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Africa and Decentralization: Enter the Citizens

The local government transformation and decentralization processes underway in Sub-Saharan Africa have opened space for civil society empowerment, giving citizens opportunities to better participate in decision-making processes and administration. The challenge facing decision-makers is to develop models of local governance that can best facilitate the involvement of civil society. *How and how much* civil society can contribute to the establishment of good governance in a sustainable fashion is the question at the core of the current debate on the subject.

Writers have provided varied definitions of the concept of civil society. In general, the term may refer to the organizations through which citizens participate and exert influence over public life. James Manor maintains that it can be understood as "organized interests with a significant degree of autonomy from the state." Mark Swilling offers the view that it consists of locally constituted voluntary associations, which have the capacity to influence and even determine the structure of power and the allocation of material resources. These are institutions that exert pressure and control as "watch-dogs" on state institutions in the area of governance and development, and jealously guard their autonomy and

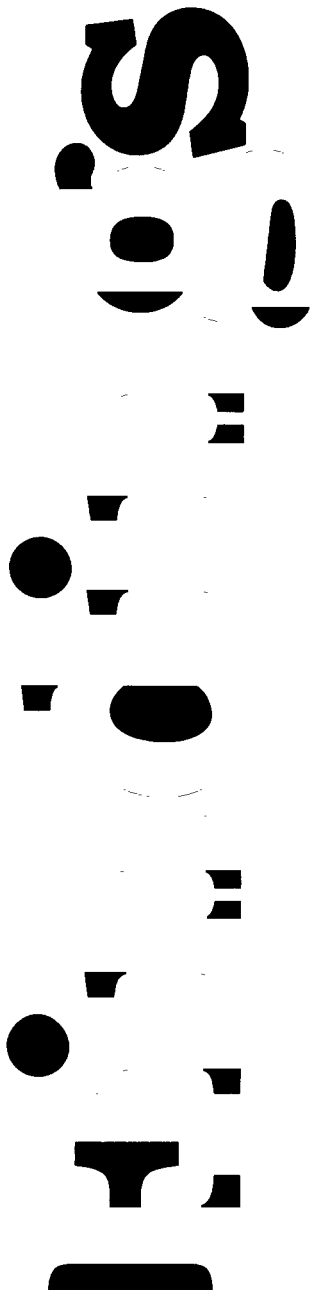
identity. Mamadou Dia argues that many African countries are characterized by an institutional disconnect between formal modern institutions transplanted from outside and indigenous, informal institutions rooted in local culture. Formal institutions include the entire government machinery, from ministries to local governments. Civil society organizations exist as political organizations, trade unions, human rights groups, community-based organizations, and others. As a rule, civil society organizations adhere to the following principles: participation, transparency, accountability, equity, effectiveness and efficiency, strategic vision, and good management.

In theory, a vibrant civil society can contribute to effective institutional development and democratic decentralization, enhance the responsiveness of government institutions, increase the information flow between government and the people, make development projects more sustainable, enhance accountability, transparency and integrity—all of which constitute good governance. However, considering the challenges that face local governments, it might be difficult for the governments to fully embrace civil society as a pillar of democratic decentralization.



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Civil society in the African context

The socio-political and economic crisis that engulfed Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s has persuaded state and non-state actors to review policy and institutional mechanisms for delivering services and foster development. Citizens demand quality services, while city managers lack the resources and morale to perform. One of the reasons civil society groups sprung up in the 1990s was the incapability of local governments to deliver services and fight against poverty and environmental destruction on their own.

It is unfortunate, as country experiences reveal, that the two parties have difficulties engaging in a productive relationship. Goran Heyden had earlier observed that in most African countries, governmental staff tended to be quite arbitrary in their approach to the people for whom they were designing or executing policies. If the people questioned or resisted arbitrary tactics, the officials resorted to intimidation or other measures aimed at punishing the vocal citizens. This culture continues unabated in spite of decentralization and democratization of governance. In Uganda public officials are wary of civic associations, not least because of their role as vocal advocates for the disadvantaged, and are therefore reluctant to allow them to play a more active role in public affairs. Councilors tend to believe that civil society thrives on sowing seeds of political discontent and on challenging the legitimacy of the councils.

