

# Civil Society in Authoritarian Regimes

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## Questions

- *What ways have civil society effectively promoted domestic social accountability, including holding executive to account in contexts of increased shrinkage of both civic and democratic space?*
- *What approaches have donors used to better support civil society to promote domestic social accountability in these similar contexts, without doing more harm?*

**Geographical Focus:** *East and Sub-Saharan Africa*

## Contents

1. Overview
2. Definitional issues
3. Civil Society and Social Accountability
4. Donors
5. References

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## 1. Overview

This rapid review synthesises findings from rigorous academic, practitioner, and policy references on the role of civil society in promoting social accountability in authoritarian regimes and the ways donors can support them. The main geographic focus of this report is East Africa, with a secondary focus on Sub-Saharan Africa. In the African context civil society is best defined as 'a public sphere of formal or informal, collective activity autonomous from but recognizing the legitimate existence of the state' (Orvis, 2001: 20). Whereas social accountability is best defined as 'an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement, i.e., in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations who participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability' (Malena, Forster and Singh, 2004: 1).

Since the fall of the Soviet Union civil society has played an increasing role in the democracy process in Africa. However, civil society in Africa is still often based on ethnicity or religion, with the professional Western idea of civil society having less success in Africa due to lack of support. Success of professional civil society has thus been more closely aligned to technical aspects, such as participatory budget processes, where civil society tracks the government's expenditure and holds them to account for lost funds and irresponsible spending. For this reason donors have seen success in offering technical training and have been encouraged to increase this element of aiding civil society. Due to this form of professional civil society often being relatively small and new in Africa, funding needs to be finely balanced, as it can harm the development of these groups and prevent them from forming their own ideologies, as well as building support and legitimacy. The large expectations from the Global North of civil society further damages its development, as they are often expected to do too much without being given the space to develop their own agenda. The media is an important part of civil society and can be a key actor in social accountability, however, in many African countries the media is not equipped to hold the government to account.

The African version of civil society has seen great success from national conferences, where large numbers of civil society groups meet to hold the government to account. These national conferences are often led by religious leaders and have previously, in the case of Benin and Congo, even led to public impeachment of the country's president. It has been argued that in authoritarian regimes, these ethnic and religious based civil society groups are more likely to be effective than the Western vision of professional civil society, as they are given more space to manoeuvre and have large support bases (Ottoway, 2000). Thus, donors have to make difficult decisions, based on local dynamics, in how they fund civil society, what they expect from these groups, and how they monitor success, in order to play a positive, rather than a negative, role in the development of civil society in these countries.

The majority of the literature tends to focus on the role of civil society in Africa during the transitional period in the 1980s and 1990s, which due the changing political, economic, and societal dynamics is less relevant to the role civil society can play today. There is a lack of literature on contemporary African civil society and social accountability with the current focus more on the role of donors, or on civil society providing services that should otherwise be provided by the government. The literature brings up a number of examples of women groups and the role of civil society in increasing gender equality, however, this does not extend to include disabilities.

## 2. Definitional issues

There are many debates around civil society in the African context, specifically whether the Western imported understanding of the concept fits within African society and thus the debate has been extended to how the term should be defined for the African context. White (1997: 379) gives a traditional definition of civil society and focuses on separation from the state and defines civil society as 'an intermediate associational realm between state and family populated by organisations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values'. Whereas Bratton (1994: 2) defines it in relation to Africa and allows room for more informal links in his definition, defining it as 'a sphere of social interaction between the household and the state which is manifest in norms of community cooperation, structures of voluntary association, and networks of public communication'. However, Orvis argues that the definition should be broader still in order to reflect the full array of African political and associational life, taking into account the often ethnic nature, and to move beyond civil society being viewed as a democratising element. Orvis (2001: 20) defines civil society as 'a public sphere of formal or informal, collective activity autonomous from but recognizing the legitimate existence of the state'. He argues that this remains true to the Western development of civil society, but allows for the inclusion of patron-client networks, ethnic associations, and some "traditional" authorities as part of civil society, making it representative of African society as a whole and also less likely to support liberal democracy.

