

The 'Uses and Abuses' of Civil Society in Africa¹

Julie Hearn

The current discourse on 'civil society' in Africa, conducted by Northern governments, international NGOs, activists and academics, often presents civil society as the *locus sine qua non* for progressive politics, the place where people organise to make their lives better, even a site of resistance. This article seeks to remind us that, as originally theorized by Antonio Gramsci, civil society is a potential battleground. It also constitutes an arena in which states and other powerful actors intervene to influence the political agendas of organised groups with the intention of defusing opposition. This article examines the extent to which this form of civil society is being constituted in Africa, in particular, through Northern government support to African policy-oriented organisations. It does this by looking at three quite distinct national contexts and investigating the relationship between the dominant development project in each, undertaken by the government in 'strategic collaboration' with donors and civil society. It focuses on Ghana, South Africa and Uganda during the late 1990s. All three countries have been paradigmatic in terms of donor visions for the continent and have attracted some of the largest aid packages that specifically target 'civil society'. It is argued that donors have been successful in influencing the current version of civil society in these countries so that a vocal, well-funded section of it, which intervenes on key issues of national development strategy, acts not as a force for challenging the *status quo*, but for building societal consensus for maintaining it.

Which 'Civil Society'?

In a 'bottom-up' sense, civil society is the realm in which those who are disadvantaged by globalization of the world economy can mount their protests and seek alternatives ... In a 'top-down' sense, however, states and corporate interests influence the development of this current version of civil society towards making it an agency for stabilizing the social and political status quo. (Cox, 1999:10-11)

The term 'civil society' has had a long and chequered history. Bratton (1994:52) cites Pelczynski who comments that 'few social and political concepts have traveled so far in their life and changed their meaning so much.' Within the African context, many commentators (Oloka-Onyango & Barya, 1997; Allen, 1997; Hearn & Robinson, 2000) have written about the 'conceptual confusion' surrounding the term and have critiqued it on counts of theoretical clarity, analytical application and simple ideological role, being the deeply pluralist term that it is. This article takes Cox's

starting-point that 'there is little point in arguing that one usage of the term "civil society" is correct and the other is wrong' but instead 'let us take current identification of civil society with autonomous social forces as a basis for discussion and examine its implications' (1999:10).

It will be argued that autonomy is an essential, yet frequently side-lined, feature of civil society. The current development paradigm in Africa predominantly concerns bringing civil society into a closer and closer relationship with states and has very little to say about the importance of keeping a critical distance. Writing from a Ugandan perspective, where the process has perhaps the gone the furthest, Muhereza and Kyomugisha (1999:3) describe policy-making and implementation as predicated on the 'compliance nature of the triad relationship between the state, donors and civil society'. As Abugre (n.d.1) notes, 'partnership' is at the centre of the so-called 'new agenda for development assistance'... Central to this new agenda is a framework where 'civil society organisations' (including but not restricted to NGOs) are expected to work in 'partnership' with 'participatory and accountable' governments as the 'only means of ensuring and sustaining participatory, equitable and sustainable development.'

This article explores how the current development agenda of 'partnership' not only undermines autonomy but can also contribute, as Cox (1999) warns in the opening quotation, to the current version of civil society in Africa becoming a means for stabilizing rather than challenging the social and political status quo. This will involve us in examining three quite distinct national contexts in the late 1990s – Ghana, South Africa and Uganda. Each of these has featured prominently in donor visions of paradigmatic development. Ghana has been the African model for structural adjustment, South Africa has represented the triumph of democratisation and Uganda is currently seen as a leading beacon for poverty alleviation.

In each example, we focus on that section of civil society which has actively engaged with the dominant national development project. It is no coincidence that this section is invariably amongst the most well-funded, is almost completely donor dependent, and tends to identify itself self-consciously via the new language of 'civil society'.² We begin with Ghana in 1997, where the national context was characterised by an attempt to build societal consensus around 'accelerated adjustment' in the hope that this would propel it toward middle-income status by the year 2020. Discussion then moves to the South African context in 1998, which was characterised by consensus building around the legitimacy of the new South African state, premised on notions of limited liberal democracy and eschewing any remnants of social democracy which many South Africans fought and died for. Finally, it turns to Uganda in 2000 as the model par excellence for the latest 'partnership' project – 'poverty reduction'. In each case the extent to which policy-oriented, donor-funded civil society has an instrumental role in building consensus around the dominant development agenda is highlighted.

