

# The Debate around Civil Society in Africa: A Replica of “Western Civil Society”

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**Abstract:** In search of answers to locate what is wrong with African civil societies, this study seeks to evaluate and critically explore contemporary debates surrounding civil society organizations in Africa. The study also aimed to ascertain whether African civil society organizations are replica of the Western civil societies. Much of the received wisdom on civil society discourse is that it enhances liberal democracy by widening citizens participations in political processes, eradicate poverty and fill the void created by state deficiencies. Yet civil society in many African countries is faced with doubts on its usefulness, origin and application in the continent. These uncertainties surrounding civil society often centered on its legitimacy, autonomy, authority and purpose. In Africa, civil society legitimacy and freedom can only be guarantee if they are transparent and accountable, in other words, they need to be democratic institutions; and they need to address accusations of manipulation for political or personal gain. While this study acknowledged the strength and effectiveness of civil society in Africa but still has a long road ahead to becoming a powerful voice on public policy or enhance democracy in the continent.

**Keywords:** Africa, African Civil Societies, Democracy, Legitimacy

## I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of civil society has become a buzzword in the discussion of democracy and governance in Africa. The third wave of democratization in Africa is built on the renewed trust in the concept of civil society. However, it is understood differently and probably different uses. Arguably, civil society is a Western idea. Its origin can be traced back to both the liberal and Marxist traditions of European political thought (Bratton, 1994). In the 1980s, Eastern Europe saw the massive number of associations as belonging to the civil society as against the state due to the denial of their social reality. De Tocqueville's emphasis on the significance of voluntary associations in promoting democracy and in Gramsci's emphasis on the role of social institutions in either strengthening or challenging state power (Kennedy, 1991; Rau, 1991; Bratton, 1994). However, similar notion is seen everywhere when countries are faced with the challenge of democracy. Post-independent Africa seem to be affected with one-party rule and the same could be true as seen in Eastern Europe during 1980s.

Much of the literature on African civil society is marred with doubts about its origin, usefulness and application (Obadare, 2004). These scholarly divisions deserve due consideration because of the complexity and diverse nature of Africa as a

whole. To this end, the purpose of this study is to evaluate and critically explore contemporary debates surrounding civil society organizations (CSOs) in Africa. The study also aimed to ascertain whether African CSOs are replica of the Western civil society. Using Gramsci theory of hegemony and domination, the study aimed to answer the following questions: In what way does African civil society contribute to strengthening democracy? Is there civil society in Africa and if there are as I assumed, how is it different from Western civil society?

Like political associations, civil society is more of a theoretical concept than an empirical one. The political discourse in Africa center on the concept of "civil society" and promoting it is the goal of the Western world and international donor agencies. Abdel and Hassan (2009) rightly asserted that the concept of civil society is one of the most contentious issues in cultural and political circles of African. Yet, it receives little attention to both its advocates and detractors. In Africa, civil society is an indefinable concept as a direct result of African society being formed of diverse cultural, religious, and factional associational life (Kew and Oshikoya, 2014; Chabal and Daloz, 1999). The inadequate division between the state and civil associations in Africa, and as a result of civil society's incapacity to surpass primordial family or even communal ties.

Much of the literature on civil association in Africa saw it as an alien concept that is incompatible with socio-political reality in the continent of Africa. Arguably, the concept of civil society is as old as human but it was until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Antonio Gramsci gave it a modern definition. Accordingly, civil society is the aggregate of the super structures such as the trade unions, associations, political parties, the media and churches (Abdel and Hassan, 2009). We envisaged civil associations as those bodies independent from both the family and the state and usually given the political space at national and international levels. Africa's development initiatives must spring up from a strong and vibrant civil society. Much of the discussion on African civil society focus on Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and this makes it more controversial. It is controversial and exciting because it calls in to questions of their very existence, purpose and funding sources.

