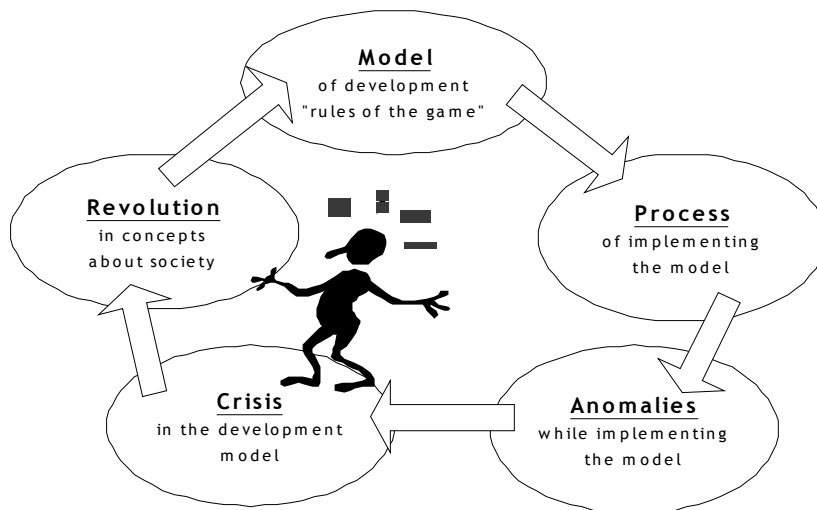
In Africa, as elsewhere, at least two kinds of aspirations have shaped public visions of futures worth striving for:

- A. More political inclusion and power for citizens regardless of social class, gender, race, cultural identity or other ascribed characteristics, and
- B. Better material and non-material living standards both in returns to labour and in the “social wage” of publicly-provided goods and services, achieved on a broad and fair basis.

There’s not much dispute about these as valid goals. After all, they are at the heart of universal covenants and many other official statements of purpose, including those of Hivos and those it supports in Africa.

But on matters of *how* to move toward those goals, there is much less consensus. Which levels of work - local, national, global - should have priority? Are A-goals pre-conditions for the B-goals, or the other way around? With what mixtures of private and public actors? And so forth. Around such issues there is plenty of dispute. After the Cold War ended and Western aid industry mainstream began signing up to these goals, questions have multiplied and stakes have risen.

Neither Hivos nor its counterparts take rigid positions in answering the “how” questions. But among the answers, “civil society” has long stood out. Today, powerful institutions claim to have also swung behind “civil society” - at least their own version of it. They project onto it certain kinds of members and roles in all parts of the world. Yet increasingly there have emerged anomalies -- gaps and contradictions



Hypothesis about rise and decline of:

initiatives / projects / organisations / modes of interpretation or intervention

between the concepts and the realities -- around the idea of civil society. Like other big ideas, it seems to be following a cycle of change like the one in the diagram above³.

Anomalies have surfaced especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Nowhere have outside institutions done more to push a particular version of civil society, yet nowhere is the relevance of that version more in question. That is because the idea has become a tool of intervention. Powerful interests have used it to create facts-on-the-ground.

Therefore probing concepts of civil society is not merely talk in an ivory tower, but about real policy measures, the construction of ‘real’ identities and the allocation of real monies.

Important matters are at stake, namely the course of African political life. There are risks that as something constructed or imported by interveners, “civil society” may be one more contender in a long parade of approaches that attracted a large following for a while, yet today rest in peace in a big graveyard of failed development ideas.

1.1 Is Civil Society an Actor or the Theatre?

In the history of ideas, political thinkers have used the term “civil society” to refer to widely different things. In that extended family of ideas, it’s not necessary here to recount who begat whom. But it may be useful to consider two main lineages in today’s *normative or value-driven* understandings of the term⁴. Main features of both lineages can be summarized in the following table:

	Mainstream Lineage	Alternative Lineage
Membership of “Civil Society”	Local and intermediary NGOs, anti-government media, nonprofit service bodies such as missions, charities, professional and business associations	Social movements, non-establishment political parties, trade unions, activist community-based organizations, knowledge-based NGOs, independent media

³ Adapted from: ISNAR, 2002, *Novo Paradigma para a Inovação Institucional*, Sao Paulo

⁴ This draws upon, among other works: Jude Howell and Jenny Pearce, 2001, *Civil Society & Development - A Critical Exploration*, London: Lynne Rienner; Mary Kaldor, 2002, *Civil Society and Accountability*, Human Development Report Office, New York: UNDP; and Alan Fowler 2002, *Civil Society and International Development: toward a Complex Systems Perspective and Practice*.

Main problems for “Civil Society” to tackle	Imperatives of markets, competition and modern life break natural social bonds. Tensions increase, threatening political instability. Lack of trustful relations in society sets limits to exchange and to security of private property - thus setting limits to economic growth. The state “crowds out” private economic actors. Bad governance stems from oversized state apparatuses and from behaviour of government elites.	Domination by national and foreign state and private actors (often in collusion) generates socio-economic exclusion and insecurity. These set limits to equitable development and growth, weaken tax-based redistributive measures, frustrate democratic politics and generate dangerous social polarization. Bad governance is a cumulative outcome of national and global politico-economic and military forces.
Wider roles of “Civil Society”	Civil society fosters bonds of trust, thus lowers business transaction costs and widens market relations. It compensates for loss of traditional social bonds, strengthening social consensus and consent to rules, thus helping prevent conflict.	Civil society promotes the ethic and practice of solidarity and emancipation, animating and inspiring action toward state and toward private business interests. (Nonviolent) conflict seen as a necessary motor of social change.
Organizations’ positioning and tasks	Organisations together form a “third sector” complementing the state and business sectors, though they are separate from the state in political terms. Via “advocacy and lobbying” they hold the government to account. They promote decentralization and reduction of central state powers. Via public-private “partnerships” some NGOs provide social services, conflict mediation &c. as alternatives to state providers.	Organisations distinct from state and from business interests. Social movements may however crystallize into parties contesting for state power. Otherwise primary tasks are to aggregate countervailing power through mobilizing and forging alliances among groups of the poor and excluded via routine and non-routine political, judicial and media channels.
Level & scope	Mainly local and national	Local, national and international
Political premises	Approach is premised on notions of “weak publics” where opinions are formed but no active political leverage is pursued.	Approach premised on notions of “strong publics” where opinions develop and political leverage actively pursued.
Contemporary origins and backing	Approach associated with family of ideas centred on “community”, “social capital” and “trust” promoted chiefly by US academics and large research projects based at US universities ⁵ . Major financial and intellectual backing since around 1990 from the World Bank & USAID.	Approach associated with activist movements of 1970s and 1980s confronting authoritarian, often western-backed regimes. Latin American, anti-colonial and some European intellectuals.

⁵ While a full list of social science writings would include such monumental figures as Talcott Parsons, this version of “civil society” may be attributed to works such as James Coleman (1990): *Foundations of Social Theory*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press; Francis Fukuyama (1995): *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, London: Hamish Hamilton, and Robert Putnam (1993): *Making*

International assembly-points	CIVICUS (launched in 1993, originally headquartered in Washington DC)	World Social Forum (first held in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil); regional social forums
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These two lineages - especially the mainstream lineage -- have blanketed talk in recent decades. Both assign civil society a positive purpose, even portraying it as a heroic social force, although each aims to slay rather different dragons. Both are normative, taking civil society only as *nice*.

Yet neither can really take on board social groupings that are *not* nice. Indeed some are downright *nasty*. Think of mafia networks, skinhead gangs, ‘youth league’ rent-a-mobs, hate radio and weirdo cults that poison people in subways. Such groups are not “civil” in the sense of favouring the common good, but there’s no doubt that they are examples of voluntary associational life. Yet neither lineage has a place for them, nor for the many quietist and other-worldly groupings that prefer to retreat from public life. In short, these two versions of civil society are rather more like banners to march behind than lenses by which to see what’s going on.

