Title: A Critique of Civil Society Discourse and Good Governance in Africa

By Mammo Muchie, Aalborg University, Aalborg, Denmark.

10th General Conference of EADI

19-21 September 2002, Ljubljana, Slovenia

EU Enlargement in a Changing World
Challenges for Development Co-operation in the 21st Century
*Not economic exploitation, as often assumed, but the disintegration of the cultural environment of the victim is the cause of the degradation. The economic process may, naturally, supply the vehicle of the destruction, and almost invariably economic inferiority will make the weaker yield, but the immediate cause of his undoing is not for that reason economic; it lies in the lethal injury to the institutions in which his social existence is embodied. The result is loss of self-respect and standards, whether the unit is a people or a class, whether the process springs from so-called culture conflict or from a change in the position of a class within the confines of a society.*

- Karl Polyani, Ch.13, *Class Interest and Social Change,* in *The Great Transformation,* 1944

**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the global discourse of the failed or weak state and the successful agents of civil society by closely examining how the global constitution of failure and success has been constructed in Africa. The factors for establishing a discourse of failure and success with respect to the state and civil society relationships in Africa will be considered. The discourse of "failure and success" appears to have been implicated in disrupting the proper relationship that is needed to establish robust institutional arrangements combining strong states, strong markets and strong civil societies capable of fostering collectively human security, peace and stability in Africa. The paper will begin to mount a critique of civil society being promoted by the internal and external forces that benefit by its widespread expansion in Africa.

**CIVIL SOCIETY IS NEITHER GOOD NOR BAD**
"Actual civil societies are complex associational universes… they contain repression as well as democracy, conflict as well as co-operation, vice as well as virtue; they can be motivated by sectional greed as much as social interest." (Robinson and White, The role of Civic Organisations in the provision of social services: towards synergy. Helsinki, World Institute for Development Economic research, 1997 p.3)

Thus civil society is neither good nor peaceful nor violent and bad. It is neither all democratic nor all despotic. The concept is a generic term for containing and including every variety of association: grassroots organization, charitable associations, civility expressing organizations, independent organizations, associational organization, private organization, private voluntary organization, community based organization and non-governmental and quasi- non governmental organizations. Neither all those associations that are neither wholly market guided nor all state guided fall in the civil society sphere. Civil society is an old idea made newer by so-called third wave democratization and the contemporary realities of a post cold war stimulation of the pluralisation of varied stakeholders in world economics and politics. Its revival owes to the emergence of a globalising agenda driven largely by donor finance that dominated the world’s intellectual, political and moral space and vision especially after the end of the cold war.

Civil society became popular after globalisation has fully discredited the planning state (e.g former Soviet Union states) and the interventionist state (e.g the Kenyan welfare state in the Western states), and the developmental state (in much of the developing world) in favour of a minimalistic role of the state in the economy (the liberal state). It appears that globalisation and democratisation have changed world politics and economics in favour of the rich, markets, corporations, private finance or speculative capital, and against the poor, the state, trade unions and even non-financial capital. If state action cannot deliver better possibilities, it is said civil society, and non-profit making voluntary sectors, and community based organisations and other social networks and NGOs may step in. The role of NGOs is also related to help reduce the most unacceptable side of the mainly economic driven globalising logic. It is this international context of globalisation that explains the emergence of the current interest and development on civil society. There is thus much value in identifying the ideological contamination of this concept from the current go-go globalisation and the rhetoric of democratisation in order to distill and rescue the role of civil society in development, peace-making, and in fostering security and long-term co-operation in Africa through the various regional and continental approaches to build civic participation, sense, expression and engagement.

There are four important indicators that are necessary but not sufficient to measure the contribution of civil society in fostering co-operation, stability, security and peace building in Africa.
1. Spreading a culture of civility as a counter weight to war and violence.
2. Institutionalising a culture of service by community based self-organisations to counter rampant poverty and inequalities,
3. Spreading ethics and moral sense as a civic culture and virtue in order to overcome prevailing social interchanges marred by violence, deception, force and blackmail

The question is whether the current array or constellation of civil society associations, communities and organisations as they are evolving and persisting to exist in Africa contribute to civility and civilization or war, poverty and discord. There is an assumption that creating and spreading these associational forms will strengthen civility, cooperation and peace. There is an equal assumption that market and state failures make the latter the least attractive candidates as agencies for civilised cooperation and peace. This benign approach to civil society and uncharitable approach to markets and the state should not be taken at face value. None of the institutional actors representing markets, civil society and the state are, \textit{a priori}, innocent or guilty. They are all complex organisms. They all have their own specific functions and problems. They can do different things differently. As a heterogeneous and complex sphere, civil society too can be a factor of discord and violence. There is in fact military civil society operating as a transnational network at present that has alarmed the hyper power of our time to declare the world disposition of political forces into those with the hyper power or the rest. Civil society has to be scrutinized and re-conceptualised first before we admit that its wide scale expansion and promotion can be a factor for peace, security, stability and cooperation in Africa.