A reminder that this study is divided in to three main sections. In the first part of this study, a brief analysis of Antonio Gramsci hegemony theory will be discussed. The second

segment shall explore the nexus between democracy and civil society in Africa. The study strongly argued that civil society movement in some African countries have not only promoted democracy and development but equally aided in strengthening democratic institutions. Third part shall deal with contemporary debates on CSOs in Africa. Diverse opinion on its usefulness, acceptance, or neo-colonial instrument shall be explored. The paper is concluded with general discussion and questions raise for further research are highlighted. I acknowledged the diverse nature of the African continent; however, the study shall make reference to some stand-out countries in Africa and findings from this study cannot be generalized.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

While this study aimed not to dwell in to detail of Gramsci theory of hegemony, the paper however, accord a brief analysis of the hegemony theory. Gramsci placed more significance to hegemony which he argues can be achieved through consent or force. The fact that Antonio Gramsci hailed from a backward agrarian society in Italy seems to have formed the basis of understanding of class alliance, subordination of the Southern to the Northern (Gündoğan, 2008). Although Gramsci was not able to elaborate this theory in a systematic way (Bates, 1975) but it still holds value and significance among scholars. In fact, Gramsci's contribution to the discourse of civil society cannot be over emphasized since he helped with the understanding of modern concept of civil society.

The basic principle of the hegemony theory is one with which few would disagree. That man is not ruled by force alone, but also by ideas—the foundation of a ruling class (Bates, 1975:351). In order to attain this hegemony, a dominant class must win consent from other classes and communal forces through such means as generating and sustaining a system of alliances, showing its prowess in the world of production and by its reputation and prestige. Class struggle starting from commercial relations to political power, reigning class power emerging from civil hegemony into political hegemony. For Gramsci, hegemony does not only refer to ideological and cultural leadership of the ruling groups and classes over the allies, but also, domination by them of even the allies (Gündoğan, 2008:45). In this study, hegemony refer to political and economic leadership born out of consent, a consensus which is tenable by the dissemination and popularization of the reigning class world view.

For the purpose of Africa and this study in particular, one may begin to ask civil society usefulness and whether it indeed enhances democracy in Africa. Some commentators argued that civil societies in many African countries lack financial power to embark on projects and hence solicit the support of donor agencies whom arguably might have a different intention from mere aiding of the society or masses. This relationship between CSOs and donors create hegemony like-

type where one controls the other. As Gramsci argues in *Prison Notebooks*, the bourgeoisie rule over the society because it controls the means of production and services in the society.

## III. AFRICAN CIVIL SOCIETY, DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT

The assumption that civil society promotes and enhances democracy have more advocates than detractors. Civil society has become one of the catchwords in discussions of democracy and governance in Africa (Somolekae, 1998; Lewis, 2001; Hearn, 2001). Donor agencies have paid too much attention on civil society as an alternative institution outside the ineffective and big government. The collapsed of the Soviet Union in 1980s promoted massive wave of democratization not just in Eastern Europe but in Africa as well. Ghana and Senegal stand-out high where civil society have helped enhance democracy and democratic transition. Many commentators perceived civil society as vital element of the political project of building and consolidating democracy around the world. They believe that efforts to globalize democracy must be accompanied by the creation and strengthening of civil society in places like Africa where it is either non-existent or at a nascent stage (Orji, 2009:77).

Although African civil society might have face numerous challenges, but they flourished in the struggle of dictatorial regimes in Africa towards democracy. The growing significance of civil societies in Africa have asserted pressure on governments for political reforms across the continent. CSOs have also been pivotal in building much-needed partisan opposition, which provides the crucial power balance upon which democracy depends (Kew, 2005). Since the 1990s the causal nexus between civil society and democracy has been the object of much debate. This is because civil society can consolidate democratic governance by widening citizens participation in political processes and enhance economic growth (Kew and Oshikoya, 2014).