At the same time accountability and social accountability have different understandings. Cavill and Sahail (2004: 157) offer a broad definition of accountability as a whole and define it as 'when agent A is accountable to agent B then agent A is obliged to inform agent B about agent A's actions and decisions, to justify them, and to suffer punishment in the case of eventual misconduct'. Whereas McNeil and Mumvuma (2006: 5) define accountability in relation to the role of civil society and stress its vertical nature: 'vertical accountability refers to the means whereby ordinary citizens, mass media, and civil society actors seek to enforce standards of good behavior and performance by public officials and service providers'. Malena, Forster and Singh (2004: 1) offer a more inclusive definition for social accountability and one that links well with Orvis' understanding of African civil society, by opening up the process to indirect actors, they define it as 'an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement, i.e., in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations who participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability'. Whilst Ahmad (2008) makes an important point in highlighting that although poor people, who rely on the government a great deal, are the greatest beneficiaries of effective social accountability, they are the least equipped to actually hold government to account.

## 3. Civil Society and Social Accountability

With the collapse of the Soviet Union there was a wave of democratisation that spread through Africa and as a result many civil society groups and activities emerged, particularly the national conferences. It is argued that the emergence of civil society in Africa is closely tied to the adoption or consolidation of the market economy and political pluralism. As the Global North has made aid dependent on good governance, the role of civil society in Africa increased and they became an important part of the 'democratisation' wave in Africa in the 1980s and 1990s (UNESCO, 2009).

African civil society has had some issues with it being dominated by traditional, ascriptive, and kin-based groups such as clans, tribes, and ethnoreligious groups. These groups are able to harness large non-state networks and raise issues with the government. However, they act for a particular group rather than society as a whole. More recently modern and secular civil associations have formed which have been able to strengthen the process of holding the government to account, but have a weaker support base (Gyimah-Boadi, 1996).

Many large donors have supported the introduction of participatory budget processes, which operate alongside the public expenditure cycle and are based on the principle that budgets reflect the government's policy decisions. Therefore, through making it easier for the population to access budget information the process can become more transparent, which in turn can minimise opportunities for clientelism and corruption. In Uganda Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys were used successfully in school budgeting. As a direct result of the process primary school enrolment increased from 3.6 million in 1996 to 6.9 million in 2001 and the share of the budget reaching the schools increased from a low of 20% in 1995 to 80% in 2001 (Ahmad, 2008)

In the 1980s many non-governmental organizations were established in countries such as Nigeria, Uganda, Zaire, Zambia and Zimbabwe to monitor the human rights performance of their governments. Also, local chapters of Amnesty International had opened in Benin, Sierra Leone, Togo, Zambia and Mauritius by the early 1990s. Many groups moved beyond human rights monitoring and began also monitoring elections. This was done through wider networks, such as a network of intellectuals and professionals in francophone West Africa and through umbrella groups of churches in East Africa. These organisations helped to keep their governments accountable and to educate the local populations on citizenship. Another element utilised by civil society in Africa, and having originated in Africa, is the national conference where national elites from the main segments of society meet to address the country's political crisis and to formulate constitutional changes. In Benin and Congo these conferences were used to conduct a public impeachment of their president, stripping them of executive powers (Bratton, 1994).

Christian churches and their national organisations have also played a significant role in social accountability in Africa. In Kenya, the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) was a key voice of opposition to the authoritarianism of President Daniel arap Moi. They were a critical voice against the lack of a secret ballot, opposition arrests, lack of transparency, political repression and mismanagement of the economy. Christian groups have also fought authoritarianism and championed democracy in Ghana, Nigeria, and Zambia. Religious leaders have also played an important part in the path towards democratisation by acting as non-political brokers between autocrats and those demanding democracy. For example, the Roman Catholic Bishop Ernest Nkombo of the Congo and Monsignor Laurent Monsengwo of Zaire were pivotal in the transitions and national conferences of their respective countries. In Togo Archbishop Fanoko Kpodzro was head of the sovereign national conference to chart the country's political future (Gyimah-Boadi, 1996).