There are all kinds of activist civil society groups and NGOs that wish to imbue and broaden existing civilised culture to incorporate the "right to dissent" and the "right to be wrong". This suggests that protest and dissent that can challenge the rule of law should not be criminalised as "uncivil or uncivilized." That acknowledgment introduces specificity to the type of violence that needs condemnation. Thus not all violence may be criminal and uncivilised. The scope of civil society sphere should include some legitimate acts of resistances and defiances of authority. Much of the anti-economic globalisation movement is trying to legitimise civil society action that decriminalise resistance and defiance against great-power hegemonic and corporate alliances. Civil society's civility is thus a complex concept whose boundary is not clear cut in relation to legitimate resistance that includes acts of violence. Does the concept of civil society include the right to dissent or is it merely a peaceful claim to ones right to associate around ones perceived interest? This boundary problem of civil society is not yet settled. And the issue is very important given the massive failures of justice and crises of nature that progressive voices from the civil society sector are trying to highlight.

I. Some Fundamental Conditions Necessary for constructing Good Governance

For long-term stability, security, co-operation and peace, human wellbeing must become the foundation of good governance. The primary ethical norm for any just social arrangement begins

With the intention and effort to make every person to enjoy basic well being and security. That is
the pre-eminent moral foundation that should guide any normal region, society and social-economic arrangement.

The content of human life should not be invaded by violence, and uncontrollable discord nor degraded by poverty. Here the notion of violence is treated in relation to social arrangements that impede and limit people from having the opportunity, right and freedom to access possibilities to construct reasonable and fulfilling lives. A society where the structures, institutions, norms and values tolerate massive poverty such as exists in much of Africa now is one that suffers from massive moral and justice failure. Such a society oppresses human agency with poverty and war and opens no other reasonable outlet to human agency to search for justice other than a resort to more war and violence. While morally and from a humane point of view no violence can be afforded or condoned, in radically poor and unequal society violence may not be avoided. The dilemma is that once the option of violence is selected as the weapon of the poor, its execution perforce leads to further suffering and exacerbation of the poverty situation. The condition of poverty opens the violence option; conversely the onset of violence aggravates the poverty situation. The two become mutually reinforcing rather than mutually cancelling. Africa is one of the region of the world that provides the empirical case for such a pervasive reinforcement of poverty by violence and violence by poverty.

**Permanent Violence** can be broadly defined as a daily and routine violation of human rights, against the expression of human agency through the imposition of force and/ or deception. Violence can be organised and individualised, institutionalised or policy-driven where individuals, states, communities, societies, groups, and other specific actors can be the targets. A violent phenomenon occurs when violations, impositions and constraints restrict people from living lives they freely choose to lead in the A. Sen sense of freedom and development. It is also an exertion of physical power on people, nations and countries without their consent or negotiation leading to their humiliation, violation of the basis of self-respect, the destruction of their human self-worth, normal functions, identity, dignity and capacity. New forms of violence are spreading such as we see taking place in Somalia on top of the old forms fought between states (e.g. Eritrea and Ethiopia) and those with a state and a major movement for self-determination (e.g. Sudan and The Southern Sudanese Liberation Movement). Military companies, security firms, private armies, multiplying arms dealers and markets in arms are spreading injecting new logic to war, and making it impossible to control the new wars. Poor societies are most vulnerable to the proliferation of drug and private-army related violence.

The violence market is spreading generally in Africa, fuelled by the prevalence of
poverty.

**Permanent poverty denotes the** destruction of human wellbeing through the lack of access, entitlement and capacity to command the following:

- **basic** well-being (food, clothing, shelter),
- **additive** well-being (education, physical health and psychic health),
- **subtractive** change from wellbeing into ill-being: i.e., freedom from the invasive practices that convert wellbeing into ill-being such as violence, crime, torture, genocide, divisive discrimination, domestic violence, child abuse, sexism, racism, ethnic cleansing, militarism, xenophobia, arbitrary Government control and so on,
- **multiplicative** growth in human wellbeing development (freedom and ability to experience aesthetic, artistic, intellectual and moral/super ego level pursuits, enrichment of the content of living, psychic fulfilment, contentment, pursuit of cultural capital through knowledge and wisdom while being free from worries of material constraints)

Poverty is said to be a form of silent violence while violence subtracts, degrades and destroys the fabric of society, exposing whole communities in the end to poverty. The existence of the combination of violence and poverty in a given regional society is morally, politically and economically undesirable. The Horn of Africa is one of the regions in the world where the civil society, the state and markets have not worked together to reduce the threshold of poverty and violence.