Although the section of civil society focused on in each case responds to the specific political and economic context of the country in question, it ends up performing much the same function across all three. In Ghana it promotes yet more poverty-inducing adjustment with no guarantees of gain for the pain. In other words, it 'sells' austerity without development to Ghanaians. In South Africa it is engaged in convincing South Africans not to equate democracy with expectations for a better material life. Again, this amounts to 'selling' austerity. In Uganda, it ensures that poverty reduction is the order of the day, apparently giving up on development in favour of living better

'within your means'. In other words, current 'poverty reduction' looks alarmingly like adjustment to poverty. Therefore, whether it is championing more low/no-intensity democracy or low/no-intensity development, civil society becomes an important agency for stabilizing the status quo in Africa, which is abject poverty with no prospects for social transformation.

Engineering Consensus & the New Politics of Adjustment in Ghana

As the following excerpt from an USAID document confirms, American assistance to Ghana is explicitly oriented toward ensuring increased local legitimacy for current development strategies.

Other ... political risks include growing polarization within the Ghanaian polity and perhaps an associated risk that a legally sanctioned change of government could have totally opposing development views and reverse long-term policies. USAID assistance to civic organisations that develop and debate public policy, and U.S. support for consultation on government policies, have been useful in shaping a vision for Ghana's future which is developing broad, bipartisan support (USAID, 1997:21).

Ghana's leading role, initially as an economic reformer and, more recently, as a democratic reformer, made it an important African country for the donor community, particularly in the mid-1990s. As an article in the *Financial Times* (9 July 1996) noted, 'if Ghana falters in its trailblazing role ... the credibility of the donors' development strategy for Africa will also be eroded.' Ghana is currently undertaking an ambitious economic restructuring programme, known as *Ghana-Vision 2020*, in an effort to transform itself into a middle-income country by the year 2020. This requires increasing economic growth rates to well above seven per cent per annum (USAID, 1997:21). As the World Bank's 1996 Ghana Country Assistance Review notes, the economic restructuring of the past decade cannot be sustained unless 'the implementation of a large unfinished agenda of adjustment is accelerated in the short run' (Armstrong, 1996:1). Kraus (1991:19) comments, however, that since their inception in the early 1980s, structural adjustment programmes have been 'the most contentious issue in African political economy.' Nationwide demonstrations in May 1995 against value added tax (VAT), which left five protesters dead and forced the resignation of the finance minister responsible for the Economic Recovery Programme since the early 1980s, became a flash-point for struggle over structural adjustment.

The VAT demonstrations were a turning-point for the Rawlings government. The lesson which it and the donors learnt was that implementing difficult economic policy within a democratic framework requires broad-based consensus. With a view to building support around the reintroduction of VAT, the government organised a two-day National Economic Forum in September 1997.³ Under the theme, 'achieving national consensus on policy measures for accelerated economic growth within the framework of Ghana Vision 2020', the forum brought together over 150 organisations and institutions. The discussion generated thereby was peppered with references to hard choices, the absence of soft options and the need for sacrifices. The emphasis on national consensus and unity of purpose also signalled the importance of the political context of Ghana's new multi-party democracy. As one distinguished Ghanaian commentator explained in a televised panel discussion at the time, the fact that so many were expressing their views heightened the need to bring those views together,

else political stability might be jeopardised. In its outlook for 1998, the Economist Intelligence Unit commented that the most formidable challenges facing the government in the coming year would be the introduction of VAT and public sector reforms. It concluded: 'In the face of domestic opposition to these measures, a popular consensus in their favour will have to be forged in parliament and the country at large' (1997:3).