Therefore many find it useful to think of civil society not as an actor, but rather as the theatre itself. This is the *analytical* or what some have termed the *sociological* understanding of the concept⁶. Seen as a social realm or space, it can accommodate groups in the two normative versions, plus the ‘other-normed’ groupings besides. To avoid confusions arising where the term “civil society” excludes some but includes others on debatable normative grounds, this paper refers to a *domain*⁷, and suggests the following definition:

Civil Domain

A social realm or space apart from the state, familial bonds and for-profit firms, in which people associate together voluntarily to reproduce, promote or contest the character of social, cultural economic or political rules that concern them.

Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy, Princeton: Princeton University Press. A major promoter of this version is the Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project of the Johns Hopkins University.

Kinship between this version and the 20th century’s triumphant Big Idea, neoliberalism, cannot be discussed here. Yet it must be recalled that one of neoliberalism’s main objectives was to *destroy* one of the big civil society successes: activist trade unionism. See Richard Cockett, 1995, *Thinking the Unthinkable. Think-tanks and the Economic Counter-Revolution 1931-1983*, London: HarperCollins.

⁶ James Manor and others, 1999, *Civil Society And Governance. A Concept Paper*, IDS Sussex

⁷ The term “civil sector” might also serve, except that it suggests something that is equivalent to “state sector” and “business sector”. The three-part model of business/state/third sector has been shown to be misleading. It assumes boundaries that often do not exist (there are many hybrid semi-state and semi-business forms found in “civil society”), often assumes that “civil society” complements the market in taking an anti-state stance, assumes equivalence in strength where there are massive imbalances of power and assumes parallelism in operating logics whereas in scope and complexity the logics at work in civil society (being spiritual, cultural, recreational, political and economic - sometimes wrapped up together) far exceed those of the state and capital.

Broadly speaking, within civil domains at least three normative categories are detectable:

An emancipatory camp. A diverse category populated by those pursuing aims consistent with covenants of social, economic, cultural and civil rights. Having been vigorously discouraged for decades by outside powers and their local clients, it is a minority, often a besieged minority.

A supremacist category. Also in a minority, these groups routinely pursue domination over others, denying or subverting emancipatory aims, as agents of economic or violent crime, promoters of xenophobia, ethnic hatred, denial of rights to women and girls &c. However, in some settings they can be well-positioned and enjoy the protection or outright support of those holding state and corporate power.

The self-regarding or inward-looking. The bulk of voluntary associations and nonprofits may best be categorized as instrumental, as vehicles for service delivery, political self-advancement, &c., or merely inward-looking, as with the most religious and cultural associations, clubs providing services to members and so forth.

Such a categorization may serve merely as jumping-off points for further exploration and debate. Other categories and criteria are no doubt possible. These categories are not mutually exclusive. Some actors may have a foot in two camps, such as politically aware emancipatory groups that protect themselves behind a “hiding hand” of non-controversial welfare work. Others commute between them, and yet others evolve from one into another. Identities can be portable even beyond the civil domain, extending to the state; West African researchers, for example, find NGO actors “defending the interests of local civil society against the state, while themselves being agents of the state”⁸.

The main point is: it makes little sense to portray the civil domain as one coherent unified thing with a plan to improve the world. It may be better understood as a realm of different and even opposing movements. That understanding introduces a vital motor of social change: conflict. The civil domain is thus a place where groupings make or lose social power and struggle with others - sharpening arguments, debating, recruiting members and mobilizing other resources. Targets include the state, private firms, and even the intimate world of the family.

The fortunes of the emancipatory camp may be of greatest interest, but it is nonetheless useful to press on a little further into the disputed territory of the civil domain as a concept applicable to Africa⁹.

⁸ Beatrice Hibou & R. Banegas, 2000 ‘Civil Society & the Public Space in Africa’ *CODESRIA Bulletin* Nr 1

1.2 Relevance for Africa

Most ideas about “civil society” developed on the basis of social formations and systems of governance of the West, including to some extent Latin America. If we accept the hypothesis that all societies are going to converge around Western lines and that, as the famous respecter of capitalist modernization Karl Marx put it, “the most developed country shows to the less developed the image of its future,” then the notion of a civil domain can be applied just about anywhere with few problems.

Yet in many parts of the world, including Africa, solid evidence for convergence is scarce. It is getting harder, not easier, to portray African dynamics as mere replays of developments in the West.

Historical Settings

Africans are indeed making their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing. Some circumstances relevant to the public sphere can be noted briefly:

Social and ecological diversity.

African ecologies, terrains, local modes of production, cultures and ways of exercising authority are far more diverse than those of Europe west of the Ural mountains, not to speak of North America and its sausage-like homogeneity.

Uneven development.

Overlaying Africa’s internal diversity have been diverse modes of subordination to the Western world system. That subordination has resulted in uneven, distorted patterns of development. Enclaves, social schisms and polarization are rife. Different places acquired different economic roles, different infrastructures and different concentrations of knowledge. Zones favoured by Western interests grew richer, draining other zones of labour and other resources and thus “under-developing” them.

Racism and “essentialism”.

Under colonial and settler rule, the ascription of “essential traits” of character according to race or ethnic origins fed into, and drew on the dynamics of uneven development including divisions-of-labour. That shaped collective identities and collective self-esteem. Much of this has been kept alive in the post-colonial era.

*Governance: Unnatural Birth*¹⁰.

⁹ For a deeper exploration of the intellectual origins and debates about civil society in Africa, see Ebenezer Obadare, 2002, *The Alternative Genealogy of Civil Society and Its Implications for Africa: Notes for Further Research*, CODESRIA 10th General Assembly, Kampala, Uganda

¹⁰ Mick Moore, 2001, *Political Underdevelopment. What Causes ‘Bad Governance’?* IDS Sussex

Rather than being grown organically from within, institutions of formal governance in most of Africa were transplanted following armed conquest, within arbitrarily defined territories.

Autonomy of governments from citizens' taxes & fees.

Being outwardly-oriented, economic arrangements have left most African states dependent on revenues from exporting enclaves (oil, gemstones, agribusiness exports &c) and foreign aid. Such revenues may be termed 'unearned' because political classes can claim them without having to meet needs and wishes of citizens as taxpayers, producers, consumers or voters. These revenues can be managed non-transparently from the top down. Political classes face few incentives to hammer out some kind of reciprocity between themselves and citizens, and thus to permit expansion of genuine political space.

With these circumstances in mind, we can move to issues of associational life. Considered first are factors that appear to limit the relevance of civil domain concepts; thereafter this section looks at factors that appear to underscore the idea's relevance at least in some settings.

Possible limits to civil domain concepts in African settings

Observers have noted the following kinds of reasons to show caution about (if not reject entirely) the idea of civil domain in many African settings. Similar cautions are also heard about Central Asia, the Middle East, parts of Southeast Asia, &c.:

- a. In principle, associative life in civil domains takes place on the basis of voluntary participation or active consent. Yet in many African settings much associative life is based on *ascribed or involuntary affiliation*, notably in kinship and other customary systems into which one is born or otherwise obliged to be part of¹¹.
- b. Access to the civil domain is supposed to be open to all. Yet in many African settings access is commonly mediated by authority in families or households. There, age and especially gender determine who decides about who can take part in voluntary associative life. As older men hold more social power over it, *voluntary associative life is therefore smaller and less diverse than would be the case if familial authority did not loom large*.
- c. As a rule, civil domains should enable cross-cutting, horizontal ties to develop to defend or promote group interests in the public sphere. Yet in many African settings, associative life tends to be *organized vertically*, according to logics of lineage, customary or patriarchal authority and ethnic allegiance¹².

