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CIVIL SOCIETY LEADERSHIP

The plurality of civil society and the diverse sets of relations that it engenders with the state is... the best guarantee for the consolidation of democracy in South Africa.

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1. Introduction

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and the networks they form have become major players in global development. Over the last decade, donors have placed greater emphasis on civil society voices in encouraging pro-poor development through their inputs in policy formulation processes, and then by holding government to account for implementation. CSO networks have been the prime organisational form for articulating the voice of ordinary people.

CSOs are defined here as “self-organizing and self-regulating groups with corporate identities that are autonomous from the state and may exist within any given social or political setting”.¹ CSOs refer to a wide array of organizations: community groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), labour unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations.

For CSOs to become agents of democratization, they must embody three characteristics. First, the organizations themselves must operate democratically; they must represent democratic values of diversity and tolerance within their

membership. Second, their agendas must contain some element of demand for political democracy, putting increased pressure on the state to make a lasting transition. Third, CSOs need to gain enough individual or collective power to play an influential role in the democratization process; in essence, they must work with the state, yet remain autonomous from it. They must promote political participation, yet also attempt to limit the power of government, and expose corruption and abuse of power.²

South African civil society is as large and as vibrant as in most advanced industrialised countries; in some cases even more so. The Ministry of Social Development estimates the number of registered CSOs to be over 113 000; in addition, there are about 50 000 unregistered CSOs, according to Sangonet. Engaged and empowered civil society leadership enables communities to take serious steps against corruption, abuse of political power, and social injustice. In this way, as well as by contributing to policy and legislative development, and by monitoring its implementation, CSOs provide a unique kind of political leadership. The Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office (CPLO), together with the Hanns Seidel Foundation and the

Goedgedacht Forum for Social Reflection, have been running a series of roundtable discussions on various aspects of political leadership³. It is fitting that the fifth and last of these focused on Civil Society Leadership.

2. The Role of South Africa's Civil Society

When people freely exercise their rights to freedom of association and freedom of expression, for example, by meeting to advocate for their interests, to pursue a cause, or to protest a government policy, they do so as part of civil society. Civil society is thus a mechanism whose function as a mediator between the individual and the state distinguishes it from the government and the business sector.

South Africa's civil society sector plays a vital and often unacknowledged developmental role. In spite of an enlightened Constitution, discrimination and inequity still thrive in South Africa. Women, children, people of colour, indigenous peoples, migrants, gay and lesbian groups, and people living with HIV/AIDS, are among particularly vulnerable groups. Although there has been some progress in racial, ethnic, and gender equality since 1994, South Africa remains a vastly unequal society, riven by all the worst consequences of pervasive poverty.⁴ The civil society sector is dedicated to alleviating damaging socio-economic conditions, and over the past two decades the sector has increasingly filled gaps in government service delivery. It is no exaggeration to argue that without the efforts of CSOs, the suffering of the poor, the marginalised and the sick would be significantly more acute.

In addition, it is largely civil society groups that have 'made the Constitution work' by bringing a range of administrative, human-rights and rule-of-law disputes to court. Scores, if not hundreds, of successful court actions and applications by CSOs have focused on legislative and policy issues, while many more have dealt with failures of implementation. All of this has not only made a direct difference to the lives of millions of people, it has also helped to build up a huge body of constitutional jurisprudence that will continue to serve our interests long into the future.

3. Civil Society Influencing Political Leadership

South African civil society remains a vigorous source of citizen participation in public life and thus a means of holding government to account. Civil society's vigour is demonstrated by the fact that decisions in national, provincial and local government are subject to scrutiny and discussion by a variety of organisations which have an ability to help shape the debate and, in some cases, to prompt government authorities to alter decisions. Perhaps the most celebrated example is that of the TAC, which won a change in government's attitude to HIV and AIDS.

Civil society leadership also has the power to bring about change; to challenge the decisions and policies of government; and to ensure that constitutional principles and the rule of law are not violated with impunity. Since 1994, a culture has developed that encourages public involvement in the crafting of laws, and CSOs have been diligent in responding to this openness. We are fortunate to have one of the world's most open parliaments, and hardly a law goes through the legislature without having been influenced to some degree by the comments and criticisms of civil society. Almost always, this leads to an improved piece of legislation, as the combined wisdom and experience of civil society is applied to the Bill in question. As importantly, the process results in a more credible law; when people and organisations have had the opportunity to contribute to the debate they are far more likely to accept the legitimacy of the final product, even if it is not perfectly to their liking.

The routine involvement of civil society in the formulation of legislation, and even its mere physical presence in parliamentary committee rooms, also has a salutary effect on MPs. It reminds those who may have forgotten that their first duty is to the electorate, the public whose representatives they are, rather than to their party bosses. The submissions of CSOs can also assist MPs in their own arguments for or against a Bill, and indeed these submissions often contain insights and expertise that would not otherwise be available to the relevant committee.

4. Challenges Facing Civil Society

One of the challenges currently faced by this sector is that of financial sustainability. Whereas under apartheid the sector was generously funded by the international donor community, with democracy much international funding has been channelled 'government-to-government', through an often ineffective state apparatus. While there are no current and reliable statistics on funding to the sector, most organisations rely on a combination of diminishing international funding, corporate social investment, donations from individuals and a degree of income-generation, often via government contracts. This situation is exacerbated by the current economic recession, which has caused some traditional foreign donors to scale down their funding drastically or to withdraw completely. As a result, the sustainability of many important organisations is threatened and some, such as the Human Rights Committee and IDASA, have been forced to close completely.

