

CAN STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY BECOME REAL PARTNERS IN FIGHTING POVERTY IN AFRICA?

This brief captures Claude Kabemba's short intervention at the 2005 Public Service Day Tele-Conference organized by the South African Department of Public Service.

Introduction

For decades Africa has been struggling to find the best mechanisms to deal effectively with problems of poverty, wars and underdevelopment. Soon after independence African leaders opted for a one party state which retained power in the hands of the state. There was significant expectation in the immediate that the state would usher in a more just and democratic society. But the state became personified and could not contain corruption in an ethnic, controlling and bureaucratic government service, which sidelined citizens in the management of state affairs. By the 80s the expectation for a better life for most Africans lay in tatters and increasingly became a dream. The International Monetary fund and World Bank took the initiative to rescue the African state by introducing the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). The leading idea during this period was that a state controlled economy had failed and needed to be replaced by much opened and free market orientated society. The market was given greater value than the building of democratic political societies.

In an attempt to monitor state behavior states themselves were asked to facilitate the emergence of a civil society that would in turn monitor state's behavior. This period saw the proliferation of civil society organizations. The international Community channeled a considerable proportion of development assistance NGOs than to government. The policy of the Washington consensus, which intention was to liquidate Africa's state capacity introduced adverse political changes by removing economic policy from the arena of democratic struggle and instead making it a prerogative of the executive, which was compelled to sign conditionalities (Mandani, 2005). After decades of SAP implementation and civil society existence, by the end of the 80's, the African continent has not made significant progress on the economic, political and social front. In the early 90's African states were asked to liberalize

politics by adopting multiparty democracy. Immediately we saw the emergence of human rights civil society groups geared towards the monitoring of state activities. After a decade of democratization with no positive result, the African leadership want to revert to a situation where the state would play a central role in the development agenda. The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) puts the state as the centre of development. The relationship between civil society and the state is a source of debate on the exact role of civil society, if any, in state driven development approach.

A new agenda for Africa: The era of a developmental state

What does this new agenda means and what is the place of civil society in the process?

The African governments have been under pressure in the past two decades from pro-privatization and free market calls for a rolling back the state. Most African governments have experienced in the past a process where by the control of economic decisions slipped away from their hands into those of Multinationals and private sectors as they increasingly decide the direction of national economies.(Kothari 1994). The agenda has been to roll back the state and permit free access to the market, resources, and labor. The main thrust of the argument is that the state has become irrelevant or too deeply embedded in dominating the system. African leaders are revisiting this approach and believe that in the current situation of great inequalities and poverty the state must play a central role in dealing with issues of development and fighting poverty.

The poverty situation facing the continent is unprecedented and cannot simply be addressed by the private sector and multinationals whose first objective is to increase their profit margin. The African leadership is reviewing the situation where the market defines economic behavior and where the state simply facilitate the freeing of the market and only intervene minimally in the immediate and longer-term interest of its citizens—particularly the poor. The

argument is that the market cannot guarantee equitable distribution nor should state be reduced to promoting the interest of national and global capital (Kothari, 1999). The market is not morally sensitive to the situation of the poor but the state can be if correctly structured and prepared. This coincides well with the focus on good governance and respect of democratic principles on the continent that has become a critical issue in policy documents such the NEPAD, the AU Charter, regional organization policy documents and the UN Millennium Goals.

Democratisation goes far beyond the essential formal elements of a democracy--elections, multi-party systems and institutions-which are not sufficient to guarantee broad-based participatory democracy. Democratization implies the empowerment of the broad majority of people who have been left out of economic and social development and decision-making. It will require efforts to alleviate poverty, redress inequalities in income and gender and facilitate access of the broad majority to basic social services, particularly education, health and family planning.

Can the African State on its own meet the Human Security needs?

The weakness of most states on the continent would not allow them to play the developmental role successfully without support from civil society. Most states if not all are experiencing structural and institutional difficulties to effectively and efficiently deliver on the social front. Because of the degree of dysfunctionality and collapse, their public services are inadequately prepared to deal with social transformation. Most states are just too weak to take up this responsibility alone. The first challenge facing the state is the rebuilding and strengthening of the state itself before it can be in the position to respond to the human security needs and peace challenges efficiently. Since the human security cannot not be postponed in favor of political stability mechanisms must be designed at the same time as the capacity of the state is being strengthened, that will deliver on the social front. One such design is to include civil society in social delivery.