¹¹ José Negrão, 2003, *On Relations Between the NGOs of the North and Mozambican Civil Society*

- d. In most thinking about civil domains, conflict takes place mostly according to logics of balance-of-forces, bargaining, ideological struggle and other non-violent modes of gaining political advantage. But in many African settings, vertically organized bodies with political or ethnic supremacist ambitions tend to follow zero-sum, winner-takes-all logics and incentives around *neutralizing or crushing opponents rather than strategically out-maneuvering or bargaining with them*.
- e. Classically, civil domains develop on the basis of fairly large and robust wage- and salary-earning strata and the petty bourgeoisie. Yet in much of Africa these strata and classes take particular forms and in any case *have yet to form sufficient 'critical masses' that pursue common interests and thus cut across vertical divisions*. Complicating matters in many African settings has been the over-representation of non-Africans or non-nationals in some of these social strata.
- f. Active civil domains demand participants' time. Yet *material poverty sets limits to the time available for associative life in Africa*, especially for women, as struggles for survival (often requiring traversal of huge distances) and caring for others leave too little time and energy over for meaningful participation.
- g. Civil domains classically emerge where the state defines and presides over *one* public sphere according to rules that apply to everyone. Yet in many African settings, politics take place in ambiguous and non-transparent ways across 'two publics'. There is a 'primordial public' responding to moral imperatives of private realms of kith and kin, and a 'civic public' responding, with few moral prohibitions, to opportunities arising in formal politics and state resources. "The dialectical relationship between the two publics foments the unique political issues that have come to characterize African politics"¹³.
- h. Vibrant civil domains become possible where there is basic public order and a state capable of making rules and operating according to them. Yet particularly in the post-colonial period in many African settings, *the state is weakly institutionalized; it has too little autonomy from society to form an object of formal, open political contestation*. "Real" politics -- processes determining who gets what, when and how -- take place through informal, non-public and

¹² Patrick Chabal & J-P Daloz, 1999, *Africa Works - Disorder as Political Instrument*, Oxford: James Currey

¹³ Peter Ekeh, 1975, 'Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17(1). Similarly, D. Eyoh, 1999, 'Community, Citizenship and the Politics of Ethnicity in Post-colonial Africa, in Zeleza & Kalipeni (eds) *Sacred Spaces and Public Quarrels: African Cultural and Economic Landscapes*, Trenton: Africa World Press. Ekeh's model appears to have influenced the idea of an "economy of affection" of Goran Hyden 1983 *No Shortcuts to Progress. African Development Management in Perspective*, London: Heinemann

conveniently 'disordered' systems which scarcely resemble political processes that make possible civil domains classically defined¹⁴.

- i. A corollary to the prevalence of weak states is the scarcity of all-powerful states. In a classical anti-government script, such as in the drama of Eastern Europe, emancipatory civil domain groups confronted state power in order to replace it with something responsive, impartial and democratic. In some African settings, however, civil actors' political ambitions are not about transforming the state but gaining access to it, even being co-opted into it, without changing the rules of the game. An exception to this story line has been the formidable *apartheid* state in South Africa and its collapse when confronted by a broad emancipatory movement.
- j. Complicating public life in some African settings is the presence of so-called customary power -- the rule of chiefs, headmen, 'native authorities' &c. It has been perpetuated beyond its colonial origins to dominate most rural, and even some urban populations; '*decentralized despotism*' in its conventional and hybrid forms (such as local party bosses) disallows genuine space for public voice, and even democratically elected regimes show no interest in scrapping or reforming such systems of local power¹⁵. Customary power is not everywhere and always the same as "domination by senior men", but in many settings this is the case; as a result, capacities and talents of women and girls, and their participation in public life, remain stunted.
- k. Civil domains are supposed to allow for open, assertive, broadly-organized expressions of interest in the public realm. Yet for a host of reasons in many African settings, *resistance is often expressed individually and passively, not in collective 'voice' but in atomized 'exit'*: evasion, non-compliance, flight. The political scientist Célestin Monga terms this 'collective insubordination'¹⁶. More active variants involve 'quiet encroachment', such as squatting urban land and illicitly tapping water and electricity¹⁷. Overt action thus tends to occur in defense of such quietly acquired gains, when they are challenged -- as seen in poor people's resistance to forced removals in cities like Luanda.
- l. Usual notions of the civil domain allow little room for militarized, violent forms of conflict. Yet ruling groups and civil actors wishing to usurp their power (or lead a region to break away from central authority) today can easily acquire means of

¹⁴ Patrick Chabal & J-P Daloz 1999 *Africa Works - Disorder as Political Instrument*, Oxford: James Currey

¹⁵ Mahmood Mamdani, 1996, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa & the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Oxford: James Currey.

¹⁶ "Collective insubordination is the oldest watchword in African societies across the board." Célestin Monga, 1996 (translation), *The Anthropology of Anger: Civil Society and Democracy in Africa*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner

¹⁷ Asef Bayat, 2000, 'From "Dangerous Classes" to "Quiet Rebels". Politics of the Urban Subaltern in the Global South' *International Sociology*, 15(3).

violence and coercion, mainly via global markets in arms. Both kinds of power-seekers thus become less inclined to pursue time-consuming, complex routes to power through nonviolent political mobilization and interchange with citizens. Evidence from countries like Nigeria suggests that where some groups adopt generalized violence and intimidation in the name of struggles for justice, overall prospects for political mobilization in the civil domain get worse¹⁸.

Potential points of relevance of “civil domain” concepts

The foregoing might suggest that emancipatory associational life in many African settings may be caught between rocks and hard places. The rocks are entrenched or “path dependent” socio-cultural patterns and feeble states that set limits to civil domains. The hard places are complex forces operating globally - circuits in arms and other illicit commodities, offshore banking, externally-guided governance, ‘unearned income’. All these help weaken or annul reciprocity between rulers and ruled. They narrow the space for emancipatory actors in the civil domain.

Legacies of public activism

Africa’s historical record suggests, however, that the idea of a ‘civil domain’ may have relevance after all. Certainly the era of high colonialism and settler rule provides evidence of incipient growth of voluntary initiative and ‘voice’. African societies generated ideas, organizations and collective action on a number of fronts. Some categories in the emancipatory camp are as follows:

- Independent churches - the Watchtower Movement in the Rhodesias and Nyasaland, the Zionist churches in South Africa, southern Mozambique &c.
- Tax revolts - from market women in eastern Nigeria in the 1920s to residents of the Rhodesian copperbelt in the 1930s and beyond.
- Organized labour - from the 1920s, peaking in the 1950s in southern Africa, factory, dock, mine and railway workers organized, in some cases creating traditions of organizing according to people’s working roles.
- Intellectuals & publicists - from early in the 20th century, in Lourenço Marques (Maputo) to Lusaka to Nairobi dozens of African politico-cultural groups coalesced, inspired by the Bible, Marcus Garvey, Lenin and others.
- Political parties -from the South African Native National Congress (1912) to TANU, KANU, ZAPU, ZANU, UNIP and many more.

¹⁸ E. Remi Aiyede, 2003, ‘The Dynamics of Civil Society and the Democratization Process in Nigeria’ *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 27:1

Colonial and settler authorities (and some of their indigenous allies) were actively hostile to most of these kinds of organizations, especially the left-wing ones. After 1950 the authorities took a “fight fire with fire” approach. In the British-held territories this was called Community Development, basically an anti-communist strategy to organize people around ‘felt needs’¹⁹. It was introduced with a lot of fanfare about “participation”, thus anticipating many of today’s initiatives. The approach involved promotion of local non-governmental associations and ‘integrated human communities’. The main point was, however, to domesticate poor majorities, inoculating them against the viruses of nationalism and socialism. Most Community Development initiatives didn’t gain legitimacy and collapsed when the money ended. However a few charities arising in this period survived.

Particularly in urbanized zones of southern Africa with relatively large strata of wage earners, movements for national independence showed that assertive ‘horizontal’ action was possible. This was a high-water mark for the formal emancipatory camp.

Yet national self-determination struggles came at an especially favourable moment in global history. Since then, the record is more mixed.

