Civil Society and People-Centred Development in Zimbabwe

Note: This report is a very much abridged version of a longer report of a study of the engagement of civil society in Zimbabwe in people-centred development.

The term civil society can loosely be defined to encompass the wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organisations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations\(^1\). Its influence in shaping both local and global public policy has emerged over the past two decades. In Zimbabwe, as elsewhere, civil society organisations (CSOs) have become important actors in policy dialogue, delivery of social services and implementation of other development programs, as a complement to government action. Some have also taken on a role of watchdog, demanding effective, accountable and transparent governance. The sector is far from homogenous and indeed quite varied in its nature and composition.

Zimbabwe’s political, social and economic turbulence of the past two decades has challenged civil society organisations to examine their relevance and impact, and to devise approaches which might address some of the nation’s problems while they continue to promote development which is people-centred. The concept of people-centred development became popular within the development community during the 1990’s and represents the view that people must take responsibility for their own development as opposed to accepting top-down solutions from governments, donors or even CSOs. However, in the absence of demonstrable movement as a nation towards sustainable progress, can it be said this approach is having the desired effect?

The aim of this study was to consider whether or not civil society is promoting people-centred development, identify some best practices, if any, and make recommendations regarding ways in which their impact could be enhanced. It thus surveyed a sample of civil society organisations in Zimbabwe to determine to what extent they are pursuing an agenda of people-centred development, and whether they are having an impact in this regard. It did not attempt to collect and analyse quantified data; that would require a much more comprehensive in-depth longitudinal research.

What is civil society?

Most researchers agree that civil society refers to voluntary participation by average citizens and excludes behaviour imposed or coerced by the state. It is commonly viewed as civil space that allows for associational life for individuals and groups outside state control. While the African state has progressively lost credibility in the eyes of Western donors and international financial institutions, civil society has increasingly been viewed as an important instrument for promoting democracy,

\(^1\) See also www. Worldbank.org/wbsite/external/topics/cso
development, and human rights. This is partly because of its expertise, capability, skills and proximity to the intended beneficiaries of development, the grassroots. This description of civil society would exclude organisations established by an incumbent government to forward its own political rather than developmental interests.

There is some debate on what types of organisations qualify as civil society organisations, and whether all non-governmental organisations should be included. There is in fact no agreement on what constitutes a CSO, with some observers including NGOs and others excluding them. We felt that it was not useful to enter into the semantics debate to describe a dividing line between civil society and non-governmental organisations. NGOs surely do form a part of civil society, but possibly not all NGOs could be termed CSOs. However, we will leave the argument there, and note that in this study CSOs and NGOs are not clearly differentiated and to some extent the terms are used interchangeably.

**People-centred development**

“People-centred development” refers to a particular understanding of what development should entail, and how it can be achieved. The theory is that when people participate in and make decisions about their own development, not only will sustainable development occur, there will be a spill-over into the political sphere which will promote democracy and good governance, thus enabling a rapid improvement in the quality of people’s lives, both material and non-material. People-centred development is set against the top-down sort of development planning and promotion which was introduced by government in the 1980’s and even before, and which was also espoused by a large number of non-governmental organisations. Rather than be told what they must do as before, individuals and communities now should decide for themselves what they would like to do, and then seek assistance with the technical, training and material inputs which they might need from either government or non-government agencies.

As people take responsibility for their own development rather than expecting others to direct them, they need to learn democratic methods of decision making and working with each other, and they begin to claim rights from government officials and elected representatives and hold them accountable for how they govern. The spiral goes upwards, with democracy and sustainable development reinforcing each other. People-centred development beginning in communities thus eventually promotes the good governance which will assist in driving further development through national policy-making.

**Zimbabwe’s operating context**

Civil society has itself developed through a changing context over the decades since independence in 1980. Initially, it was very small, as the nation expected government to provide and to take the lead in determining Zimbabwe’s economic and social development. And government did take command, leaving little space for non-state actors as the state of emergency of the liberation war was retained for a full decade. It was only lifted in 1990, after the ZAPU opposition was swallowed through unity. This provided an opening for civil society organisations to enter the public arena and indeed their services and development assistance were much in demand as the economy shrank under an IMF-driven structural adjustment. A plethora of organisations promoting wider democracy and respect for human
rights emerged during this decade, and began to unsettle government, who responded with draconian legislation (such as POSA and AIPPA) to close the space for their operations.