Civil society could enhance democratic values through its capacity and functions as election observer and monitoring, coupled with building formidable opposition for political reform. Recent civil protest in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Uganda, Togo and Zimbabwe were renewed called for more open, transparent and democratic governance. Larry Diamond (2005) argues that without a strong, vigilant, transparent, and resourceful civil society, Africa cannot achieve development or sustain and improve democracy. Similarly, in contemporary world, donor agencies have focused on the role of civil society in tackling the developmental woes of Africa. This is because of the link between democracy and development. Economists often argue that economic growth and free market is enough to consolidate democracy, while political scientists argue that without good governance and strong institutions, economic growth will not be sustainable (Elone, 2001). Arguably, African civil society developed to fill this void (where stakeholders have largely failed to develop comprehensive

policies) by agitating for more political reform and economic assistance to help the continent with her development challenges. Democratic values such as rule of law, freedom of speech, human rights, periodic free and fair elections etc, are key essentials for Africa in meeting its present-day development trials (Bojang, 2017).

Civil society holds the latent promise of political pluralism and at the same time serve as watchdog over governmental policies and programmes (Bratton, 1989, Abdel and Hassan, 2009; Jacobs, 2011). Formation of civil society played a potent part in dismantling dictatorial regimes and opening civic space for broader political involvement in many Africa countries. However, the increasing regulation of CSOs shows a return to despotic practices and a counterattack against democracy. According to Elone, regardless of this tendency numerous countries have also assumed enabling frameworks for civil society, identifying the influence of this sector to national development.

While this study did not challenge the contribution made by CSOs towards consolidating democracy in Africa but the researcher opines that the institutions of many CSOs in Africa is not democratic because of outside forces controlling it. As a result, associational life in many African countries does not reflect the wishes and interests of the masses but that of the donors. In this way, donor agencies serve the hegemonic functions/role and CSOs in Africa are compel to further their interests or agendas instead of the masses. Using Gramsci hegemony theory in the context of African civil society is further discussed below.

#### IV. CURRENT DEBATES ON CIVIL SOCIETY ASSOCIATIONS IN AFRICA

In the received literature of African civil society lies the notion of conventional civil society and its applicability in the complex and multicultural society of Africa. Conventional notion of civil society excludes traditional associations in Africa—for example, religious and ethnic associations (Orji, 2009). This has been much of the debate for past decades and is still relevant in the modern discourse. Antonio Gramsci argued that civil society is the arena, separate from state and market, in which ideological hegemony is contested (Lewis 2001). In other words, intellectuals succeeded in creating hegemony to extend their world views to the ruled thereby getting the consent. This ideological hegemony is the case in many CSOs in Africa which further jeopardized their credibility and application. This epistemological acceptance of civil society is intertwined with divided opinions on usefulness of civil society in Africa.

Similarly, Gellner (1994) argues that civil society reflects not only a particular stage of historical development in the West but the particular conditions that obtained there and not necessarily in other parts of the world (Gellner 1994:169). It is true that CSOs in Africa did not passed through similar historical development as in Europe, but African civil society is still growing and while I acknowledged its significance,

equally I wary of the way it is used in the volatile continent of Africa. As Mardin asserts, civil society is a ‘Western dream’ born out of their historical development. The question here is whether Africa envisaged this dream or Is there civil society in Africa? While there are no doubts that civil society do exist in Africa, but what remains doubtful is their agenda which appears contrary to their own existence.

Civil society in Africa face a question of legitimacy and autonomy. The freedom of CSOs in Africa is seriously undermined by government especially autocratic ones. This is translated in their ineffectiveness to bring about any policy change or reforms in government institutions. Dictatorial governments attempt to safeguard the depoliticization of NGOs, in order to thwart them from becoming a political springboard (Neubert, 2011). Legitimacy requires more effectiveness and that CSOs must be representative and leaders need to consult with constituents; CSOs need to be transparent and accountable, in essence, they need to be democratic institutions; and they need to address accusations of manipulation for political or personal gain (The Africa Civil Society and Governance Assessments Forum, 2011). Regrettably, these is not the case in many African countries though with the exception of Ghana, South Africa, and Senegal. What is prevalent in many African countries is manipulation of civil society for personal and political gains. This is what Gramsci means by *hegemony* creation is nothing but the formation of class power of the bourgeoisie; in other words, the creation of the bourgeois class. Thus, reliant on favors from international donors may lead to lack of autonomy and legitimacy on the part of civil associations.