Urbanization and the rise of civil society

Africa's urban settlements are growing in both number and size faster than in any other region of the world. Recent reviews of urbanization trends show that the urban population of Africa is growing by 6 percent per annum, twice as fast as that of Latin America or East Asia. It is projected that at the current rate, the urban population is likely to reach 500 million by the year 2025 due to increased massive migration from rural to urban centers, in addition to natural growth within the urban centers themselves. The high rates of urban population growth raise the need for a corresponding increase in the provision of services. However, urban local authorities lack adequate resources to meet the demand for quality services, which is on the rise as a consequence of political emancipation, high literacy rates and increased global communication.

Various factors are cited as the cause of civil society's rapid growth. Firstly, urban citizens are more enlightened and sophisticated than their rural counterparts. As a result, they are interested in establishing independent space outside the direct control of the state to escape political and economic oppression and improve their living conditions. Secondly, indigenous associations receive external assistance from international organizations. Thirdly, the conditionalities imposed on governments to liberalize and democratize lead to state withdrawal from the provision of basic services.

An interesting example...

The current local government in Zimbabwe is a product of both the colonial era and the post-colonial reconstruction of center-local relationships. In 1980, Zimbabwe inherited a system of local government racially divided. The colonial system consisted of Rural Councils and Urban Councils for the white settler population, and African Councils for the politically repressed black population. The two types of local authority were placed under different ministries, the Rural and Urban Councils came under the Ministry of Local Government and Town Planning, while the African Councils came under the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In 1993, the Rural Councils and District Councils were amalgamated into one single Rural District Council with the purpose of removing racially based development and strengthening the role of local government in rural areas. In 1998, the Government of Zimbabwe adopted the widely known Thirteen Principles to Guide the Decentralization Process. The first principle relates to strengthening democracy and citizen participation in plan formulation and implementation.

Decentralization has the potential to contribute to the democratization of society, promotion of efficient delivery of public services, and bridging the gap between the state and civic groups. It is the basis for local self-government, which eventually leads to good governance. In the context of Zimbabwe, civil society organizations play a critical role in representing citizens on social, political and economic issues. One clear example of improved governance due to citizen involvement is the case of the City

of Harare Combined Residents Association (CHRA).

The case of the City of Harare Combined Residents Association (CHRA)

Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe, is located in the northeastern part of the country. The city's population is estimated to be 1.5 million. The growth rate of the city is approximately 6 percent per annum, which is a high rate in terms of providing basic services and accommodation. Harare has attracted a large number of migrants from both rural areas and other urban centers. Several satellite towns have grown around it—Ruwa, Chitungwiza, and Norton—which are very much dependent on it for services. The rapid population growth has resulted in pressure on the meager services in the city, and has created problems of unemployment. These are challenges for both the central and the local governments and the city council.

The City of Harare Combined Residents Association works to help the government meet those challenges. CHRA has four major goals:

- To provide unity, understanding and friendship among residents.
- To develop and enlighten residents opinion on the affairs of the city.
- To encourage the growth or development of constructive civic, economic, educational and social activities of the residents.
- To draw the attention of appropriate authorities to problems and needs of residents.

Conflicts and tension

In recent times, the residents association has played a visible role

Civil society organizations in Zimbabwe, which play a critical role in representing citizens on social, political and economic issues.

Clientele	Institution
Trade Unions	Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU)
Gender Based Organizations	Women's Action Group (WAG)
Consumer Organizations	Consumer Council of Zimbabwe (CCZ)
Residents And Ratepayers Associations	Combined Harare Residents Association (CHRA)
Neighborhood Watch Committees	Highlands Neighborhood Watch Committee
Community Based Organizations	Zororai Old Peoples Home
Vendors Association	Green Market Vendor's Association
Research And Training-	Ruwa Training Center?
Religious Organizations-	Anglican Young Peoples Association (AYPA)
Non-Governmental Organizations	Plan International
Development Associations-	Mashonaland Development Association (MDA)
Human Rights Groups	ZimRights