From 2000, with the economy in free fall and the erosion of the rule of law, government showed increasing hostility and attempted repression of some civil society organisations. CSOs were initially somewhat shielded from the effects of economic collapse, however, because they depended not on the local economy but on international donors for their funding sources. And as impoverishment and social disintegration intensified through the decade, all types of CSOs found there was more work for them to do. Their increasing importance, however, brought new problems of careerism and elitism within their ranks, accompanied by dependency on their donors – both issues of concern.

Given this context, after considering the work of selected civil society organisations, and attempting to draw conclusions about their contribution towards people centred development, the study proceeds to make observations on civil society’s relationship with both government and with donors, and the problems encountered in both spheres.

*Categorisation of civil society organisations*

In order to structure this study CSOs in Zimbabwe were grouped into broad categories which reflect the type of work that they do: development organisations, service providers, and advocacy organisations. Advocacy organisations were further classified as those operating in the fields of governance and human rights, and those promoting of social and economic justice. The umbrella NGO, NANGO was also included. Seventeen organisations in all have been studied, through a reading of selected documentation and interviews with some key personnel, and some tentative conclusions are drawn.

*Contributions of civil society organisations towards people-centred development*

The study revealed that within the sample, most CSOs have demonstrated their ability to foster people-centred development through promoting ownership, inclusivity and participation. Some organisations have engaged in policy dialogue and sector analysis, conducted independent research, and shared valuable information on sustainable and economic development. Others have provided development assistance or services to communities where government has failed to provide. Those involved in advocacy for economic and social justice have championed good and accountable governance, and challenged the state where it has violated rights. Social movements have attempted to mobilise citizens in large numbers to claim their rights and pressure for accountability and social justice.

All have within the past decade embraced a rights-based approach and the language to match, which seeks to alter the public’s attitude toward authorities from one of fear and obedience to the confidence to demand service delivery and accountability. Some of this programming shift, especially in development organisations, has come from prodding by donors, some has come from the discourse of UN or other international agencies, but much has come from the influence of home-grown advocacy organisations which have been promoting concepts of human rights and democratic accountability in response to the failure of governance. It is in fact remarkable in some ways that so much has been
achieved in such an oppressive and disabling political environment where proponents of simple human rights concepts can be harassed and jailed for their activities.

The work of development organizations in Zimbabwe has been essential given the country’s rising poverty levels during the economic doldrums and political instability of the past two decades. The recurrent droughts compounded by economic crisis following by controversial land invasion, political intolerance, and limited donors’ support for government development programmes all increased the suffering of the majority of citizens in general and the rural population in particular. The role of CSOs in building community resilience and securing livelihoods has been a welcome contribution given the inertia of the state in addressing chronic poverty. Food security, seed production, access to potable water, income generation, sanitation and hygiene and HIV awareness and treatment were among the major components of the projects implemented. All components have been found relevant during the prolonged reconstruction process of the local economy in project target areas and at household level.

It has been encouraging to note that most development organisations, though shunning outright advocacy work as being too dangerous - especially any advocacy which holds government officials accountable - have been able to promote within their development work a subtle but important shift in the relationship between the people and the government. They do work to improve production, by making material inputs, and by training members of communities, but increasingly by promoting a greater awareness of the need to demand services from various levels of government, and fostering a more committed and responsive leadership at community level. The introduction of rights-based programming indicates a mental shift and much of the training has aimed at empowering the people to determine their wishes and pursue them as communities without major external inputs. One key has been to win local traditional leadership support, and ensure people’s participation, ownership and sustainability. But all have had to tread delicately through the minefields of political party conflicts and the abuse of power by officials, including security sector actors.

