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Measuring African Civil Society

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Introduction

Alan Fowler¹ has provided a very useful outline of the different influences postulated by various scholars concerning what has contributed to the African civil society landscape. In so doing, he offers strong evidence suggesting that this landscape has unique characteristics that need to be explored in their own terms. Possibly the most important and least documented relates to “*African moral philosophy Ubuntu – ‘I am because you are’ that permeates social relations, civic agency and associational life*”. This aspect resonates with me from my own work with civil society organisations in Southern Africa and was only too evident in the study profiling the non-profit sector in South Africa². In the analysis of the findings of this study we found that the majority of volunteers forming the backbone of civil society in South Africa were unemployed women, who although often not having sufficient resources to adequately feed themselves and their families, spent much of their time assisting others even worse off than themselves. It is based on my observations during both the fieldwork component of this study and the analysis of the data that followed that instinctively makes me want to explore the nature of civic agency in Africa on its own terms. Although this study was part of the Johns Hopkins Comparative study, which I am grateful for as it provided the impetus and rationale for what is considered a ground breaking study, it also left me with a feeling that the basis on which we analysed the results were restrictive, as were the types of associational life forms that could be captured within the operational definition. This left me questioning the conceptual and definitional basis of my research as well as the extent to which it represented the whole of the civil society sphere in South Africa. These instincts have been reinforced in an innovative qualitative study undertaken by Susan Wilkinson-Maposa, et al covering four African countries,³ and the quote from a paper by Wilkinson-Maposa and Fowler⁴ on this research effectively encapsulates what any study of African civil society needs to achieve.

¹ Fowler, 2010

² Swilling & Russell, 2002

³ Wilkinson-Maposa, S., Fowler, A., Oliver-Evans, C., Mulenga, C., 2005

⁴ Fowler and Wilkinson-Maposa, 2010.

“Philanthropy in and of Africa is in search of self-understanding.first to establish against which research findings can be tested in terms of their relevance and meaning. Second, to identify Africa-specific concepts that may contribute to and complement efforts to ascertain an indigenous comprehension of ‘philanthropy’ that is locally rooted rather than reflective of foreign interpretations”

It is therefore based on this and other experiences of researching civic agency in various Southern African countries that I put forward the considerations outlined in this paper. The objective of which is to explore civic agency in Africa, without preconceived restrictions, in an attempt to make sense of the observations that the Size and Scope study hinted at. This paper therefore unapologetically outlines the practical methodological and measurement considerations for undertaking a bottom-up, evidence-based appraisal of civic agency, in its entirety, as it presents itself in Africa. I believe that only through a completely fresh look at the why, the how and the who of civil society in Africa can we really attempt to make sense of what it is and its current and potential influence on the broader issues of African governance and democracy.

Other researchers, such as Edwards who talks about the move towards “*new approaches to creating civil society theories and practices with distinctively African flavours*”⁵ also hint at the idea that civil society in Africa has its own peculiar characteristics. It is therefore concerning that civil society on this continent has, almost without exception, been studied through an external, often Western conceptual lens. This has resulted in civil society primarily being understood in external terms, limiting understandings of what makes sense within particularly African contexts.

I am not suggesting that civil society in Africa is homogeneous and has not been moulded by a range of very different influences. Rather, this paper explores the possibility that there are certain distinct characteristics that do set civil society in Africa apart. These may be as a result of our history of colonisation, specific population features, or the particular way African people respond to threats to their civil liberties. Such distinctiveness is likely to be the result of a combination of these influences and many others, resulting in a layered dynamic as discussed in Alan Fowler’s paper⁶. However, without empirical evidence, the character of civil society in Africa, whether distinct or otherwise, and the factors that influence that character, can only be guessed at. Also, without this kind of knowledge it is very difficult to make sense of African civil society and its influence on democracy and governance. From this perspective and as an empirical researcher the only way I can see this being rectified is through robust endogenous empirical research based on grounded research methods. I believe that this

⁵ Edwards, 2009

⁶ Fowler, 2010

will open us up to exploring civil society with un-blinkered eyes⁷so that we can achieve the depth of understanding that has hitherto escaped us.