The media is an important part of civil society and can be a key actor in social accountability. However, in many African countries the media is not equipped to hold the government to account and there are also many laws in place to prevent them from doing so. For example, in Zimbabwe, staff of the *Financial Gazette* were arrested and charged under a pre-independence "criminal defamation" statute for reporting on the personal life of President Robert Mugabe, and have

continuously faced prosecution.<sup>1</sup> Whilst the Ivorian newspaper *La Voie* was suspended and senior staff were given two-year jail sentences for suggesting that the president's presence at a football championship had brought the national team bad luck (Gyimah-Boadi, 1996). However, with the development of technology and online reporting there is space for increasing the role the media and the diaspora can play in holding the government to account through online media outlets (Ottoway, 2000).

## Case Study: Zimbabwe

Due to economic liberalisation in the country, the Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network formed the Engendering National Budget (ENB) intervention, which, since September 2001, has analysed and questioned Zimbabwe's socioeconomic policies and actions from a gender perspective and with the aim of gaining gender-sensitive budgeting in the country. ENB has brought to light the severe inequalities in resource allocation and distribution among women and men (McNeil and Mumvuma, 2006).

Under similar principles, and due to accusations of corruption, Zimbabwe's Centre for Total Transformation (ZCTT) tracks school fee expenditures, as children were being sent home from school and teachers were leaving due to non-payment. The rural population raised a loud public outcry about the mismanagement of school fees intended for the development of education and school facilities and the ZCTT's intervention managed to address the issue. The Child Friendly National Budget Initiative was launched in 1999 by a consortium of non-government organisations under the National Association of Non Governmental Organisations (NANGO) umbrella, which analyses how resources are mobilised, allocated, and utilised in meeting children's basic needs. As part of this initiative ZCTT uses community scorecards to monitor individual school fee expenditures, as well as baseline surveys, targeted focus groups, interviews with school principals, and workshops on school budgeting and expenditures. Much of the success of the initiative is due to the large network of NGOs involved in NANGO, with over 1000 organisations participating. However, in the wider Child Friendly National Budget Initiative, access to information has been routinely blocked by the government who see these NGOs as allies of the opposition, and thus the process has been hindered (McNeil and Mumvuma, 2006).

NANGO has managed to remain an extremely inclusive consortium (which has partly bridged the gap between professional civil society and movement-based groups) that has enabled citizens to take some form of ownership of the budgeting process in Zimbabwe. NANGO uses workshops, both pre and post budget to mobilise citizens – particularly marginalised groups – to participate in its budget work. These workshops allow the wider community to make budget recommendations, which can then be relayed to the government, thus allowing these groups to have a say where they would otherwise be ignored. Members of parliament, chiefs, councillors, and governors also participate in the workshops, along with both rural and urban local communities, ensuring an inclusive process and that local voices are heard by those with the power to change policy (McNeil and Mumvuma, 2006).

More recently, due to the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions in Zimbabwe, the resulting poor service delivery, and in an effort to promote transparency and accountability in local authorities, civil society organisations are focusing mainly on basic service delivery monitoring, community-based planning, and budgeting. Through building citizen coalitions that engage with local

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.financialgazette.co.zw/shooting-the-messenger/>

authorities on the delivery of water, sanitation, health, education and transport services, communities are developing their own community development plans, which include contextual and gender sensitive budgeting. However, apart from residents associations, with their militancy and critical mass of a differentiated membership, many civil society groups lack the capacity to build relationships and coalitions to hold the local authorities to account. Moreover, these civil society groups are attempting to hold local authorities, rather than the government to account (Muchadenyika, 2017). Table 1 below demonstrates the tools (and their effectiveness) used by Zimbabwean civil society to hold local authorities to account.