Another potent debate surrounding civil society is their source of funding coupled with its usefulness in general. For example, in Zimbabwe, Gambia, Togo, Cameroon, etc, CSOs are only limited to provision of welfare to the public with little or no policy input and thus unable to hold their governments accountable. Again, their inability to secure adequate local funds have forced them to depend on international donors (Baylies and Power 2001; Makumbe 1998). This dependency on Western donors has created a hegemony and domination starting first with articulation of narrow financial interests and then developing into ideological class consciousness. As Gramsci noted, hegemony is not only political (and ideological) but also economical. Due to the fact that civil associations in Africa relied heavily on donor assistance, it is alleged to undermine the authority of domestic CSOs in the eyes of the native population and the government, as such they were labeled either as promoting foreign interests, or as infiltrated by the opposition. On the contrary, some CSOs also enjoyed the goodwill gesture from the state which equally undermine their authority. These partnerships create a hegemonic power by the state which amount or tantamount to dormant CSOs in some African countries.

Arguably, some vibrant and active CSOs in Africa are reflection of Western civil society with neo-colonial tendency. While some countries like Sudan, Somalia, Zimbabwe,

Cameron, Togo, etc. are robbed of the benefits of having a credible civil society due to their regime types and closed public space, countries such as Ghana, Senegal, Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa have started enjoying the fruits of vibrant CSOs. For example, Ghana's post-independent history was attributed by military rule which then gave way to a robust democratic transition, and today is one of the strongest multi-party democracies on the continent in part through both domestic and international pressures of civil society and widespread civic associational life (Kew and Oshikoya, 2014:11). Civil society across Africa is gaining in strength and effectiveness but still has a long road ahead to becoming a powerful voice on public policy.

## V. CONCLUSION

In contemporary world, civil society have found favor in the eyes of both scholars and international development organizations due to the types of strategies they employ in poverty reduction. Development aid in Africa is often linked or combined with political reform in the bid to tackle the continent development woes. This explains the growing prominence of civil society in academic discourse. It promises to make state efficient, consolidate democracy and help eradicate poverty in society. Yet the issue of civil society generates mixed feelings and no distinct understanding of how it can enhance democracy or development in Africa. Arguably, this is the dilemma surrounding most civil society in Africa.

Discussion about civil society in Africa centers on NGOs and often a times exclude traditional associations such as religious and cultural groups. This exclusion limits the active involvement of the masses in such bodies and the rhetoric of African civil society as a reflection of Western civil society is echoed and further questioned. While this study observed the resemblance between civil society in Africa to those in the West, the paper equally acknowledged striking divergences between them due to historical, cultural and institutional differences. The conditions necessary for civil society to operate successfully in Africa seems inadequate. As Mardin asserts 'civil society is a Western dream' and developed with their societal transformation which is only limited to the West. Therefore, societies in Africa need to pass through the same transformation in order to equate civil society in Africa to those exist in Europe.

Questions of legitimacy and autonomy of African CSOs has been much debated of recent. Freedom of civil society is seriously hampered in many African countries due to new wave of autocratic regimes. Civil society can only exist in the realm of freedom. Civil society needs to be visible and transparent as much as possible. This will not only gain them the trust of the masses but the government as well. Unfortunately, many civil society in Africa are furthering the interest of few individuals and these create hegemonic class power. The source of their funding is also problematic in the sense that it undermines not only their legitimacy and

autonomy but their authority as well due to high dependency on Western donors. Arguably, this creates hegemonic relations and often a times African civil society are branded as furthering Western or elites interests in the society.

Although civil society in Africa face numerous challenges, but there are few success stories in countries such as Ghana, Senegal, South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, etc. Africans are challenging the existing political and economic order in their respective countries demanding for more political freedom, accountability, and economic opportunity. This study opined that civil society in Africa have begun to gain importance by influencing government policies, consolidating democracy by widening the participation of citizens and advocating for political rights. However, what remains to be seen is the applicability of civil society ideas in traditional rural Africa. This paper recommends for further study on forces that shape African civil society historically and where it stands contemporary; and its role in political transitions and democratization process in Africa.

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