Core research question:

With respect to some of the above mentioned issues, the following broad research question may be useful:

What is the character of civil society in African country contexts, what influences this character, and how does this character affect processes of development and governance?

This hopefully provides some understanding for the WHY part of this equation. The following three sections of this paper address the WHAT in terms of what we should be measuring in order to address the above research questions, the WHERE in terms of geographical considerations and finally the HOW which takes a first stab at identifying a possible methodology. These postulations are all being put forward with a view to stimulating debate around this issue.

Approach

Any study attempting to explore how civil society in Africa can be conceived of in its own terms needs to give considerable thought to the operational and methodological considerations that will elicit optimum results. Most comparative, empirical studies that have been undertaken with a view to making sense of this highly contested terrain have utilised either an organisational or a functional approach. However neither of these approaches in their entirety is appropriate for our purposes i.e. to sufficiently address the research question posed above. For example the approach cannot limit its exploration to either a formal organisational approach as the Johns Hopkins Comparative⁸ studies do, nor can it concentrate on the role and nature of civil society actions as the Civil Society Index⁹ does. The organisational approach would limit the extent of the phenomena that could be explored to only those that are expressed through a formal organisation. This precludes a variety of other associational forms as well as varying aspects of individual, collective action.¹⁰ The functional approach would be more useful as it is more open to the full range of civil society characteristics and also takes cognisance of the environmental aspects so important in an analysis of civil society in Africa. However the lack of specificity, i.e. its lack of clear boundaries and definitions, detract from its usefulness as an analytical tool that allows for replicable, representative, comparative research across countries. The most appropriate approach that will adequately meet both conceptual as well as practical objectives should combine these two approaches.

⁷ Heinrich, 2005

⁸ Salamon, 2010

⁹ Mati et al, 2010

¹⁰ Morris, 2000; Horton Smith, 1997; Fowler, 2002

Practical research objectives

It is however also important that any research on civil society in different African country contexts should also have a highly practical application, generating data that is of practical use to civil society practitioners and primary stakeholders. CIVICUS has achieved this with considerable effect in the development of the Civil Society Index (CSI)¹¹. It is believed that research that aims to achieve the following objectives will increase insight into civil society in Africa as well as contribute to the practical application of the civil society concept.

Objectives:

- To contribute towards the body of knowledge guiding conceptual and theoretical thinking on civil society in an African context
- To gain insight into the character and forms of civil society in African country contexts, including networks and linkages between CSOs within and between countries
- To better understand the contextual dynamics, including motives, driving the character of civil society in African contexts
- To increasing Africa's voice in the global debate on the measurement of Civil Society
- To assess the effects of funding flows on civil society
- To contribute to a strategic understanding of how civil society in African countries can be strengthened

Based on the research question and objectives outlined above I attempt *“to consider how civil society in Africa can be conceived in its own terms and what, if at all, can be measured to better comprehend its influence on and beyond democracy and governance.*

Measurement

If any research is to successfully provide evidence that will help to clarify the complex analytic terrain of civil society in Africa, careful consideration needs to be given to what measurements will provide the greatest insight. Suggested measures are outlined below.

Values and motivation underpinning civil society

Being one of the key areas used in the explanation of civil society theory, this aspect of any empirical study is critical. Without an understanding of the values and motivations that help us to understand the underlying principles of civic agency, it will not be possible to examine the particular contours that differentiate civil society in Africa. This aspect of measurement cannot be restricted to civic action expressed through some form of associational life or by looking at purely individual civic action, but needs to explore the reasons for undertaking any particular activity.