Change that roots out poverty and violence is necessary. The ultimate objective function is to bring about change in order to attain a poverty and violence (PV) state where:

\[ \mathcal{G} = N \]
\[ \sum_{i=1}^{\mathcal{G}} PV = 0 \]

\( i \ldots \mathcal{G} \) Represent the different forms and acts of violence and the variety of forms of poverty. In the case of poverty, it includes the poverty experienced by many social groups. In the case of violence, it includes wars within the region.

\( \sum PV \) is a summation of the representation of the state of existence of poverty and violence and their symbiotic relationship. \( \sum PV = 0 \) is an expression of ambition or vision suggesting an end-goal that the society as a whole should strive to reach, an optimum social attainment. The politics, economics, legal, security and cultural systems need to be realigned and cohere to realise this objective and end-point with minimum cost and optimal efficiency. The social arrangement that needs to be
promoted is that with a potential and a built in self-correcting mechanism for reducing poverty and violence in a direction through time that ultimately will bring them to zero (the state of poverty eradication).

The rate of change defines the speed at which the $PV$ prevalent state changes into a $PV$ reduction state, and the latter abbreviates into a $PV$ eradication state. The state $\sum PV=0$ can be reached at a faster rate only when national ideological purpose, political, economic and legal arrangements are made to work in concert with the norms of high public ethics and public service.

There is a need to build a regional consensus in order to recognise the eradication of $PV$ as a regional-African priority. There is also a need to accelerate the speed of change of $PV$ from state to state until progressively the final poverty and violence eradicated state ($PVe$ State) is attained. This requires a new thinking and approach to imagine not only the ‘reduction’ of poverty and violence (the stuff of current official thinking) but also total eradication (the expected desirable state that must be created!). The lower the expectation for changing $PV$ states the higher the probability that $PV$ will be persistent. The higher the expectation that $PV$ will be eradicated, the lower the probability that $PV$ states will persist.

Africa needs to create a new hope, optimism, moral foundation, courage and enterprising expectations for change free from deception and coercion. That foundation will assist Africa to find feasible trajectories and drastic alternatives that are acceptable to the population without a radical polarisation of the population of the region with wealth concentration in the hands of the very few and poverty for the many.

**Absence of Legal and Moral Base to Power Transitions and Transfers**

A society or region that does not obey any legal, constitutional and moral principle to make transitions from one set of public servants to another can be seen as inherently prone to accidents and breakdowns. Non-legal means of bringing about political changes are risky to society. Where either traditional means of consensus building or modern constitutional means of change of power from party to party do not take place, the transitional problem is always going to be held hostage to fortune. The culture of public service and public ethics is an essential quality to political leadership. This is an important ingredient to cultivate. Lack of orderly and predictable transition is a critical deficiency of the political culture in much of Africa. For example, Rawlings calls the Kufor Government the "worst in that country's history" and the Kufour Government is barely two years old!!! Intolerance against the tolerant and the intolerant is the norm of the African region. Every minor matter turns into an issue ruling out deliberation, negotiation, conversation and consensus. There is a need to foster a culture where the defeated and the victors make it their obligation not to throw society into a state of chaos and violence to bring about political change.
The important question is whether civil society as it is actually evolving in the Africa region is fit to the purposes of transforming these principles into practice.

The Discontent and Critique with Current Discourses of Civil Society

The discourse of civil society in Africa is linked with the emergence of the phenomenon of the collapsed state (e.g. Somalia) and the generally assumed failure of state capacity for managing change in Africa. The private and the non-Governmental actors are assumed to be able to do a better job in carrying out public tasks where the public agencies are said to have failed. Civil society has a role. The state also has a role. The private sector too as well. The key is not to allow ideological contamination to demote one of these actors and institutions while promoting another. Excision of current discourse of civil society in relation to failed states and failed markets is necessary not to discount the role of civil society. It is in fact the opposite; it is to redefine a proper relationship between them in order to provide fuller play to their synergistic impact on overall social change and transformation.

