

CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Joint Workshop of the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR) and TrustAfrica

Kadir Has University

Istanbul, Turkey

July 7-10, 2010

DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA: (DIS) ENABLING THE PUBLIC SPHERE

DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSIONS: OCTOBER 30, 2009

In July 7-10, 2010, the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR) will hold its 9th International Conference at the Kadir Has University in Istanbul, Turkey under the theme *Facing Crises: Challenges and Opportunities Confronting the Third Sector and Civil Society*. Together with ISTR and other African institutions and researchers, TrustAfrica intends hosting a full day meeting on the theme *Democracy and Governance in Africa: (Dis) Enabling the Public Sphere*. In addition, a panel on the topic will be proposed for the ISTR conference itself. Authors of accepted papers will be assisted to attend both events. This is a joint call for abstracts that, from a civil society perspective, addresses the question of democracy and governance in Africa, yesterday, today and tomorrow.

It has long been argued that, in distinctive ways, Africa suffers from a governance crisis. In many countries substantive, as opposed to cosmetic, democratic progress has yet to be made. And instances are increasing where democratic gains already achieved are being eroded. The term 'democratic deficit' is probably too bland and euphemistic a term to describe the acute, systemic failures of (party-based) politics on the continent. Accompanying this state of affairs is a purposeful shrinking of the public sphere for citizens and their formations, with increasing limits to their engagement in public affairs and debates. Necessary information is withheld. Journalists are threatened, or worse. Open debate is curtailed. Criticism is too readily treated as insurrection. On the pretext of counter-terrorism and anti-corruption, one can observe a growing trend among African states to create repressive regulatory and administrative conditions for citizens and their associations. Recent examples are seen in the Gambia, Ethiopia, Uganda and Zimbabwe. Is this situation a reflection of an inability to establish trusted forms of governance that correspond to deep issues of identity and political culture? Might it stem from a legacy of colonial models that are worse than inappropriate because they provide a vehicle which inhibits creation of 'home grown' political dispensations that satisfy polities' effective control over those who govern? Does it signal the questionable relevance of citizenship and civic agency as meaningful drivers for democratic reform? These, and many more queries are needed to understand the place of civil society in the African political malaise.

States, Civil societies and Governance

In almost all African countries, political liberation was supported extensively by spontaneous people's movements, faith-based formations and various constellations of civil society. A close link existed between civil society – understood in that era as people, whose civic rights were denied, self-organizing for political ends -- and what was to emerge as an indigenous political society. From North to South, West to East, civil societies – be they legally recognised or informal - played critical roles in the dismantling of colonialism, apartheid and other forms of domination. This force for political reform was not only true of Africa-it was also true of other parts of the world. In Eastern and Central Europe, an unaided civil society played a major role in the fall of communist states and the subsequent waves of democratization that followed.

In Africa, spurred by a liberal market ideology and its economic instruments, disillusionment with post-independence one-party nation-building and the 'developmental state' gradually set in. Consequently, inspired by the changes brought about by people's power elsewhere, a number of donors and some governments invested heavily in civil society as an alternative agent of change. The associated theory and logic were linear - strong civil societies 'produce' better governance. In some quarters civil society was even considered as a 'magic bullet' in solving Africa's problem of 'under-development'. Civil society's role was not limited to the arena of political and civil liberties. It was also seen as instrumental in promoting well-being, influencing public policy, reducing poverty and administering humanitarian aid. Civil society, in particular, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) associated with foreign aid, assumed significant roles and became major forces in development. Many African regimes still equate civil society with NGOs, which obscures an important analytic distinction between aided and un-aided formations of civil society.

Given the foregoing impetus and expectations, over the past decade investment in multi-country studies have attempted to map the forms and quantify the value of civil society, typically understood as the economic domain of non-profit organizations, or a third sector. Results of this work show a highly varied, but generally substantial contribution of the third sector as a proportion of a country's gross domestic product, including in Africa. A paradox, therefore, is that the substantive role of the third sector has been overshadowed by the dominance of state and market narratives of how societies change. With no place, for example, in official statistics, the realm and scope of civic agency remained on the sidelines. However, infusions of foreign aid and calls for 'people's participation' have brought civil society out of the shadows, but not in the way that original theory suggests. There is increasing evidence of a complex, non-linear relationship between states, civil society and governance on the continent. For example, the evolution of civil society may be challenging the status quo, but not necessarily for the public good. Civic agency also has an uncivic face of intolerance, exclusion and resolution of differences through the use of violence that must also be recognised for its socio-political effects and state responses to them.

Moreover, and ironically, increasing constraint on the public sphere noted previously testify to the fact that, in Africa, ruling regimes see civil society as a (potential) force to be reckoned with. During Africa's civil wars, leaders on both sides of a conflict – Sudan, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo – have controlled areas containing operations of the same international NGOs. For many now in power, this experience has been an education in terms of NGO political-economy, feeding regime suspicion about

motives, roles, opportunism and self-serving entrepreneurialism. In many countries; the domain of civic action is viewed with suspicion, despite the fact that many rulers came into power through the support of civil society or were themselves part of the civil society formations before. It is no surprise, therefore, that legislation constraining civil society organisations, like NGOs, are enacted as pre-emptive strikes to any potential threat to the regime and its control of the public space. Because civil society is deemed a serious contender for the same space, it is co-opted or treated as an enemy rather than a partner. At the heart of such laws is a broader political strategy to decapitate any opposition, in particular that of a political nature. Even countries with 'friendly' NGO legislation, show a tendency to control and repress civic expression and agency.

Perhaps more confusing is the historical and contemporary role that civil society, particularly its expression in aid-related NGO-ism, plays in providing a 'holding ground' for aspiring or rejected or retiring African politicians. It can be argued that, as part of their political repertoire, leaders in Africa often rely on variations of NGO-ism, as well as creating and using civic associations for personal ends. The point is that the connection between civil society, political society and governance in African countries is a complex affair that has yet to be subjected to systematic, critical and comparative scrutiny. In other words, the theme of the meeting and panel is not about civil society in its technical functions, for example, in providing services or mutual support. Rather, it is an opportunity to explore the processes that tie citizen's self-organised formations to the state and visa versa. This call is, therefore, for papers whose analysis of the recent closure of public spheres by nation states is located in the broader question of African governance.

Abstracts are invited that address the democracy-governance theme. Other themes that can be addressed include:

- The relationship between aided and un-aided civil society and the public sphere.
- Civil society and NGO-specific laws in Africa and the contestation of the public sphere.
- States, citizenship and the public sphere in Africa.
- The African Diaspora and the Public sphere.
- Regional Economic Communities, the Africa Union and sites for the contestation of the public sphere.

Abstract Submissions

Abstracts are invited in English and French. To be considered for review and acceptance, an abstract must meet the standards as set out in the ISTR Call for Contributions. The abstract must indicate significant academic theoretical and empirical rigor and creativity by meeting the following minimum requirements:

- Working title
- The research problem

- Aim of the research
- Research question
- Theories and concepts informing the research
- Research methodology and design used
- Key theoretical and empirical findings

The abstract should be 800 words in length and should be sent to info@trustafrica.org or moyo@trustafrica.org

Selection of abstracts will follow ISTR's process of blind review.