¹¹ Mati et al 2010

The findings of the research undertaken by Wilkinson-Maposa et al demonstrate the importance of motivation in understanding civic agency. They also suggest that it is an important indicator for measurement of specifically African characteristics an example of which can be seen in the assessment of the cultural drivers of choice discussed in the quote below:

“In some cases, cultural traditions and norms as well as the degree of community cohesion inform whether help drivers are considered by informants to be duty or choice. In three counties, for material and non-material transactions combined, choice is the more prevalent motivation than obligation (Mozambique 80 percent; Namibia 65 percent and Zimbabwe 51 percent). The outlier to this pattern is South Africa, where duty is more prevalent (60 percent).¹²

The authors put forward that the inference from these research findings *“is a mosaic of help motivations and accompanying decision rules with distinct African characteristics”*.

Motivation for any civic agency is therefore especially useful in light of our core research question and is expected to provide insight into the range of indigenous factors that influence the variegated character of civil society.

Any research should however also be open to capture the un-civic values and motivations underpinning civil society action as well. This open-mindedness is important to ensure that any such research is critical, systematic and comparative and does not romanticise the concept of civil society.

Also, in its development of a value’s dimension, the CSI makes use of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights to provide a list of values.¹³ Empirical research that helps to identify motives and values that are significant in African contexts would also provide the basis for useful comparison with existing lists, helping to look at them more critically and assess their suitability.

Measuring resources and the influence of those resources

The resources that power an organisation would be an important dimension to measure both in terms of human resources through full time, part time and volunteer work but also in terms financial and in-kind resources. Associational life forms are a more formal manifestation of civic agency and create a wide range of opportunities through which citizens can contribute time and donations. The strength of any organisation is often determined by its members paid or unpaid, this is therefore a key aspect to be explored. It should not however be limited to measuring the numbers of full-time equivalent days worked in order to put an economic value to volunteering as the more economically

¹² Wilkinson-Maposa, et al 2005

¹³ Heinrich, 2005

motivated comparative studies do, but almost more importantly provide a profile of those giving their time. The results of the non-profit sector study undertaken in South Africa demonstrated that civic agency is not evenly distributed across all of a country's citizens but is dominated both in terms of leadership of organisations as well as volunteers, in that country, by the most historically disadvantaged group; black women, often battling to survive themselves.¹⁴ Determining who undertakes any civic action is the precursor to exploring why and therefore an important dimension to be measured.

The financial resources that fuel any organisation are also important not only for purposes of measuring sustainability and as an indicator of size but also need to be explored for purposes of understanding the influence of those resources on the role of the organisation. For example if the primary source of funding emanates from the state which is an increasing trend in aid architecture in Africa, it is highly unlikely that that organisation is going to act as a watchdog to the state and is more likely to undertake service provision activities as opposed to lobbying and advocacy activities.

Measuring and quantifying associational life

Existing definitions of civil society highlight the importance of this aspect of civic agency. Identifying and capturing, as far as is possible, a complete range of associational life will thus provide a valuable measure of civil society. This will also contribute to an evidence-based definition of civil society, allowing the organisational component to be assessed and considered. This will have certain important methodological implications, requiring exploratory, qualitative and participatory research techniques to ensure that as far as is possible all forms of associational life are identified and measured. It is envisaged that quantitative representative research techniques will have to be applied for purposes of enumerating just how civil society is constituted and configured in the different countries. Once again, this is expected to shed light on the character of civil society and the factors influencing that character.

Measurement of individual and collective civic agency

Just as certain measures of associational life have been developed with considerable success to help to explain civil society (for example the Johns Hopkins comparative studies¹⁵) so too do individual forms of civic agency need to be identified and quantified. The CSI takes the view that the broad range of personal and public actions should be encompassed and therefore collective action, organisations and institutions should all be included¹⁶. Incorporating this aspect of civic agency completes the sphere that comprises the full spectrum of civil society components. The character of individual actions including aspects such as assisting a neighbour dying of Aids, participation in a neighbourhood watch, taking care of HIV orphaned children or taking part in a march will all be considered. This will also provide a platform to identify the social, economic and political factors that trigger these actions, revealing similarities and distinctions

¹⁴ Swilling and Russell, 2002

¹⁵ Salamon et al, 1999

¹⁶ Meti et al, 2010

between countries and helping to address the core research question with which this paper is concerned.