Confining the civil domain has been a host of political forces. Not least of these, up through the 1980s, were foreign-backed efforts to crush leftwing movements. French, British, Portuguese and American backing to the repression or manipulation of political, media, trade union and others may have been quiet and discreet, but it was unrelenting.

Changes regime in the former Portuguese colonies, Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa represented advances of emancipatory agendas. Civil actors played crucial roles: boycotts, strikes, non-cooperation, sabotage, legal services, distribution of outlawed news-sheets &c all helped mobilize millions -- although in official histories such accomplishments often seem eclipsed by heroic accounts of armed freedom fighters.

Today, some civil domain groupings born in the struggle for democracy are alive and kicking. Among the most vigorous and growing are those based on members. In South Africa these include the “civics” in townships and the trade union federation COSATU with a membership of more than 40 percent of formally waged workforce.

In the post-colonial period, civil domain actors contributed to leadership change at the top of political pyramids in Kenya, where NGOs in the emancipatory camp were active throughout the 1990s, and in Zambia up to 1991. In these and other countries they persist, though by no means all struggles are about changing regimes. Indeed

¹⁹ See for example Michael Bratton, 1978, *Beyond Community Development: The Political Economy of Rural Administration in Zimbabwe*, Mambo Press, Gwelo.

many important triumphs in recent decades have not been in dramatic removals of despots, but rather in step-by-step advances in sectoral or sub-national issues, such as land rights, women & violence, local radio, industrial pollution, or the preservation of public sector services in the face of neoliberal austerity measures.

Beyond the Formal Emancipatory Camp

While the formal emancipatory camp has seen triumphs and setbacks, a lot has been going on in other parts of the civil domain. Indeed in terms of membership, revenues, assets and cultural power, momentum in many countries' civil domains appears to have developed largely outside the emancipatory camp.

First, especially among the poor, excluded and war-affected, growth of Christian and Islamic denominations and sects has been explosive²⁰.

Second, among urban salaried strata there have grown voluntary organizations. These range from business and professional bodies to "old boys" associations to secret societies like the Masonic brotherhood (whose membership includes key politicians in Francophone Africa) that promote international networking among elites.

Third, economic interests develop in social networks. Pragmatism and business acumen are evident in much African associational life. Reliability and decent profit margins in trade are among powerful incentives to adhere to networks. Some are based on mixtures of faith and ethnicity, such as the Mouride Islamic business networks in Wolof-speaking communities of Senegal, Kimbanguist and Baptist church enterprises in KiKongo-speaking parts of Angola, and Lutheran networks in KiChagga-speaking zones of Tanzania. Others pivot on long-distance migrant labour - an economic and social pillar in much of southern Africa and countries like Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, Somalia and Sudan.

Such civil/economic networks are dynamic and successful, but they can become objects of violence. A recent study²¹ shows that where exclusive ethnic networks are seen to capture most of the benefits of capitalist globalization and to influence public policy, resentments toward them can build into an anti-ethnic or anti-foreign backlash. The 20th century has seen popular fears and distress whipped up by political opportunists into terrible bloodletting, such as in Indonesia 1965-66, when under the Western-backed Suharto regime up to half a million Indonesians of Chinese origin

²⁰ See Paul Gifford, 1998, *African Christianity - Its Public Role*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Wim van Binsbergen, 2003, *Challenges for the sociology of religion in the African context- Prospects for the next fifty years*. http://www.shikanda.net/african_religion/turin%20paper.pdf

²¹ Amy Chua, 2004, *World on Fire. How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability*, London: Heinemann

were killed. Africa too has not been exempt, as seen most recently in Côte d'Ivoire and in Uganda in 1972-73.

Thus in the balance is the question: Will these rules be applied as well to those not members of such networks, thereby defining a general political space available to citizen groups at large? In some cases economic networks can generate change that does not reinforce exclusion. In Durban, Luanda and Maputo, market traders facing common needs to negotiate with municipal authorities, police and protection racketeers have created semi-formal and formal associations to defend their interests on a number of fronts. They formed the social basis for organized 'voice' to press the government to change rules and practices in ways benefiting all traders.

Conclusion

Civil domains, as defined, are indeed present in Africa. Yet Western models are probably not the best guides to understanding their pasts, presents and futures. Africa continues to make its own history in its own way -- including its own modes of associative life and resistance.

Some civil domain groups have expanded their followings and enhanced their presence more than others. In recent decades Africa has seen supremacist actors, but especially the self-regarding / inward-looking groupings, grow and flourish. It's been more difficult for the formal emancipatory camp. Having contributed decisively toward achievement of majority rule, its members have in recent times faced strong headwinds and cross-currents -- not to mention a host of outsiders trying to manage their vessels and set their courses.

Emancipatory elements of associative life have developed unevenly across Africa at different historical moments. Among factors favouring their emergence:

- Strong states, including the colonial order;
- Critical masses of with secondary schooling, large wage- and salary-earning strata;
- Urbanization through economic growth (as against forced urbanization born of war or radical rural impoverishment);
- Globalised culture, especially literacy in major languages and organized religion;
- External promotion, ranging from missions to official programmes to solidarity efforts.

Can voluntary, activist promotion of interests 'horizontally', that is, cutting across vertical division, be deliberately induced or created on such a scale as to shift the course of history?

Part II Tensions and Dilemmas



Paths may be made by walking, but many obstacles and pitfalls appear on paths of emancipatory action in civil society. Some paths can even lead to dead ends. Difficulties and potentials arise from the kinds of forces noted above. Others stem from the interplay of local organizations and outside interveners, including those in the aid system.

This chapter looks at some lessons and pointers emerging from the pursuit of emancipatory agendas in civil domains. Some aspects are of greater relevance to those higher on aid chains (like grant-making development agencies) while others concern civil domain organizations at receiving ends. The universe of interveners (donors and civil domain bodies) referred to here is quite broad; these observations are not directed particularly toward Hivos and its grantees. At issue are general patterns of tensions and dilemmas arising in the encounter between civil domain actors and their foreign supporters.

Some Problems and Puzzles

Knowledge and information continue to emerge about associative life in Africa and elsewhere. Because it has been subject to designs, budgets and evaluations, much more is known and debated about associative life that is induced or intentional - NGOs being exhibit A.

Yet indigenous, immanent, vernacular associative life is far less well known.

Hence the following notes of contradictions and problems stem mainly from what is known about induced, for example, donor-driven associative life. However in many cases vernacular forms loom large in the background; indeed indigenous associative life can often constitute the (for outsiders) invisible underpinnings of induced, formal bodies like NGOs.

The following observations are presented merely as snapshots, not full accounts. Their relevance is greater in some settings and historical moments than in others. They refer to a broad range of interventions and interveners. Thus they are meant to apply well beyond the relatively small universe consisting of Hivos and its counterparts, though they may pertain to that universe.

1. “Empowerment” may be urgently needed, but its pursuit can lead to disempowerment. NGO initiatives claiming to empower “the community” via organization-building can mask processes that privilege minorities and exclude majorities²². For example, in low-income urban zones NGOs with self-proclaimed mandates to serve “the community” have sometimes faced local resentment because they were clearly busy empowering themselves by capturing funding streams, making deals with officials over the heads of local residents and so forth.

As argued by a number of African activist-intellectuals, empowerment can’t merely be granted from abroad like money for an aid project. Rather it is something cultivated and shaped from within²³. Power grown ‘organically’ has been demonstrated time and again in Africa, from South African townships and shack settlements and to the *musseques* of Angolan cities. Here membership-based bodies and open community “forums” show the possibilities of inclusive approaches, having drawn and kept adherents without depending on outside resources.

2. “Participation” has been endorsed by Africa’s leaders²⁴ and actively talked about at the top of the foreign aid system since the early 1990s. As a container concept it has attracted a big coalition of interests, including many in the emancipatory camp. Yet as applied on the ground, “participation” has acquired connotations of manipulation, deception, unpaid local labour and so forth. Some now speak of the “tyranny of participation”, and discuss it only with adjectives: ‘veneered participation’ (going-through-the motions); ‘inequitable participation’ (women and minorities marginalized), ‘skewed participation’ (pre-selecting those who can participate in participation); ‘bureaucratic participation’ (planning-by-numbers, discussing-by-checklists) and so forth²⁵.