State-Civil Society Relations

Civil society on the continent is reluctant to let the state control and dictate terms for the development of the continent. Such a move will give an opportunity to political leaders to sideline civil society and increase state arrogance. Those who are in support of civil society playing a significant role argue that the state has no capacity to deliver efficiently to citizens by itself. The existence of a strong civil society working alongside a capable state is seen as necessary in order to civilize the state. The concern of the state is to what extent should civil society be allowed to intervene in addressing key challenges facing societies. The state on the continent because it is so weak and dysfunctional is sometimes concerned that the existence of a strong civil society would challenge the dominance of the state and in the process if circumstances allow take over the control of the state itself. There are also those in governments who believe that giving too much autonomy and space to civil society groups, they might become disruptive. This position is sometimes informed by the politicization of civil society groups in many African states. This is why it is wrong to address civil society as a monolithic block. In many African states the politicization of the civil society groups makes it difficult to determine the boundaries of what civil society is and what it is not. When controlled either by the state or foreign forces, civil society can be used to demobilize and disorganize populations. This raises fundamental questions about the appropriation of governance and how power is distributed and exercised both locally and globally (Centre for Conflict Resolution, 2004). However, contrary to the view that sees civil society as competitor, in most cases, it is concerned simply with holding the state to account and not taking it over. (Humphries and Reitzes, 1995)

Contrary to the situation of the 60's and 70s, the new African political leadership recognizes the role of civil society and wants to work with it in reaching the people and in addressing the human security challenges. We have seen an increasing interaction between civil society and the state, regional and continental governmental bodies. There are examples to substantiate this. Recently the South African government formalized its relations with faith

based organizations to work together in the area of service delivery; the government of Nigeria has appointed an Advisory on civil society Relations and efforts are being made to cultivate relations with civil society groups. (M'boge and Gbaydee Doe, 2004) These practical approaches to improving relations between state and civil society are only compounded to few states. At the regional and continental levels, great strides have been made to create working relations between regional bodies and civil society. Governments are talking to civil society on how to work together. We have witnessed a series of meetings between AU/civil society which culminated in the drafting of the statutes for The Economic Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC). (M'boge and Gbaydee Doe, 2004) This was followed by the establishment of the Pan African Parliament (PAP). Indeed there is a strong drive at the continental level to ensure greater citizen participation in political issues of governance. **At state level**, there is no country in principle on the continent including Swaziland that is openly opposed to the presence and work of civil society. But not all are making an effort to formalize and structure their relationship with civil society.

While the democratization process taking pace across the continent has reduced the authoritarian and exclusionary nature of the state, the latter still does not have the capacity to provide or create preconditions for the existence of a vibrant and capable civil society. Civil society groups remain closely monitored and do not in many states enjoy the freedom and space to operate freely and support state actions. The nature of civil society itself has not changed fundamentally to give confidence to governments. Civil society groups are ideologically and materially too close to their funders or other internal political forces that they are handled with care by those in government structures. In many cases, the relationship between state and civil society on the continent continues to be determined and designed by outside actors. This maintains the tension between civil society groups and state making it difficult for the two to work together. It is not surprising for example that governments such as those in Zimbabwe and Rwanda have been quick in rejecting the financing of civil society groups, especially human rights groups which are mostly financed by outsiders. Although governments do not present

alternative funding sources, they consider these groups more motivated by the hunger to access political power, in the process advance foreign interests than those of the society they claim to be serving.

The question becomes how do we decrease this tension and create that working relationship between a weak state that is still fearful and a civil society that is not independent? The challenge of creating a dynamic civil society is to accept that any collective endeavor which pursues both the interests of specific community or group or association as well as the larger good, will have to make compromises. If a truly plural and democratic civil society and state is the goal, then creating methods of accommodation as well as inclusive (rather than exclusive) strategies will be needed (Kothari, 1999).

There have been attempts in recent times to involve representatives of civil society in joint fora with governments. But despite this rapprochement not much has changed since the cleavages and tensions that exist between government and civil society persist, even deepening in some societies such as Zimbabwe, Eritrea and Rwanda to mention just a few. In Zimbabwe the debate raises a clear division where state is considered as bad and civil society considered to be good. This dichotomy can be transposed to other countries. The relationship between state and civil society will not work if this polarization continues to be made. Civil society groups are not homogenous and equal. We need to recognize how civil society mirrors the state as a complex sphere of contradictory hegemonic projects, promoted by competing actors (Humphries and Reitzes, 1995).

There is no doubt that a successful and dynamic civil society would contribute to building a democratic relational network to nurture or protect diverse political and economic pursuits. Just as the state, it needs to work on its weaknesses and built a much more mature group. Only then can we expect the emergence of a sincere partnership between state and civil society. We know today that electoral democracy has not sufficiently empowered the state to be able to deal alone with social and economic challenges single handedly. There is need beyond the ballot to open up space for citizen participation in

governance. Omano (2005) suggests that this approach creates what is commonly called a developmental state. He defines a developmental state as one that not only embodies the principles of electoral democracy, but also ensures citizens' participation in the development and governance process.

Though the state is called to play a leading role, it is no more conceptualized as an autocratic state but as democratic one. A minimalist role of the state in society is being challenged. Given the inequality that African states are experiencing it seems Africans are realizing that more state is necessary than to delegitimise it further. Consequently, society which includes bodies from traditional organizations to non –Governmental organizations and front trading networks to community ventures, needs to be strengthened in order for the state to function effectively (Centre for Conflict resolution, 2004). We are not suggesting that we will reach a stage where the tension between civil society and the state is offset by the fact of working together. Citizen, unlike the subject, is an active participant in the political input process—the process by which political decisions are made. However, the dominant role of the state will continue to dictate the terms of this partnership. The situation where citizens are simply subject on the receiving hand of government actions and decisions is being seriously challenged on the continent.

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