Measurement of Function

Although extensive assessment of activities and motives underpinning those activities need to be given considerable emphasis in any study exploring civil society in Africa, and will contribute to an understanding of the roles or functions, to address the practical objectives of this study, the function does need to be explored in its own right.

Therefore any research should interrogate both explicitly and implicitly the function of all civic action undertaken whether it is through associational life, collective activity or as an individual. This is a particularly important for understanding the role of civil society in Africa with regard to governance and democracy, and will assist in the development of a meaningful home-grown definition and conceptualisation of civil society in this context.

Contextual environment

The contextual environment, particularly in Africa, is critically important as it will help to explain the different influences that impact on the conceptualisation of a distinctly African civil society. For example, the research is premised on the hypothesis that motivations and values driving civic/ 'un-civic' action, and the forms that civil society takes, whether associational or individual, are influenced by context. Contextual factors that should be considered include social, political, historical, religious and cultural as well as any other indicators that might have a bearing on civic agency in a particular country. The importance of environmental factors influencing civil society is discussed at length in the CSI¹⁷ and specifically within an African context in Fowler and Wilkinson-Maposa's chapter. These environmental factors will be critical in the analysis and interpretation of results and will assist in determining which factors are most influential in carving out Africa's distinctive civil society. The discussion below on the sample of countries specifically attempts to identify a range of country types with factors that might have such an impact, and would therefore need to be controlled for in the country selection process. Selection of country types is just one aspect of environment that can, to some extent be controlled for. There are however a range of more subtle, cultural environmental factors around giving that Wilkinson-Maposa et al's research just begins to explore substantively and which any research design needs to be sensitive to. It is these environmental aspects that I believe will truly help us to understand how and why civil society in Africa is so different.

Sample of countries or country-types for inclusion

The effectiveness of civil society can, to some extent, be gauged by its ability to respond to the social needs of its citizens, be it poverty alleviation, inequality, attrition of basic human rights, or any other inroads into the civil liberties of its people. Therefore any study that is to truly understand civil society in Africa needs to include a range of

¹⁷ Mati, et al, 2010

countries with varying societal characteristics. In this way the profile of associational life and individual and collective civic activities within very different contexts can be explored and will assist us to examine different influences and their impact on the nature and role of civil society. With this in mind, it may be useful to consider a range of contextual indicators. Some of these include:

- History of colonisation: A sample of countries that were colonised to different extents and for different durations may be linked to a heritage of different social realities and cultures.
- Conflict and peace building: The contexts generated by war-torn versus peaceful countries and the influence of this on the character, forms, and motives of civil society would be useful for comparative analysis and for exploring similarities and differences between countries. For example, are trends evident in war-torn countries, and is there alignment between the motives underpinning forms and actions that appear to be similar?
- Style of governance: Differing governance styles such as authoritarian versus a more democratic style are also likely to influence differing civil society responses.
- Critical social/ health issues: Exploring civil society in countries from regions with very specific social or health problems such as Southern Africa where the ravages of HIV and Aids have resulted in the formation of hundreds of civil society organisations¹⁸ may also reveal similarities and differences in character, form and motives. These organisations have been established in an attempt to assist through a range of interventions, be they home-based care of the terminally ill, orphans and vulnerable children affected, lobby and advocacy groups fighting for more affective provision of a AVR, counselling and related services, or various other strategies designed to combat the pandemic. The identification of health and broader social issues to which CSOs respond is therefore expected to add to insights on the profile of CSOs and the factors influencing those profiles.

Classification of associational life and civic action

The results of both the association life form measurements and the individual and collective action will be analysed with a view not only to providing greater insight into indigenous forms of civic action that differentiate African countries, but also with a view to developing relevant useful definitions and classifications for purposes of analysis and further research.