Consultative processes advertised as moments for participation -- the much ballyhooed PRSP civil society consultations being the latest example -- are commonly more ritual than substance²⁶. Labour time, information and money are often demanded of African “target groups” in the name of participation. But neither their

²² One example from a large literature: Tim Kelsall & Claire Mercer, 2003, ‘Empowering People? World Vision & ‘Transformatory Development’ in Tanzania’, *Review of African Political Economy* Nr 96

²³ Yash Tandon has long hammered on this point, such as in his bulletin *Sustainable Development*, 30 November 1993: “Empowerment” is a contraction in terms; there can only be “self-empowerment”. Another Makerere University intellectual, John-Jean Barya, has made a similar point: “Freedom and liberation from autocratic rule, as well as democracy and accountability cannot be decreed. They must have a social basis in which they arise, are nurtured and sustained.” ‘The New Political Conditionalities of Aid: an Independent View from Africa’ *IDS Bulletin* 24(1) 1993.

²⁴ *African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation*, 1990, Arusha

²⁵ Richard Heeks, 1999, *The Tyranny of Participation in Information Systems: Learning from Development Projects*, IDPM, University of Manchester

²⁶ ActionAid USA & ActionAid Uganda, 2004, *Rethinking Participation. Questions for Civil Society about the Limits of Participation in PRSPs*. <http://www.globalpolicy.org/ngos/int/bwi/2004/0404think.pdf>

consent about concrete measures, nor their feedback about implementation and outcomes, have been sought in meaningful ways.

Some now advocate dropping the term participation altogether. They urge adoption of more political approaches, of concepts that give “teeth” to popular consensus through concrete obligations and rights capable of being upheld in a court of law. Terms like *negotiation* may better indicate what is intended²⁷.

3. “Anti-poverty” action today seems to have the wind in its sails -- at least in the aid industry if nowhere else. But major tensions are at work. The shift of official rhetoric toward poverty since the late 1990s revealed how unprepared most politicians, aid system leaders and econocrats have been. For until that shift, poverty was not high on the agendas of key institutions at both donor or receiver ends. Indeed paradigms, mindsets, analytical tools and incentive systems were and continue to be premised on notions that Greed is Good and that horse-and-sparrow economics were sufficient to tackle poverty -- that is, “feed the horse well and some benefits are sure to pass through for the sparrows to eat”.

At other levels, there are also tensions and paradoxes, not the least of which are the ways labels like “poor” and “poverty” are viewed in Africa. From Burkina Faso to Mozambique, rural people have answered survey takers with: “But you’ve got it wrong! Almost nobody here is poor!” Yet there are also places where people profess quite different identities: “At last you’ve come to bring us development! We are all so miserable and poor here.”²⁸ Between prickly pride and marketable ‘miserablism’, interveners face the dilemma that the ideas, categories and labels they bring to their “target groups” strongly shape identities and behaviours -- and thus chances that their interventions will make a difference.

Historically, poverty and exclusion tend to be reduced when redistributive measures get backing at the top. Cuba is a major example in this regard - as even World Bank President James Wolfensohn has admitted. It remains to be seen whether current approaches - the obligatory formulation of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, and Sector-Wide Approaches - will elicit top-level commitment.

Redistribution can be complex and difficult. But some straightforward and efficient means of reducing poverty are well known. One proven way is simply to give money to poor people! Until very recently the World Bank and the rest of the aid system ridiculed income support and other public entitlements as unaffordable and difficult

²⁷ See for example Cees Leeuwis 2000, ‘Reconceptualizing Participation for Sustainable Rural Development: Towards a Negotiation Approach’ *Development and Change* 31.

²⁸ See Yusuf Adam and others, 1996, *Poverty in Mozambique*, Maputo: UEM; and Lars Engberg-Pedersen, 2002, ‘The Limitations of Political Space in Burkina Faso’ in Engberg-Pedersen & Webster (eds.) *In the Name of the Poor. Contesting Political Space for Poverty Reduction*, London: Zed Books

to administer. Yet in both higher income South Africa and low-income Mozambique, programmes of cash transfers to poor households with many dependents are working well, keeping many millions out of destitution²⁹. Those entitlements and related public employment programmes also appear to have modest developmental effects in boosting local investment drawn by increased local spending and infrastructure. Run with overhead costs of only about 5 percent of total turnover, such programmes are far more cost-effective than the average nonprofit or government project claiming to attack income poverty. This poses important issues for NGOs, including the question of whether the micro-project as a “solution” to poverty should finally be written off.

4. Aid and aid-driven institutions, including nonprofits, can be important sources of employment and social advancement in Africa. As such they help shape and reproduce economic networks, social classes and norms that underpin the basis for an indigenous civil society. For example, the massive growth of churches, mosques, religious schools &c. generates jobs and economic circuits. Forms of civil domain “import substitution” take place as northern nonprofits set up local ‘clones’ or ‘franchises’ as part of their global strategies. Beyond these are hosts of aspirants, and those creating their own versions of imported models.

Aid in Africa has promoted an important new social category: intermediaries between donors and potential beneficiaries that some have termed “development brokers”. Nonprofit organizations are common vehicles for them, but they also appear among local officials including customary authorities. Most brokers are able to operate across boundaries between governmental, non-governmental and business sectors - indeed they can make these boundaries irrelevant and thus pose new challenges in the construction of the public sphere³⁰.

The aid system can have other profound social effects, including promotion of groupings whose outlooks, lifestyles and talk match those of ‘transnationalized’ middle strata elsewhere on the planet. Reinforcing such trends are some of the rules of the funding game that orient civil domain accountability upward and outward.

²⁹ In South Africa as of 2003, the new Child Support Grant (introduced in 1998) had been taken up by 3.4 million care-givers, while 3.8 million others receive old age pension and other assistance grants; together these help keep nearly half of all poor people out of total destitution, a major achievement. In Mozambique, the GAPVU programme of cash payments (introduced around 1991) supported more than 100 thousand urban households with five or more dependents. It has since been modified and renamed.

³⁰ Thomas Bierschenk, Jean-Pierre Chauveau & Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, 2002, *Local Development Brokers in Africa. The rise of a new social category*. Working paper 13, Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität, Mainz, <http://www.uni-mainz.de/~ifeas>

Accountability downward to members and ‘target groups’, as well as sideways to allies, may help curb risks arising from such trends. Yet this may pose tensions, as a strong accent on “downward” or “sideways” accountability might come at the cost of less frequent and intense accountability upward, toward donors.

5. In many African settings, a lot seems to be happening thanks to NGOs: sewing circles, street children centres, HIV-AIDS counseling, kitchen garden and small livestock efforts, micro-lending, literacy, and so forth. Many places seem abuzz with little projects supported from abroad. But does this add up to anything people can count on? For many citizens such apparent beehives of activity can be a ‘tyranny of structurelessness’ -- a situation in which no one can be held responsible, or accountable to the public as a whole.

Nonprofits claiming to be more responsive than the state in service provision may seem to have a point when people flock to their clinics and schools. But in the absence of public steering and comprehensive coverage, overall outcomes can add up to fragmentation, instability, unequal access and no reliable ways for citizens to decide what shall be provided, or to call service providers to account and get what they are entitled to. For these kinds of reasons a research program on human security is grappling with the question, ‘Do NGOs produce insecurity in the long run?’³¹.

We may therefore have to look beyond NGO micro-projects toward public processes where choices are being debated and substantial, long-term resources allocated for public provision³². Today, processes of budget-watching, public priority-setting and management of local development funds are showing that it is possible to expand and improve investment in public goods and at the same time build traditions of local public democracy³³.