Globalization spread this anti-statist pro-private business and civil society and NGO ideology. One of the consequences of this unalloyed and untrammeled ideology is the double and simultaneous global construction of the failed state and the assumption of ‘success’ in favor of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the vibrant civil society. This is not borne out by the empirical fact of some state performing less well than others. It became a general strategy to roll back the state and give other agents/actors promotion. In general globalisation fostered an ideology where the state was demoted; civil society along with the ‘free’ market was promoted. State failure was decried; civil society stakeholder failure was largely ignored by an unverified and empirically unsubstantiated attribute of some metaphysical ‘benign goodness’ to NGOs. As a consequence, as many of the functions of the state as possible migrated to the sphere of civil society actors. Donor funding shifted from the state to civil society. The state was morally condemned. More of it was seen as a problem. Less of it was seen as necessary. The state was exhorted to be lean and minimal. The global discourse urged that the state reduce itself, maintain macro economic stability through balance of payment adjustment, promote the complete privatization of the economy, come out of failure by learning to create state capacity through ‘good governance’ and create an enabling environment for private actors and civil society. How a failed state can do all these things is difficult to fathom.

The primary hurdle in the possible contribution of civil society to peace and co-operation lies in the discourse of civil society. There is a need to deconstruct the global discourse of the failed state and the successful agents of civil society by closely examining how the global constitution of failure and success has been constructed. Civil society has to have
local agency, if it is to play a freer role in the making of peace and co-operation. Tied to multiple and conflicting external interests, civil society may create more hurdles than possibilities for peace and security in Africa.

The possible conflicts implicit between the global narratives of 'failure and success' and the local development of civil society must be appreciated to re-define civil society agency. Does the global influence distort the local evolution of civil society and the state in partnership? It appears that the description of the state as 'failed' and by implication civil society as a potential social space for 'success' by external actors introduces two problems. The first is the right of ownership to discourse formation: that is, it is related to the relative weight of internal and external contributions to frame discourses that shape the interaction of internal and external political and social forces. The second is the manufacturing of a new political economy through donor funding where state and civil society become engaged in tensions and conflicts rather than being able to promote partnership and social cohesion.

Donors feed finance and consultants to shape civil society according to their own images. Some international NGOs set up their own local offices. They help manufacture a transnationally induced civil society. Local NGOs can be threatened with international NGOs, unable to muster the resources and connections that come with extra-national relations. NGO-dom, in effect, becomes something like a new social space for making a living. There may thus be a scramble to create NGOs for reasons of self-employment rather than promoting a social cause on the basis of local understandings. Within local NGOs, there appear to be those that are funded by Western governments and foundations and those that may not have this opportunity. People with the same qualifications but with different connections with Western governments and foundations earn different salaries. This creates resentment and division among the local actors engaged in the NGO building industry. A shared understanding is lost. Civil society becomes a terrain for a more exclusive articulation and validation of private interests with new enclosures and barriers for inclusion and communication amongst large swathes of civil groups occupying roughly the same social status and role. It turns into an arena of battles amongst similar groups who are divided by income and funding differentials beyond local control.

The global mode of constituting civil society and state relationships in terms of the frames, narratives, discourses, rhetoric and metaphors of failure and success needs to be questioned. The term “civil society” itself, as it is being constituted by the global discourse of donors, requires questioning.

An alternative development of civil society based on local definitions, knowledge and cultural assumptions for the creation of social cohesion, trust and coherence ought to be explored. In the African context, there needs to be a vision to create three strongs and three successes—all mutually reinforcing rather than mutually destructive of each others successes.
and strengths. That is, a strong state, a strong market and a strong civil society—against a failed state, failed market and failed civil society—by all working in concert to reinforce and augment each other—is needed. A strong partnership between civil society and a developmental state capable of steering markets and social and political forces for regional—indeed continental structural transformation provides a necessary framework for constructing social coherence and cohesion in Africa.

**Taming the Power of Discourse**

Discourse has an intrinsic power to frame, set parameters, suggest agenda, help select policy options and legitimise outside intervention, especially by those who are able and willing to manufacture, name and control the discourse. Throughout the post-war period, there have been a number of powerful discourses competing to control the normative content and related social practices regarding the way economic, social, political and economic changes actually take place.

In the nineteenth century colonialism brought the discourse of the *civilising mission* to shape Africa's social-political society and future. In the post-war period there were the discourses of development, the third world, and democracy. Each in its own way has dominant discourse generators and discourse objects showing clearly who has agency and who lacks it. The coloniser, the developed, the first world have assumed agency, i.e., the knowledge, the freedom and power to set the agenda and select the terms of intervention. These actors have negotiated among and for themselves an African social reality only slightly, if at all, informed by African cultural currencies, and it is this self-serving “reality” that is used to guide—or at least justify—interventions in African affairs. As a result, the colonised, the underdeveloped, the so-called third world arrangements have been subsumed as the objects of intervention rather than the subjects of history.