One of the major challenges of people-centred development efforts in Zimbabwe is poor targeting of beneficiaries. The limited resources manage to reach the lucky few and more often than not the demand exceeds the supply. As a result the poorest of the poor seem to remain neglected and excluded as they lack both the information and the means to access assistance of development organizations. The inadequacy of resources is compounded by the fact that development NGOs also to work in silos rather than consortiums or partnerships, thus missing the opportunity to strengthen impact by combining efforts. On the positive side, it was noted that when organisations integrate project implementation with advocacy work – as some do – a more powerful effect can be seen, and perhaps this is a model which should be further investigated.

Advocacy organisations in the field of economic justice have had some influence when lobbying government on policy in technical areas, but when working at grassroots have had to contend with governance issues as well, as they attempt to make officials accountable. Those organisations specifically engaged in advocacy on governance have tackled policy issues such as the constitution, and also engaged with communities to try to help them develop the interest and the knowledge to challenge their elected representatives to respond to the people’s wishes. Some work at grassroots level on
election issues such as voter registration or on understanding the constitution, and on promoting democratic forms of leadership.

CSOs in the category of service providers are the least likely to engage in people-centred development per se, but even they are introducing approaches which encourage individuals and communities to take greater responsibility for improving their own lives. Social movements draw on large numbers to demand that government officials, both elected and appointed, respond to the needs of the people and account for their actions, thus demanding both economic and political rights. NANGO, as an umbrella organisation to which most CSOs belong, has attempted to protect the operating environment as well as raise the performance and governance standards of member organisations, but nevertheless the sector remains under threat.

In regard to the collective impact of civil society on people-centred development the study concludes that change is taking place as a result of the work of CSOs, and many individuals and communities are taking greater responsibility for their own progress and are beginning to learn to hold government officials accountable. Progress is slow, but this should be expected, because what is being aimed at is a cultural change which can only take place over a lengthy period of time. Rapid results are hardly possible given the nature of the change to be achieved. Nevertheless, while one can conclude that development organisations and service providers certainly do improve lives of individuals and communities, the question remains as to whether the combined impact is sufficiently meaningful in terms of changing the nature of governance to allow for sustainable people-centred development on a national scale.

**CSO – government relations**

General observations are made about characteristics of the current relationship between civil society and government, civil society and donors, and civil society organisation networks, and some disturbing trends of the culture of CSOs are noted. Generally the attitude of government towards CSOs has been hostile, but there are variations depending on the type of work being done. Those which demand accountability and respect for rights from government frequently find themselves harassed by state agents. Not surprisingly, the more CSOs challenge government the less amicable the relationship becomes, with some individuals targeted for arrest, and even torture and incarceration.

Organisations which work on apparently non-political issues such as gender equality or trade justice have found that their inputs to policy issues are often welcome. The policy work done by economic justice advocacy organisations is extremely important, and their influence on government policy makers is critical in setting a national framework in which people-centred development can thrive rather than suffocate. And government seems to have no problems with economic justice campaigners as long as they are not questioning the accountability, transparency and legitimacy of politicians and officials, which of course the more radical organisation do. Thus, calls such as for debt audits have fallen on deaf ears as they are likely to raise unpleasant dust for a number of politicians who have benefited from the country’s economic turmoil over the years. That suggests that such policy work needs to go hand in hand with governance advocacy and mobilisation for development at the grassroots.
However while advocacy organisations and social movements are often on the frontline in receiving government threats, development organisations and service providers do work very closely with government departments, and are frequently much appreciated by government, especially those officials who are genuinely trying to make their work meaningful. Unfortunately, more unscrupulous politicians do often try to claim that the work of non-governmental organisations is the result of their own efforts.

**CSO – donor relations**

Relations with donors are frequently controversial. Organisations find that they are required to follow funding priorities of those donors from whom they seek support, thus leading them to become part of the donors’ agendas, however noble they might be, rather than being in a position to determine the agenda themselves. Those who provide money can hardly be denied the right to determine how their money is to be spent, according to their own view of what is needed to bring development, but the unfortunate consequence is that the relationship is one of dependence rather than empowerment.