An important question to address is why so great an emphasis has been placed on consensus in recent years. Brinkerhoff and Kulibaba provide an explanation applying not just to Ghana, but to broader developments across the continent:

as the trajectory of economic reform moves from the earlier stages of stabilization, usually managed by a small team of technocrats, to liberalisation and, ultimately, long-haul consolidation, where much larger numbers of actors are involved, African decision-makers and policy managers increasingly face the requirement of building coalitions and managing consensus (1996:125).

These sentiments have been echoed by the World Bank in Ghana:

In the 1980s, the Bank dealt with a small group of leaders and technocrats accountable to an unelected head of state. In the 1990s, Ghana has an increasingly active parliament ... and new forms of decentralised organisation and accountability. The political reforms may slow decision-making and policy implementation in the short-term. But insofar as they broaden the 'ownership' ... they will serve to deepen and to speed development over the long-term (<http://www.worldbank.org/html/oed/pr099.htm>).

The US aid programme's analysis is similar:

The sweep, swiftness and success of the 1983 Economic Recovery Program may be attributed to the mandate given to a small and well qualified group of presidential and ministerial advisors. Although dramatic policy changes have been made, in order for Ghana to realize 7 percent growth, bold new initiatives in policy reform are required ... Further, the maturing of democratic institutions means that a much more intensive process of consultation and consensus-building is required (USAID, 1997:23).

The US aid programme in Ghana, administered by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), has been at the forefront of engineering such a process. Its consensus-building attempts include challenging economic policy formation as the sole preserve of the government and encouraging its being opened up to other actors. As its country report asserts, 'Parliament, business and labor interests and civil society are now parties to policy formulation' (Ibid.). Its intervention began with sponsoring the first four independent analyses of the economy by the Centre for Economic Policy Analysis (CEPA). USAID notes that 'improvements are needed in public and private sector capacity to analyse policy questions and to participate in consensus-building and in mechanisms for public-private consultation' (Ibid.). USAID has undertaken to 'support a participatory approach to policy change' which is 'process-driven in contrast to the traditional conditionality and output driven formula', and which places 'greater emphasis on stimulating Ghanaians - public and private - to drive the policy change process' (Ibid. p. 29). USAID's self-styled role was to include 'support to local research institutions and private and civic organisations, to strengthen their capacity to participate in the policy change process' (Ibid. p. 30). Its report concludes that 'this process approach will help institutionalize tools and fora for policy change, that will improve policy management and improve sustainability of policy change' (Ibid. pp. 29-30).

One of the most important recent developments in USAID's attempt to bring other actors into the economic policy formation process was the aforementioned two-day National Economic Forum, opened by President Rawlings, which took place in Accra in September 1997. In an interview, the week before the event, an USAID official expressed excitement about the Forum and explained that it was an integral part of their programme to support civil society in Ghana through private sector actors. Indeed, earlier in 1997, USAID had sponsored a meeting in Chapel Hill, North Carolina for 65 public and private actors from Ghana, to which the Economic Forum was a follow-up.⁴ However, on the eve of the Forum controversy erupted over who was officially organising it. The director of the National Development Planning Commission gave a press conference in which he stated that the initiative for the Forum had come from the Commission rather than a USAID-funded NGO, the Private Enterprise Foundation (PEF). On the same day, the Deputy Minister of Trade and Industry went on prime-time TV to confirm that: 'It has never been the intention of the USAID to hijack the economic development policy of this country and run it for Ghana.'

We argue here that bringing civil society into the economic policy process in order to broaden consensus around Ghana's accelerated structural adjustment is an important but little documented objective of Western civil society assistance. An observer can see the relative importance of this objective when examining the kinds of organisations being supported by donors as well as those that receive the most funding. Ghana's Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), whose brief is to promote economic liberalism, has the largest number of foreign donors. It has 'cross-donor' support, receiving funding from at least seven different Western governments. The funding it has received has also been substantial. The US National Endowment for Democracy (NED) provided the IEA with over \$500,000 between 1992 and 1997 for work promoting the role of the private sector within parliament and among the public.⁵ Between 1995 and 1997 Denmark provided almost the same amount of funding for a programme of roundtables and discussions between government, the political opposition and other organisations to discuss Ghana's economic policy. This level of funding is in a substantially different league to grants of less than \$10,000, for example, which are received by such bodies as the National Union of Ghana Students (NUGS).