6. As major actors in civil society, NGOs are often celebrated as the leading edge of political change. Yet comparative research embracing the broad range of NGOs often fails to support that heroic story line, and indeed often points in a different direction. In many settings it appears that, taken as a whole, NGOs often reinforce the political status quo³⁴. Sometimes their effect is to de-politicize and demobilize. In some

³¹ *GSC Quarterly*, Nr. 3, 2002, Global Security & Cooperation Program, Social Science Research Council, Washington DC. A case from a large literature: James Pfeiffer, 2003, ‘International NGOs and primary health care in Mozambique: the need for a new model of collaboration’ *Social Science & Medicine* nr. 56. The term ‘tyranny of structurelessness’ was first used by a US sociologist in 1970, and appears in T. Tvedt, 1998, *Angels of Mercy or Development Diplomats? NGOs and Foreign Aid*, Oxford: James Currey

³² In Nigeria, for example, “[T]he pro-democracy organizations are not even visible in the budgetary process. Nor have they been able to play a leading role in the debates on key issues and challenges in the public arena.” E. Remi Aiyede, 2003, ‘The Dynamics of Civil Society and the Democratization Process in Nigeria’ *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 27:1, p. 21

³³ The UN Capital Development Fund adopted this approach around 1994.

³⁴ For example, Alan Fowler, 1993, *Non-governmental Organisations and the Promotion of Democracy in Kenya*, Doctoral dissertation, University of Sussex.

settings people join local associations not to assert collective interests but on the contrary to buffer themselves against a constant stream of outside interventions, and thus to *reduce* risks of involvement in public affairs³⁵. In North Africa, researchers are concluding that there may be “too much civil society, too little politics”, as NGOs have eclipsed opposition parties, sidelining basic political processes³⁶.

Knowledge of socio-political effects is improving through rigorous comparative research. One such study³⁷, focusing on civil domain groups supported by Dutch co-financing agencies, indicated that in the case of Mali, the Dutch agencies themselves had no clear strategy toward strengthening the civil domain and were inclined to select development NGOs over membership-based bodies. The study looked at performance along four dimensions: One, basic organizational capacities; Two, networking; Three, influencing policy, and Four, fostering citizenship - that is, promoting action and consciousness for the public good. Most Malian grantee organizations showed evidence of the first; some showed evidence of the second in capacities to connect with officials (less so with other civil domain bodies); few showed any evidence of capacities in respect to the third and fourth dimensions.

Mali stands out in West Africa for its history of social movement and party activism, especially in the 1990s. Yet this study suggests that Dutch funding in Mali was hardly relevant to that kind of mobilized citizen activism. Nor was there much evidence that civil domain bodies favoured with Dutch support had thereby become better able to contribute to that activism.

Nevertheless it remains the case that civil domain actors, even in unfavourable political settings such as war-ravaged Angola, have played restraining roles on officials across a range of vital public matters, such as the content of a peace settlement, prison conditions, press freedoms and violence against women and girls.

7. Public sector bodies across Africa continue to show many ‘morbid symptoms’ of poor organizational health, loss of good staff, under-funding, corruption &c. and thus continue to lose capabilities and legitimacy for citizens and for donors alike. Yet there is evidence of self-fulfilling attitudes at work. Donors and lenders have for decades chosen to by-pass the public sector and to channel resources via special project units, consulting firms - and nonprofits. The resulting organizational islands may meet output targets for a while, but their overall effects can weaken the public sector over the longer run, with knock-on effects for politics. Some nonprofits and

³⁵ Lars Engberg-Pedersen, 2002, ‘The Limitations of Political Space in Burkina Faso’ in Webster and Engberg-Pedersen, *In the Name of the Poor*, London: Zed Books

³⁶ Vickie Langohr 2004, ‘Too Much Civil Society, Too Little Politics. Egypt and Liberalizing Arab Regimes’ *Comparative Politics*, 36(2) January.

³⁷ Kees Biekart, 2002, *Medefinancieringsorganisaties en maatschappijopbouw: Synthesestudie*, Ede: Stuurgroep voor de evaluatie van het Nederlandse Medefinancieringsprogramma

their backers claim to work toward ‘scaling up’ and ‘mainstreaming’ via public sectors, but most have yet to tackle the dilemma in any depth.

Where states are weak and poorly institutionalized, space for emancipatory associational life will tend to be unfavourable. Citizens find open activism risky, and they are not always well-positioned to leverage meaningful change in official policy and behaviour. But where there are robust state institutions, the environment can be enabling of emancipatory agendas. Citizen action in South Africa, for example, has made advances because special courts and official commissions have grown (partially as a result of civil society pressures) to promote provisions of Constitutional bill of rights. In Mozambique, an important pre-condition for achievement of land rights was the rehabilitation of state cadastre (legal mapping) service.

This raises questions for agencies like Hivos, which have traditionally worked only with civil domain bodies: What kinds of strategic balances can and should be struck so that public sector bodies can grow stronger and more responsive toward poor and excluded citizens, in part thanks to pressures and models mounted by civil domain actors?

8. Decentralization has over two decades become part of standard recipes for ‘good governance’ and ‘anti-poverty’ reform. It has strong adherents among NGOs pursuing emancipatory agendas. Yet political decentralization tends not to deliver its advertised benefits. Research in Africa underlines the risks of ‘elite capture’ and impediments to change if the ruling political class is uninterested in reducing poverty and exclusion³⁸. Such findings underscore Mahmood Mamdani’s conclusion: “In the absence of [urban-rural] alliance-building mechanisms, all decentralized systems of rule fragment the ruled and stabilize their rulers. No doubt this is the great attraction of the current wave of decentralization - and the historical amnesia accompanying it - to Africa’s current rulers”³⁹.

The poor *may* benefit from decentralization where more local authorities in poor and remote areas are created and made eligible for redistribution efforts by central authorities (with donor help). But the decisive factor appears to be commitment to pro-poor policies by central authorities, including the political will to by-pass non-accountable local elites. For civil domain bodies and their supporters, whose efforts may be based on paradigms of local-level action, there is no lack of dilemmas and tensions if real progress is made best through leveraging power at the centre.

³⁸ The conclusion of one study is: “decentralization is unlikely to lead to more pro-poor outcomes without a serious effort to strengthen and broaden accountability mechanisms at both local and national levels.” Richard Crook, 2003, *Decentralization and Poverty Reduction in Africa: the Politics of Local-Central Relations*, Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Sussex. See also Aaron Schneider, 2002 *Decentralization*, IDS, Sussex

³⁹ Mahmood Mamdani, 1996, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Oxford: James Currey

9. Governance in many African settings is ‘externalized’, that is, decisively influenced by powerful private and public institutions based in the North. Citizen action limited to national or sub-national levels may be necessary, but may not be a sufficient response. The challenge is to build countervailing power that links allies and mounts pressure across various levels, bridging the micro and the macro.

An illustration: Faced with serious local pollution by a corporation with foreign business connections, South African environmental NGOs with strong local anchoring and research capacity were able to enlist publicity assistance from sister NGOs in North Atlantic countries, and at the same time mobilize attention and other resources at the national level in South Africa. In the end the corporation was forced to comply with basic environmental regulations.

Civic activism internationally can significantly advance emancipatory agendas of national activism nationally. Solidarity movements “mobilized shame” to help move South Africa and Namibia to majority rule; international human rights and ‘alternative-globalization’ groups have helped improve observance of civil and political rights in yet other countries. Former World Bank Chief Economist Joseph Stiglitz states that there was little hope for change in the World Bank, IMF and others until civil domain protestors came along. How to keep up the momentum gained on these fronts in the late 1990s is one of the challenges of the hour.

Yet such pressures by no means guarantee success. Indeed they can boomerang to the extent that rulers can turn the accountability/legitimacy tables on emancipatory actors by smearing them as mere dupes or puppets of scheming outsiders.