¹⁸ Swilling & Russell, 2002

The way in which associational life forms and civic activities are classified is critical if the concept of civil society in Africa is to be made measurable and more operationally useful. Therefore any study undertaken should not be restricted by already existing classification systems but guided by the results of grounded research. Various aspects such as the activities identified through a representative study of associational life in Africa will be used to provide some understanding of the primary indicators that will lead to a useful classification of CSOs in Africa. An example of the impact of such a classification system can be seen in the application of the Johns Hopkins Comparative Study classification in South Africa. The classification system used in this study was based solely on the activity that generated the greatest economic return for the organisation.¹⁹ However as CSOs often change their focus temporarily or otherwise to accommodate the priorities of donors, and in order to attract funds while continuing to conduct a wide range of other activities that address their core mandate, this classification system was found to be restrictive, providing a limited economic analysis and precluding the possibility of any real analysis of the full range of activities in which the organisation was involved.

The UN Volunteers has a completely different classification system which relates more to the role of the organisation in society. This is possibly more sensitive to the spectrum of indigenous organisations but is still restrictive in capturing the particularly African texture of associational life and therefore is possibly somewhat reductionist in its approach. It is therefore recommended that a multiple coding system be developed that is sensitive to the full range of activities being conducted by any particular organisation, while still remaining internationally relevant.

Methodological considerations

This section of the paper addresses aspects of the methodology that need to be taken into consideration if the aforementioned objectives and information requirements are to be achieved. The considerations are not comprehensive and will require further thought. Nonetheless, I believe that two overarching aspects that frame these considerations are:

- That any approach used is sufficiently broad to ensure that the full spectrum of associational and other manifestations of civic life in the different countries can be determined without restrictions and
- That the information obtained will be sufficiently practical to be of optimum benefit to civil society practitioners, donors, researchers and stakeholders interested in exploring civil society from a uniquely African perspective.

It is believed that both these considerations would be best achieved through principles of grounded research allowing for a strongly evidence based response to the research questions posed.

¹⁹ Department of Economic and Social Affairs Statistics Division, 2003

Mixed method approach

To accommodate these considerations a mixed method approach may be most useful. Although costly and time consuming, a mixed method approach is the only way all the different measurements can effectively be addressed providing sufficient data to transcend the limitations of any one methodological approach.²⁰

An extensive country mapping exercise that provides important background contextual information on each of the countries to be included would set the foundation for this research. This desk research should provide insight into the historical, economic, social, cultural and political factors that will have a bearing both on the design of the study as well as the interpretation of results. It should also explore as far as possible lists of associational life where they exist as well as a range of other types of individual and civic agency. These would include activities such as the signing of a petition, membership of a self-help group, participation in a demonstration etc. The information obtained in this process will prepare the methodological ground ensuring that all areas can be fully covered in the more structured research to follow.

We propose a consultative process of engaging local civil society researchers and practitioners with a view to exploring whether the types of civic action in each country collected in the mapping exercise is exhaustive. Also, discussions around terminology to be used in the instruments and working definitions proposed are relevant for each local country. Care should be taken to ensure that this is an active process of acceptance and not more of a resigned acceptance as was experienced in the participatory process used in the CSI²¹

Formative, investigative, qualitative research will be a critical feature ensuring the success of our objectives as it will explore in each of the countries, qualitatively, the range of different factors that will contribute to a robust implementable sample design, well conceived structured instruments and provide important input into the development of measurement indicators. On the basis of the results of the research conducted in the different countries, the final methodology and instruments to be used for the quantitative components of the study would then be honed. This component of the research is possibly the most important as the exploration of certain terms such as 'help' as demonstrated in Wilkinson-Maposa et al's research will inform the terms and definitions to be used thereafter.²²

A survey of associational life should be undertaken with a view to identifying and measuring an exhaustive range of organisations that exist in the country. The organisations included should not be restricted by preconceived theoretical notions such as those inherent in terms such as non-government organisation or non-profit