In 1994 Callaghy observed that in most places in Africa, there are few social constituencies for economic reform. Gyimah-Boadi (1996:121-2) similarly observes that 'the contribution of civil society to democratic consolidation is even more disappointing in the key areas of economic reform and development' and notes the 'absence of decisive coalitions in favor of economic reform' and the elusiveness of 'a consensus between governments and civil societies'. Our research suggests that such a consensus may no longer prove so elusive in consequence of donor support to civil society in Ghana. Instead of civil society being a hindrance to economic reform, as Gyimah-Boadi suggests has been the case in the past, donors see its potential for broadening support for the reform process. This development is not unique to Ghana. In Mozambique, Hall and Young (1997:227) observe that 'aid is being deliberately directed to assist in the construction of new social groups committed to the market economy'. Civil society's ability to promote consensus around restructuring forms the subject of the new politics of adjustment in the late 1990s in a context where adjustment is increasingly pursued through liberal democracy rather than authoritarianism.

From Social Democracy to Liberal Democracy in South Africa⁶

As Gills et al. (1993:7) noted early in the 1990s:

Perhaps more than at any other time in the recent past, it is now that the struggle to define 'democracy' has become a major ideological battle.

For the majority of South Africans the struggle against apartheid was conducted in terms influenced by socialist, redistributionist paradigms aimed at directly redressing the gross material inequality left by apartheid. As Mattes and Thiel explain (1998:102):

While 'one man, one vote' was always the goal, the key liberation movements subscribed to and spread to their poverty-stricken followers an economic, as opposed to a procedural view of democracy.

In analysing public opinion polls on democracy, they note that whilst only 27 per cent rated as essential such key procedural elements as regular elections, 48 per cent said that equal access to houses, jobs, and a decent income was 'essential' to democracy (Ibid.) However, this is not the kind of democracy that the majority of South Africans have experienced. It is clear that neither the West nor the ANC wanted to see the kind of radical, thoroughgoing reconstruction of society that would be required were the majority of South Africans to be provided with houses, jobs and a decent income. Instead, every effort was made to ensure a political settlement that would allow the passage from racial to non-racial capitalism in South Africa. One aspect of reconciling South Africans to what the New South Africa would actually entail involved convincing them that what they thought democracy meant was incorrect. Democracy as the equivalent to a better life, a release from grinding poverty and economic exclusion was replaced with liberal democracy or polyarchy, which Robinson defines as 'elite minority rule and socioeconomic inequalities alongside formal political freedom and elections involving universal suffrage' (1996:356). Mattes and Thiel (1998) conclude that in an attempt to root liberal democracy:

... one might urge South Africa's educational system, civil society, and political parties to shift their emphasis ... to the ... task of teaching people to value democratic institutions and processes more for their own sake than for what they may deliver in terms of immediate and tangible benefits.

What is interesting in South Africa, compared to other African countries, is the number and calibre of civil society organisations (CSOs) geared towards doing precisely that – encouraging a popular commitment to procedural democracy. What is more, these kinds of CSOs feature predominantly in donor political aid programmes. In the course of our research we asked over a dozen different foreign donors what kind of civil society organisations they funded through their democracy assistance. There were five main categories: democracy organisations, concerned with the overall relationship between states and citizens; human rights and legal aid groups; conflict resolution agencies; organisations servicing or representing the non-governmental sector; and think tanks. More organisations fell within the first of these categories than any of the others. They also received the largest amounts of aid and were supported by the broadest cross-section of donors.

The most prominent is Idasa, an organisation fully committed to procedural democracy with a staff of 140. It probably receives the most donor funds of any CSO in South Africa. Other organisations include the Institute for Multiparty Democracy,