In the same vein, civil society and good governance are the latest discourses that are being promoted along with globalisation, economic liberalisation and political democratisation in Africa. Civil society has become one of the most prominent global concepts throughout the last two decades. It is an old idea, traceable at least as far back as the European enlightenment. It seems to have been forgotten, having largely fallen into disuse after having been taken up by thinkers such as Hegel, de Tocqueville and Gramsci. Civil society as an issue appears to have been "re-membered" re-awakened from neglect, for now to become a pivotal element of Western cultural currency as applied to Africa.

Is this re-membering of an old concept helpful to the Horn of Africa? Does the latest discourse on civil society accord agency to political and social actors native to the Horn of Africa? Or do the global social and political actors retain their monopoly on the framing of discourses on civil society and the terms of thinking and speaking about them in relation to
Civil society, in the African context, was an idea largely exported from outside. That is its main peculiarity. The intent here is to find ways in which civil society can be re-appropriated for furthering the concept and reality of a peaceful and non-violent Africa.

'State, Market and Society Nexus in Africa'

Africa has suffered from the general ideological backlash against the state. Neo-liberal preaching of "free-market" went against the employment of concepts and strategies of the developmental state in Africa, the planning state in the former USSR and the interventionist state in Western countries. The re-membering of the classical free market discourse for the 80s and 90s brought a virulent attack on the state’s role in economic and social policy-making. The state retreat from the economy and social services has been yoked with the revival of free-market ideology (economy) and civil society (social services). While the state, market and civil society relation reflect the interdependence and mutual shaping of political, economic and civil societies, the ascendancy of free market and civil society with a beaten-down state actor suggest ideologies akin to what Putman called "bowling alone!" The merit of a free-market ideology conceived by a constellation of transnational actors and imposed on the context of the region lies in delegitimising ideologically and rhetorically the regulative role of the states of the region over markets and civil society actors.

What the region needs are strong developmental states that work with equally strong civil societies and strong markets (and not free markets!). There is no such thing as a free market, just as there is no such thing as free air outside the context of space and time. The market is always and universally embedded in societies and social-economic arrangements and structures. State or civil society strength does not lie in their confrontations with each other or in being at logger heads with each other, but in social innovations for furthering their partnerships and co-operations. Strength is built on a public policy orientation founded on the bedrock of public purpose, public service and public ethics that stimulate solidarity amongst states, markets and societies in Africa. They are not built with policies that divide, confront and weaken the triad of 'state--market--society' by strengthening one at the expense of the other or by not using law and moral authority, but rather force, deception and blackmail that disrupt further solidarity. Strength is not measurable in terms of how many states are adjusted to attract IMF-World Bank loans and grants by accepting and passing their dictations and conditions. It is measured by how much the state has developed public sense-making, by being rooted in society and markets and by emerging from it to guide society and the market in turn. Strength is also measured by how much it accomplishes governance by becoming itself a community for promoting self-reliance through following independent policy trajectories.
The successful state thrives on a successful civil society and an equally successful market, not on free market, retreating state and a "civil society gridlock" made possible by NGOs scrambling for donor handouts. The successful state can be constructed by challenging the global constitution of the failed state. The wish to reject the donor role in this definition of failure can only be accomplished by resisting the global constitution/discourse of failure through using an alternative discourse of success made locally.

The principle is to find consensual mobilising ideas and practices for all to recognise a regional meta-narrative that embodies a 'strong and successful' co-ordination of Horn of African states, markets and societies. Such a meta-narrative should displace the donor driven narrative or discourse. It can be made to assist, interact with and even guide the local narratives of self-defining Horn of African communities.

Concluding remarks

The term civil society itself has its conceptual roots in Western history. Its present application in the regional context as the most promising for embedding (Western) ideas of development and democracy should therefore be questioned. As the African post-colonial States have systematically been dismantled and replaced by diverse foreign actors, the characteristics of cohesion and coherence normally associated with civil society have dissipated.

The project of creating African-wide regional co-operation, stability, security and peace involves re-appropriating, re-defining the state, civil society and market nexus of the region in order to create enduring institutional arrangements capable of self-correction, learning, self-reliance and innovation. The forms created cannot be and should not be determined from without, but should draw in their creation upon the varied and rich cultures, traditions, and long historical experience of Africa. Thus civil society as a concept needs to be emancipated before it can be of use for building African regional co-operation, stability, security and peace.

References