²⁰ Heinrich, 2005

²¹ Mati et al, 2010

²² Wilkinson-Maposa et al, 2005

organisations as this will limit the opportunity to fully explore the full range of indigenous associational life forms. For example organisations such as burial societies and self-help groups, often excluded from more economically centred studies, provide vital forms of social capital that can make the difference between survival and not in areas of extreme poverty.²³ Areas of measurement to be included in these surveys should include a full range of activities in which the organisations are involved, the function or role of the organisations, and a profile of members including full-time and part-time paid staff and volunteers. The financial resources of the organisation both in terms of monetary and in kind should also be determined and will provide an indication of sustainability as well as being a secondary indicator of size. The local, national and international networks and linkages of these organisations will also briefly be explored as these are important indicators of the fabric of civic agency in any country.

It is important that the quantitative survey of associational life in each country is representative of the full spectrum of CSOs in that country without which a good understanding of the architecture of civil society organisations is not possible. The strong cultural and contextual basis of the CSI is undermined due to the fact that it is not possible to determine the extent to which the results are representative of civil society. This in turn also makes it impossible to quantify the results which would provide an indication of the relative number and size of civil society organisations in a particular country and the profile of CSOs in terms of their role.

Quantitative survey of individual civic activities will provide the flesh on the bones of the skeletal framework that the survey of associational life provides. Therefore it is vital that both these aspects of civic agency are approached in an equally quantitative and representative way. Methodologically this is a simpler task as the sampling framework is provided by the households in the population. This component of the study does not have to be as large to ensure that a full spectrum of activities is covered if it ensures that a fully representative cross-section of a county's citizens is included. In some countries this component is already being undertaken by the national statistics agencies as advocated by the JHU/ILO Volunteer Measurement Project.²⁴ However in Africa only South Africa's Statistics S.A. has taken the first step in this direction with its newly implemented volunteering module.²⁵ Care should be taken to ensure that the definitions and concepts used in these national studies utilise definitions and concepts that make sense locally and are as inclusive as possible.

As this component of the methodology will supplement and build on the organisational survey component providing important information on the flipside of civil agency not identifiable through the organisational survey, it is important to understand where the overlaps occur by clearly differentiating individual activities and donations identified as being given or undertaken through an organisation or as an individual. It will also

²³ Wegerif, Russell and Grundling, 2005

²⁴ The JHU/ILO Volunteer Measurement Project

²⁵ STATS SA volunteering module

provide a verification of sorts validating the volunteering activities as identified in the organisational survey.

Linkages with locally based researchers and capacity development

Use of local researchers will be an important aspect of the research design as it will not only address issues of language and culture it will also provide important contextual information that will assist in the identification of types of civic agency and associational life not already on the radar. Local involvement in the interpretation of the findings would also provide an important local perspective and understanding within the relevant context. Local ownership and use of the results of local studies is an important aspect within all countries in which the research is undertaken and should be considered at each point in the research process.

Conclusion

In this paper I have put forward for discussion what I consider to be critical considerations for a new, fresh exploration of civil society in Africa from a local perspective. The basis of this is a grounded, evidence based approach open to the exploration of all indigenous forms of civic agency, the motivations than underpin them, the contextual factors than mould them, the forms of associational life that structure them and the volunteering activities both civic and un-civic that give them their own dynamic.

The very process of putting forward methodological considerations to achieve this, have made me realise just how complex a task this is. With even an extensive multi-level, multi-method, multi-indicator approach as summed up in the quote by Heinrich below, we will probably only just scratch the surface of this complicated terrain. However if all we achieve is a rich, textured new data set of indigenous civic agency in Africa that will fuel debate around civil society in Africa anew, we will have achieved what we set out to.

“Besides advocating for greater attention to these methodological issues and greater transparency of methodological procedures, a key recommendation is to move toward multi-method, multi-level studies employing a multiplicity of indicators”
(Heinrich, 2005²⁶)

²⁶ Heinrich, 2005

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