Tensions and dilemmas are many. On the one hand, there are opportunities to leverage change. On the other, existing civic strategies center on local delivery rather than the production and promotion of alternative knowledge and ideas - major instruments of leverage. For emancipatory actors and their funders, this poses serious questions about effectiveness, for bodies like the World Bank now see their core business as knowledge and ideas, not loans and grants.

Agencies like Hivos are thus challenged more than ever to weigh, relative to on-the-ground development operations, the potentials of knowledge-based activities in promoting countervailing power on policy battlefields.

10. Quests for resources and for autonomy generate dilemmas for resource-dependent organizations all along the chain of aid. Among tensions and paradoxes around resource issues are:

Goal displacement:

- Agendas of some donors can sometimes compromise grantee freedoms to set their own objectives; for example, child sponsorship NGOs that privilege a few select individuals while overlooking whole populations, or service delivery emphasis that marginalizes citizen activism;
- Multi-purpose, jack-of-all trades capacities can make NGOs more “bankable” in the shifting market of donor grants, whereas building competencies in a single field can expose an NGO to risks that its chosen specialization will cease to be popular among donors;
- Organizational growth such as the creation of branch offices or expansion into more sectors, can displace performance quality as an organizational objective, given constraints and preferences of donors in managing grants.

Accountability muddles:

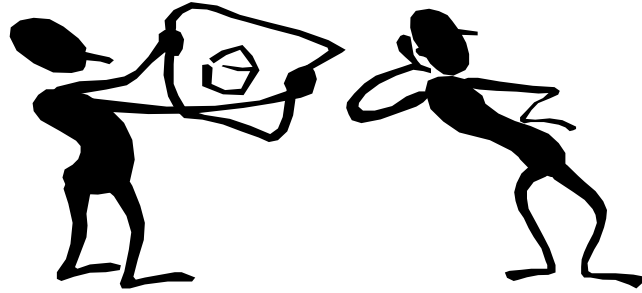
Resource dependence draws lines of accountability upward, concentrating staff resources and systems of bookkeeping, information-gathering and learning in ways that serve funding authorities first, internal management second, and other constituents like target groups third.

Capacity development and distortion:

Most capacity-building efforts center on improving systems, skills and vocabularies to enable nonprofits to meet donor requirements and thus participate in the ‘market’ for aid. Such capacities in turn carry paradoxical outcomes -- for example, improving performance for individual nonprofits, but constraining the pluralism of civil society as a whole, or boosting a part of the civil domain but also removing its political teeth.

11. Alliances and formal federations of nonprofits can in principle help harmonize and amplify emancipatory “voice” in public debate, help cross-fertilize ideas, bring cost savings through joint training and so forth. Donors like NGO umbrella bodies because they seem to be ‘strategic’ and can simplify grantmaking. Yet many national NGO federations have been plagued by conflict, accusations of malfeasance, weak performance, secretariats becoming alienated from affiliates and other problems - suggesting a less than positive balance of results.

Nevertheless, from highly structured trade union federations such as COSATU to loose alliances of land rights activist groups in Mozambique, there is continuing evidence that “joined-up” modes of civic engagement can make decisive differences in advancing rights.



Part III Worth pursuing further

A reading of the foregoing reflections suggests some ways forward. A few of these appear in the following paragraphs. Like the uneven terrain of Africa, they are not uniformly valid for all levels, all countries, and all organizations with which Hivos is presently engaged.

They present themselves at a particular moment in history. Old paradigms are exhausted and expiring; new paradigms have yet to be fully codified and handed down as official orthodoxy. Lessons of experience in Africa (and elsewhere) have begun to register with powerful institutions in the North that until recently had no need of lessons from Africa. Violent “blowback” hitting North Atlantic countries is drawing renewed attention to forgotten corners of the world, including Africa. Political resistance expressed in world forums like WTO/Cancun and World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD)/Johannesburg and new alliances among southern ‘middle powers’ like Brazil, South Africa and India are significant straws in today’s winds. And there is speculation that an emerging “Beijing Consensus” - essentially a paradigm of a strong Developmental State supervising capitalist growth - may soon rival the embattled “Washington Consensus” premised on unfettered capitalism.

Here are some points that may be worth pursuing further:

3.1 Respect for problems and their origins - including “solutions”

The top of the aid system has tended to show insufficient respect for the depth and complexity of problems Africans face. In particular, there has been little regard for the origin of those problems upstream, outside the continent, including the cascade of “solutions” imposed upon Africa over decades⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ And not only in Africa. See James C. Scott, 1998, *Seeing Like a State. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*, New Haven: Yale University Press. Many things constructed according to those engineering-like “laws” have collapsed, killing a lot of people; yet the “engineers” not only go unpunished, they enjoy fabulous careers as university presidents and anti-poverty experts.

Portrayed as lacking everything, especially answers to its perceived shortcomings⁴¹, Africa has faced a massive, unrelenting cascade of “solutions”. Powerful outsiders have come peddling THE solution or THE best practice, exemplified in such idiocies as “Spread the truth! The laws of economics are like the laws of engineering: one set of laws works everywhere!” (former World Bank Chief Economist Lawrence Summers).

For example, in the vital matter of public services, there have been three main kinds of “solutions”⁴²:

- *Intensify what already exists* (doing the same things, only more widely or vigorously, with more training and equipment, &c);
- *Cut back or end public sector activities* (privatize public assets, decentralize responsibilities, terminate public goods, services and subsidies, de-legitimate public measures for equity &c);
- *Change policy from the top down* driven by ideology and belief in technocratic solutions (one basic formula, ‘the ten smartest economists can’t be wrong’, &c).

It is widely known -- and today even admitted by main perpetrators in Washington DC -- that such measures have had terrible side effects: project and programme graveyards, broken reciprocity between rulers and ruled, cynicism about public “consultation” and malfunctioning institutions on a vast and complex scale. Privatization objectives have been realized, even surpassed -- but with nightmarish outcomes for the public. In short, yesterday’s “solutions” add up to some of the main *problems* to be tackled today.

Misplaced “solutions” are not necessarily found in all foreign interventions in civil domains. But given outside interveners’ powers to bring forth and steer certain kinds of civil domain bodies in Africa, there are good reasons to remain alert to the risks.

This suggests the need in regard to building emancipatory processes in civil domains, it may be worthwhile to pay greater attention to:

- The principle at the heart the ancient pledge of physicians: *Do No Harm*. Many observers of the foreign aid system today agree that it is better “first to stop doing damage before attempting to do good (Hirschmann 1993).”⁴³ That would mean, alongside development of positive alternatives, bringing political pressure to bear

⁴¹ Achille Mbembe notes that Africa has been “the supreme receptacle of the West’s obsession with, and circular discourse about, the facts of ‘absence,’ ‘lack,’ and ‘non-being,’ of identity and difference, of negativeness - in short, of nothingness”. Achille Mbembe 2001, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley: University of California Press

⁴² Adapted from Lant Pritchett and Michael Woolcock 2002, *Solutions when the Solution is the Problem: Arraying the Disarray in Development*, Washington: Centre for Global Development

⁴³ Mick Moore and others 1995, ‘Damage Limitation’ in *Institution Building as a Development Assistance Method. A Review of Literature and Ideas*, Stockholm: SIDA

on those powerful outsiders and their domestic allies to force them to stop promoting “solutions” of the kinds referred to above.

- Understanding and helping to open, nurture and protect the political spaces in which emancipatory actors can define the problems *as they see them* and press for solutions *as they devise them*. This could imply less direct intervention/support and more indirect support to promote better public environments for autonomous emancipatory action. This would require more attention to institutional contexts at different levels in which emancipatory actors operate -- laws, policies, common media infrastructure, incentive systems that reward the defense or expansion of emancipatory action and set off alarms when it is threatened &c.⁴⁴. It would also mean further development and use of concepts that facilitate such attention, such as ‘political space’ and ‘citizenship’⁴⁵.