**Table 1: Social Accountability Tools**

<b>Tool</b>	<b>Effectiveness</b>
<b>Community Scorecards</b>	In Masvingo, this has facilitated residents' feedback without victimization fears.  In Nyanga, communities are suspicious of reprisals from politicians, and government officials.
<b>Service delivery satisfaction surveys</b>	Assisted in determining the extent to which residents are satisfied or dissatisfied with the delivery of major services (health, water, electricity and education).
<b>Social Service charters</b>	Local Authorities that were engaged are willing to adopt social service charters despite resistance from the local government ministry. Bulawayo managed to adopt a service charter.
<b>Sensitization meetings</b>	Have raised consciousness among young women on their rights and the need to demand for their fulfilment where gaps exist.
<b>Stakeholder surveys</b>	Helped to understand the power, positions and perspective of different stakeholders on how they influence the outcome of policy processes.
<b>Petitions</b>	Local authorities do not always respond. If they do respond they will be informing residents that there are no funds.
<b>Local evidence generation groups</b>	These generate evidence on advocacy and lobby issues.

Source: (Muchadenyika, 2017: 188).

## 4. Donors

Donors from the Global North see civil society as a way to promote democratic development in the Global South. Civil society is viewed by donors as a method of holding the governments accountable for their actions and as a means of ensuring better policies and implementation. Through funding civil society these donors aim to increase the capacity of these organisations to act as government watchdogs. This should also include aid towards the political milieu in order to ensure that there is an enabling environment for civil society to operate within (Jenkins, 2001).

Many of the anti-poverty strategies instituted by donors in the 1990s have now become a driving external force behind social accountability initiatives in Africa. However, the external role in launching these initiatives has led to a lack of country ownership or further institutionalisation of the initiatives. A 2005 global review of these practices by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund highlighted the limited role they play in changing policy, particularly with regards to the macroeconomic framework and related structural reforms and thus more needs to be done to move them beyond participation and discussion and towards actual policy change (McNeil and Mumvuma, 2006).

There are considerable capacity constraints in several African countries with regards to undertaking credible social accountability initiatives, mainly due to the lack of skilled personnel. For example, in Malawi civil society noted that they were failing to monitor the education budget properly due to the lack of technical capacity. The same issues were reported by the Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network with regards to their capacity to undertake gender budget analysis. The lack of skilled staff and training programmes considerably constrains the work of these civil society organisations and it is argued that donor-led training would enhance their capacity to carry out social accountability. Moreover, these organisations lack the financial resources to effectively hold their governments to account, which in turn threatens the viability of social accountability initiatives in the region. For example, in Malawi the programme to monitor the fiscal 2001/2 and 2002/3 rounds of the budget monitoring exercise failed due to the lack of resources to efficiently undertake the task (McNeil and Mumvuma, 2006).

However, there is a fine line to balance with regards to funding, as over-dependence on foreign funding has many consequences too for the development of civil society, as they become accountable to donors rather than the people they represent. Additionally, it can endanger the local credibility of the organisations, as they can be dismissed as foreign agents rather than as voices of the people (Bratton, 1994).