in the management and conduct of Harare politics and administration. The main area of concern between residents and council is the management of public finance. There is a general perception among urban residents that they are being short-changed and are not getting value for money they pay in the form of rates and other accompanying charges. Refuse is piling up in most parts of the city, roads particularly in high density areas have potholes, street-lighting is poor, traffic lights are not working, grass-cutting is sporadic. Residents feel that councils are not transparent and accountable enough for their actions. As a result, cases of corruption are not effectively investigated. For example, there are constant complaints that prospective home seekers are conned out of thousands of dollars through the bureaucratic machine where some city council employees demand between Z\$3,000.00 to Z\$7,000.00 to speed up the processing of residential stands. In general, residents are of the view that councilors do not really represent local interests, but rather, they are using communities to achieve selfish political and economic gains.

Actions by CHRA

As a consequence of displeasure with respect to the handling of council affairs, CHRA drafted a petition, which 11,950 Harare residents signed and handed to the Ministry of Local Government and National Housing on December 1998. The said petition read: "We the undersigned Ratepayers, Residents and Tenants of Greater Harare call on the Minister of Local Government and National Housing to immediately remove from office the Executive Mayor and the entire Council of Harare for failure to ensure good governance in the Greater Harare area and gross incompetence and mismanagement."

To make sure that the petition was fully understood by the signatories, the text was also in Shona and Ndebele. Subsequent to the CHRA petition, on 25 February 1999, the Minister of Local Government and National Housing suspended the City of Harare Council in accordance with the terms of Section 114 (1) of the Urban Councils Act. In pursuit of its declared vision—to be an effective watchdog and a vehicle of good governance in Harare and a model for advocacy—CHRA assigned three indi-

viduals to sue the City Council in 1999 for unlawful increasing rates. The case was filed with the High Court, which finally judged in favor of the ratepayers. Subsequently, CHRA challenged the Commission currently running the affairs of the City of Harare not to make any decision on the fate of the well publicized council-built \$80 million mayoral mansion situated in Gunhill. They advanced the position that decisions on that property should only be made by a democratically elected council and not by the Commission appointed by the Ministry.

Over the past year, the primary concern of HCRA was to hold mayoral and council elections. The association describes the current City Commission as "a central government agency, not a people's organ". At the time of writing, it was 30 months after the elections were due, and the association argued that the council affairs could not continue to be managed by a commission whose "legality" was questionable. As stated above, HCRA has continuously challenged the legality of the City Commission because it has outlived its constitutional timeframe. The association argued that elections should have been held within nine months of the dismissal of the last elected mayor and council, as stipulated by the Urban Councils Act. HCRA took the matter to High Court where the Judge ruled in favor of the association and ordered the Registrar General to have elections held by December 28, 2001. While upholding the ruling of the High Court, the Supreme Court has advised the two parties—the association and the government—to sit down together and amicably agree on possible dates on which elections should be held.

Issues to consider

To what extent does the leadership of civil society reflect the concerns of the grass roots is difficult to establish. Jesse Ribot notes that many groups whether unions, co-operatives, NGOs or association, do not necessarily reflect the concerns of a village as a whole. While they are often treated as if they were representatives, they are not. They represent their particular interests and their representatives or leaders are accountable to their particular constituencies—and often only to themselves.

The Municipal Development Program, with financial support from the Government of Finland, has over the last three years been supporting pilots for enhancing civic participation in municipal governance in Eastern and Southern Africa. The thrust was to establish the capacity for both municipal authorities and civil society to work together more productively in the interest of local communities. It is clear from the experiences gained that while the inclusion of the civil society in local governance is appreciated and gaining acceptance, it has been a dramatic turn around for local officials who are used to hierarchical management structures. It is clear that local governments are weak in provision of services while civil society has the potential to provide services. That represents a missing link in bringing together the two parties. There is therefore a need to facilitate the forging of partnerships. As Jean Bossuyt rightly noted, opening up governance to non-state actors is a learning process, requiring time, experimentation, stock taking of best practices, flexibility and institutional innovation.

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