3.2 Revisiting how we look at social phenomena

How we think about problems is itself a challenge. For example, conventional donor paradigms about democratization and economic growth have been premised on straight-line sequences. In these models, cause-and-effect chains are considered clear and know-able. It is assumed that they can be set in motion and managed (from the top) with predictable outcomes every time⁴⁶. Yet the history of fiascos based on such models underlines the urgency of needs to question and replace them with something more subtle and sophisticated.

More attention might therefore be paid to:

- Respect for complexity - such as the discreet but cumulatively large effects of resistance, leakage and other unscripted responses - implies needs to shift attention beyond projects and “logical frameworks” to processes, improvisation, testing and learning.
- How we understand organizations, so that both their potentials and their shadow sides can be grasped. It may help to see both state and civil domain organizations as open systems, as processes rather than material things with tight boundaries⁴⁷;

⁴⁴ See Anuradha Joshi & Mick Moore 2000, *The Mobilizing Potential of Anti-Poverty Programmes*, IDS Discussion Paper 374. <http://server.ntd.co.uk/ids/bookshop/details.asp?id=545>

⁴⁵ Neil Webster & Lars Engberg-Pedersen (eds) 2002, *In the Name of the Poor. Contesting Political Space for Poverty Reduction*, London: Zed Books. Emma Jones & John Gaventa, 2002, *Concepts of Citizenship: a review* IDS Dev. Bibliography 19, <http://www2.ids.ac.uk/drcitizen/docs/db19.pdf>

⁴⁶ Robert Geyer & Samir Rihani, 2000, *Complexity Theory and the Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century*, Paper for the Political Studies Association-UK, April 2000, London. http://www.wwdemocracy.nildram.co.uk/new_visions/systems_thinking/Geyer_Rihani.pdf

3.3 Respect for, better understanding of vernacular associational life

Vernacular strategies of livelihood, resistance to oppression, adjudication of disputes, psycho-social processes of dealing with loss, child care and so forth continue serving African needs at least to some degree, often for want of alternatives supplied by public sectors. Some of these may lend themselves to emancipation. Yet despite its size and importance in Africa, vernacular associational life - that is, life beyond NGOs and other formal bodies often brought into existence by the aid system - is poorly known and understood.

We do know that vernacular systems have been exploited to subsidize formal sector development. For example, southern Africa's cheap labour mode of production was made possible by vernacular systems of rural households where women, children, old or disabled people lived without requiring decent wages, public services or housing. Vernacular coping and survival strategies seen in so much of the "the informal sector" often reflect abject poverty lack of freedom. But powerful outsiders, sometimes in collaboration with local NGOs, have celebrated and promoted such things as "solutions". Whereas it may be more rational and just to see them as swamps of human misery to be drained and ultimately subject to the same rules that govern the formal sector.

Thus in paying more attention to vernacular systems, including associational life, there may be risks of abuse. But without greater respect for and understanding of vernacular systems (including their shadow sides and internal tensions) the promotion of emancipatory agendas will continue to lack depth and anchoring.

3.4 Respect for, understanding of public action

Those pursuing emancipatory agendas have no cause to rejoice at the erosion, and in some places collapse, of public sectors. Nor is there reason to celebrate their substitution by nonprofits as the dogsbodies to fill gaps in basic services. Former UK aid minister Clare Short objected to that kind of privatization of services and emphasized the importance of a politically active civil domain pressing for public services and a responsive government. She was making a valid if overdue point -- and one rarely heard from foreign aid ministers. Not surprisingly, such approaches have not been well studied across differing contexts and sectors.

The market fundamentalist project to roll back the state still has momentum. It blankets much thinking and action by aid agencies and national economic

⁴⁷ An approach successfully pursued through cases studies in the Philippines by Thea Hilhorst, 2003, *The Real World of NGOs*, London: Zed Books

policymakers. Private sector actors, both for-profit and nonprofit, are supposed to get a bigger voice in public policy. Hence today's talk is about public-private partnerships and about 'governance' rather than 'government'.

Yet as shown in struggles to stop privatization of drinking water systems, citizens are resisting notions that markets are more just and efficient than politics in allocating public goods. The point being that even if furnished by private agents, many things are not mere marketplace commodities but rights. They are therefore matters of regulation and control through public processes. Thinkers like Immanuel Wallerstein propose that the emancipatory camp confront the dominant norm of everything's-a-commodity, everything's-for-sale. They urge emphasis on "decommodification", as a central demand of emancipatory campaigns and public policy.

A public action approach would thus take the "rights-based" approach a logical step further. It would give that approach hands and feet by assigning duties to *respect, protect, promote and fulfill* rights. That would require a political "contract" between citizens and authorities. It would further require institutions, plans, programmes, budgets, and means of enforcement including citizen power, for example, to take government units and corporations to court.

Such an approach would require concerted attention to such things as:

Transparency: Entrenching public rights to essential and independently-verified information about government, private for-profit and private nonprofit actors affecting public life or charged with public tasks. Although the moment to push on this open door is favourable (in respect to situations like Angola's, even the IMF and the OECD claim to have joined the pro-transparency camp) civil domain actors need to be able to show that they too practice transparency⁴⁸.

Public Voice: With the coming of such things as the World Bank Inspection Panel and the PRSP consultative process, the *principle* of public participation has gotten a toehold in some settings. Capacity-building in NGO advocacy is one side of a multi-dimensional challenge: how to make public participation less an occasional privilege and more a routine right.

⁴⁸ In regard to Nigeria, for example: "Civil society organizations do not generally observe democratic principles in their own internal processes, and the leaders of such organizations do not always uphold democratic principles in engaging the state because the systems and processes of control employed by authoritarian regimes affect the strategies civil society organizations adopt in carrying on their agenda. These processes and their consequences also reflect the character of civil society organizations, their relations to the mass populations, and thus their capacity to fulfill their role." E. Remi Aiyede, 2003, 'The Dynamics of Civil Society and the Democratization Process in Nigeria' *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 27:1, p. 6

Public Regulation: Setting and enforcing rules that govern private actors with public tasks or who otherwise affect public interests in the economy, environment, cultural sphere, &c. Claimed self-regulation, as in the business sector's "Corporate Social Responsibility" might help, but means to verify it publicly remain indispensable.

3.5 Attention to globalization's effects: *Bambazonke*

Here we come to hyper-paradoxes. The more the world becomes one place, the more relentlessly it becomes polarized. Millions are drawn to core countries and cities and wholly or partially integrated, while hundreds of millions in peripheral places are pushed to the margins, if not expelled outright.

Instances of polarization are many; Zambians used the word *bambazonke* to refer to pell-mell concentration of people, money and the good life in places like Lusaka while the rest of the country drifted backwards.

The stresses and dangers are significant and growing. They pivot as much around material disadvantage and injustice as around injured personal and collective self-esteem. Such structural violence is today being answered with armed violence; young men and teenagers are commonly at the front. In response, self-restraint on the part of some Western powers and their local clients has all but vanished, and their violence approaches over-kill, giving the spiral of polarization yet one more turn.

In vernacular associational life - via migration and diaspora solidarities, religious fellowships, international commercial circuits, &c - many responses have also developed, often in robust and self-reliant networks.

In Africa (as in Western Europe) globalization's contribution to the continual reproduction of winners and losers, penetration and destruction of culture, erosion of collective self-esteem and social animosities poses a number of challenges for the emancipatory camp. Worth pursuing may be a re-jigging of priorities, as for example:

- reduction of inequalities gaining at least the same status as an objective of policy and programming as the reduction of poverty;
- social categories generated by global processes, both in regard to their problems, but also their solutions: migrants, diasporas, &c.;
- development of knowledge and concepts to help surface and manage such things as externalized governance and regional public goods.
- Addressing manifestations of the same problem in different settings through South-South or East-South collaboration.

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These five topics of course don't exhaust the range of issues worth pursuing. Certainly they don't reflect all the matters raised in parts I and II, which themselves offered only partial reviews of debates and dilemmas. If nothing else, this paper may have suggested the breadth and variety of questions at hand, and how resistant these may be to conventional answers.