Through preserving individual liberties these civil society organisations contribute to engendering and maintaining democracy and promoting sound government policy and economic performance. This is one of the core aims of the funders, as it can create a cycle where rights to free association lead to better government policies, and development. However, there are issues with this model. Firstly, aid agencies expect too much of civil society, civil society is expected to play a pivotal role in (1) transitions to competitive politics, (2) the "consolidation" of fledgling democracies, and (3) the establishment of market-oriented economic policies, and subsequently positive developmental performance. However, in order to play a leading role in one of these objectives, the organisation would not be able to contribute to the others. In political aid, these agencies aim to fund organisations who they think can aid democracy, but in doing so they are going against the very policies they expect the governments to implement, as they are distorting the (political) market and creating their own version of rent-seeking. As a result, they are attracting more sinister actors who claim to be pro democracy. For example, USAID funded

Major Pierre Buyoya's Foundation for Unity, Peace and Democracy for seminars among NGOs on how to promote democracy and human rights in Burundi. However, Buyoya went on to lead a military junta that ousted the civilian regime in a coup in 1996. Moreover, even groups that are committed to changing the course of an oppressive regime, are not necessarily in favour of the competitive politics that donors are seeking, as they have their own individual interests that they will be in the position to follow (partly in thanks to foreign capital) once the political situation becomes more fluid. This can cause further issues when civil society supports a political actor matching their interests and with whom they have disproportionate levels of influence. For example, in Zambia many civil society groups lent support to a newly installed democratic government under Frederick Chiluba, which engaged in tactics similar to those of the previous regime, but where they enjoyed more influence (Jenkins, 2001).

Additionally, the aid of civil society by donors promotes political pluralism that is not rooted in social pluralism and does not have a social base – they are often the creation of donors and the market, rather than social demands for representation and policy change. These organisations become top-down, rather than bottom up organisations with very little links or connections to the people they are supposed to represent. For this reason, religious and ethnic civil society organisations in Africa often have far closer links to the people and are more representative of the people. However, they are more likely to disengage with the state and less likely to represent their members in the political process. Nonetheless, in more authoritarian regimes they are the more effective group, as they do not threaten the power of the government and have a large base, whereas the more professional NGOs do not have a large support base to mobilise and are restricted by the regime in their political actions. The mass support of the movement-based organisations becomes their tool in systems where it is difficult to manoeuvre politically, thus making religious and ethnic-based civil society groups more instrumental in authoritarian regimes in Africa. However, once the country becomes more democratic, these same organisations need to professionalise, whilst if a country is moving towards authoritarianism these organisations are better placed as movements rather than professional NGOs. In this respect civil society organisations were extremely successful in South Africa under the Apartheid regime, however, due to their lack of professionalisation they were less successful post-Apartheid. Organisations that are representative often have more immediate concrete goals than the ideal of democracy, whilst organisations that reflect donors' views are not representative and are dependent on donors. Donors have to make decisions on funding based on the local dynamics and political system, in an authoritarian regime, not only are professional NGOs unlikely to make much political inroads, they also starve the more effective movement-based groups of leadership as they hire the highly-skilled locals (Ottoway, 2000).

Robinson (1995) argues that there are a number potential issues with donors funding civil society in Africa with the idea of increasing democracy. Firstly, many of these civil society organisations are small and often new and thus do not necessarily have the capacity to receive large amount of, which could actually prevent them from having the time to map out and develop their objectives, build up their support, and increase their legitimacy. Secondly, it takes time for civil society to harness change, particularly in many African countries where the conditions are not suitable for rapid growth in civil society. Thus, the assistance provided by donors does not necessarily lead to change, as more time is needed in order to build the organisational capacity and to develop its ideological stance. Thirdly, it is difficult to assess the true contribution of civil society organisations and the insistence by donors for rigorous monitoring procedures can divert to organisations' focus away from their principle goals.



A further issue with supporting civil society in authoritarian regimes is that these regimes can use protest spaces as a way of managing dissent. Authoritarian governments have limited sources of information about dissatisfied lower ranking officials or about the society as a whole. Through allowing civil society to operate they keep discontented communities out in the open rather than driving them underground. Thus, permitting the operation of civil society and protests can be used as a tool to manage discontent. Additionally, these regimes often push, or allow, civil society to focus on narrower, local issues, rather than broader issues that may threaten the government (Lorentzen, 2013).

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## Key websites

- [Africa Renewal](#)
- [USAID](#)

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