Donors are also not entirely innocent of setting cultural norms and behaviours for what has become a sector of privilege in Zimbabwe, with inflated salaries relative to the rest of the population, and an elitist life-style. While this does not hold true for all civil society organisations, it is obvious that many have become divorced from their roots in the society they claim to serve, and need to reconsider their own legitimacy. Can they genuinely foster people-centred development if their own lives are so far removed from those they wish to motivate? Both donors and local organisations are responsible for the careerism of development practitioners, which exists throughout the “developing” world, but it is important for our Zimbabwean civil society actors to examine their relevance and legitimacy carefully in the light of the divergence of life-styles and life experiences.

International NGOs have been known to invade and attempt to undertake work on the ground, crowding out local organisations, leading towards further disempowerment of the sector. They are even less likely than local NGOs to take on issues of governance and accountability, rather focussing on service delivery of a humanitarian or occasionally developmental nature. It is only Zimbabwean NGOs which can take on the tough governance issues both at national and at community level, which are required for genuine progress of sustainable development which is people-centred.

**CSO networking**

It is common for civil society organisations to work in competition with each other, especially when soliciting for donor funds, and it has been suggested that they would achieve much greater impact if they were to work more closely together. The need for such joint efforts is particularly clear in relation to advocacy work in both the governance and economic spheres. The findings of this study, however, were that such a desired co-operation has been very difficult, with coalitions turning into new organisations rather than playing a co-ordinating role, and all jockeying for a favourable position in the eyes of the donors. Furthermore, even when operating in the same field, they represent such varied viewpoints and operating cultures that it is often difficult to find common ground. Nevertheless, if a genuine change
in political culture is to occur on a large scale, a strengthening of the ability to work in concert is necessary.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The report ends with conclusions and recommendations as follows:

1. The concept of people-centred development is a valuable one which should be promoted, but it should be seen as a long-term process which will take time to evolve. Civil society organisations should engage their members in on-going discussion to deepen understanding of the nature of people-centred development, adapt programming so that it does promote such development, and devise tools with which to measure impact.

2. Organisations which are carrying out effective work in their own specialised fields, empowering people to carry on productive lives, should be supported whether or not they specifically engage in “advocacy”. People-centred development if it is effective will act as an internal yeast promoting values and behaviours that will bring organic change.

3. Systematic research is needed into the effectiveness of different models which combine development work and the promotion of democratic processes. Such research should then be made available to CSOs for their consideration. But organisations also need to make time to discuss thoroughly how they can best make use of the findings of academic research to inform their practice, ensuring that they do not just become academic exchanges without any effect.

4. Zimbabwean NGOs need to become more effective at demonstrating their impact so that they can challenge international NGOs who want to become implementers on the ground, proving that they can do the job more efficiently and at less cost, thus regaining lost ground.

5. Donors and their partners need to dialogue on the tendencies of some civil society organisations to engage in elite lifestyles, becoming alienated from those on the ground. Serious and honest introspection is required to determine whether this is inhibiting people-centred development, and if so, who should shoulder the responsibility of doing something about it.

6. While a considerable amount of co-operation is taking place, especially in the development sector, more effort needs to be put into examining how networks, coalitions and consortia work, not only in the advocacy field but also in the development field, and considering how they can be promoted and assisted. Organisations engaged in program/projects implementation and those in policy advocacy in the same sector need to come together to discuss how they can support each others’ work to increase the impact of both. NGOs in the same sector need to make greater efforts to work together in the face of both donors and government demands.

7. Citizen engagement – especially when citizens are challenging powerful interests in the status quo – gives rise to the risk of reprisals, which can range from state and political violence, to economic and social forms of recrimination against those who speak out. Can donors play a role in protecting and strengthening spaces for citizens to exercise their voice? If so, how can
they support the enabling conditions for citizen engagement to occur without determining the agenda?

8. Since it appears impossible for donors to provide funds without involving themselves in setting development agendas it is time for Zimbabwean civil society organisations to take the challenge of gradually weaning themselves from donor funding, finding ways to survive on their own, drawing closer to the people, cutting costs, and reassessing their own legitimacy. This will doubtless be necessary in any case in the face of dwindling funding.