In response to this crisis in the funding of CSOs, it is tempting to say that civil society should adapt and find a way of living without foreign grants. This is fine in principle, but in practice there is no tradition of charitable grant-making in South Africa, least of all for democracy work, from which most corporates shy away. "Corporate leaders are quick to complain about the infirmities of the democratic system and the consequent political risk, but they are very slow to fund organisations willing to work independently on issues of accountability and transparency."⁵

Civil society by its very nature consists of extremely diverse groups with different means and ends, different visions, and different members. It is thus extremely easy for fragmentation to take place, where it is everyone for themselves, serving their own needs, and sometimes even competing with others for scarce resources. It is also quite tempting for CSOs to form exclusive networks like those in the business sector which tend to concentrate opportunity, power, and wealth in the hands of well-connected few.

The nature of civil society organisations also creates challenges from within. To run even a small organisation requires a level of education and skill that is very difficult to find among the poor and

often poorly educated, where many CSOs are located. Often civil society organisations start off as civil movements led by poor or marginalised people, but then begin to transform into organisations run by the educated and the skilled. This can create challenges where those with skills and education often find it difficult to hold back their opinions and ideas, and instead allow themselves to be led by the views and opinions of those who are poor and uneducated.

There are other organisations which, though part of civil society, are made up of highly skilled and educated individuals who avail their skills and expertise to all movements and organisations, doing work such as computing, litigation, contracts, skills-training, lobbying, or research. They also face the challenge of remaining true to the values of civil society and not becoming so far removed from the poor and the excluded, or so driven by commercial considerations, that they become part of the oppressive and exclusive structures of an unjust society.

The values of Catholic Social Teaching apply as much to CSOs as to government. Openness to the plight of the poor should always drive decisions. The value of subsidiarity must always be encouraged, where the poor and ordinary are left to make decisions, rather than moving all decision-making to the leadership. Sometimes, such 'lower level' decisions may not be the best or the most ideal, but they still demand to be respected and followed, unless of course, they are clearly wrong or harmful to the organisation. A diversity of views and experiences should always be encouraged. This sometimes means that leaders must be conscious of subtle modes of exclusion, such as running meetings in a single language when some of the less educated members are unable to express themselves in that language, or simply become silent for fear of embarrassing themselves when they try to speak a language they are not fluent in. It means that within organisations themselves, issues of exclusion, exploitation, and injustice, must be taken seriously.

5. The Roundtable Discussion

As mentioned, the CPLO, together with the Hanns Seidel Foundation and the Goedgedacht Forum for Social Reflection, recently hosted a roundtable

discussion entitled 'Civil Society Leadership'. It was addressed by Paul Graham, former director of the Institute for Democracy in Africa (IDASA); Amelia Jones, retired chief executive of the Community Chest; and Zackie Achmat, co-director of Ndifuna Ukwazi and former chairperson of the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC).

Mr Graham raised some challenging questions about the need for serious personal introspection and for a critique of values and attitudes that underlie our behaviour, decisions, and sometimes our contribution to the oppression of others. He noted that there is often a tendency for people to abdicate their responsibility for contributing to the creating of a better society, and instead to sit on the sidelines making comments. He argued that civil society has to realise how to create and wield power. This is not to say that civil society should get into competition with politicians for power, but that civil society must begin to realise that societal transformation for the better does not come from simply complaining; it involves using ordinary people's power to influence society for the better.

Ms Jones stressed that civil society leadership should move beyond service alone to advocacy, networking and lobbying. She also noted that civil society is no more turbulent now than it was in the past. The only difference is the context: much of what is being done today would have led to summary arrest in the South Africa of the past. Civil society needs to be conscious of the present context and to avoid fighting battles as if it was stuck in the past. Strategies have to be clearly defined and continually refined in light of the new challenges facing society today.

Mr Achmat talked of the importance of issues such as corporate lawlessness and the challenge posed by Apartheid structures that had been cemented into place after 1994, instead of being totally transformed or destroyed. He also referred to context: whereas in the past the attempt had been to destroy unjust political structures, now civil society had to learn to push and lobby within a democratic dispensation.

6. Conclusion

Speaking at Santa Martha on 16 September 2013, Pope Francis called on everyone to engage in

politics, to give credit where it is due, and to challenge for change where change is required. Praise for political leaders when they do well, he said, is a way of encouraging them to continue to listen and to do good, especially for the poor and marginalised.

These comments apply very aptly to South African civil society which, despite facing a number of challenges, has helped in numerous ways to support and defend democratic governance, as well as to influence government policies. In many instances civil society carries out tasks that government cannot fulfil or which it neglects to do; in this way, civil society can be seen as filling a leadership gap. In the democratic era, CSOs will undoubtedly produce more and more capable and inspiring leaders. Civil society has shown that it has the commitment and the skills to contribute to a solid, prosperous and democratic future for South Africa. The Constitution provides the space for it to do so. All it needs is to be taken more seriously, and to be given proper support. As Amelia Jones put it, civil society is not simply about the survival of the poor, but about the survival of us all.

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¹ Mehran, K and Mora, F. 1998. Civil society and democratisation in comparative perspective: Latin America and the Middle East. *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 19, no.5, pp.893-916.

² See 1 above

³ See previous briefing papers, numbers 318, 323, 325 and 329.

⁴ Juzaida Swain April 03 2013. South African Civil Society – Quo Vadis?
<http://www.ngopulse.org/article/south-african-civil-society-quo-vadis>

⁵ Richard Calland. 28 Mar 2013. Mail and Guardian. The perfect storm that shut down Idasa.
<http://mg.co.za/article/2013-03-28-00-the-perfect-storm-that-shut-down-idasa>