

Counterbalancing the African State? Should the Concept of “Civil Society” Still Feature Prominently in Donor Policy Thinking?

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Abstract

While the concept of civil society has been dismissed by many academics as being ill-defined and too vague to offer an incisive tool of analysis, this term is still widely used in the practical arena by donor agencies and ngos managing development programmes on the African continent. Academic and donor thinking on this issue have become distant. The article argues that although ‘civil society’ still has a practical application, donor policies in this area need to acknowledge some of the academic criticisms of this concept. Above all, donors need to promote ‘public advocacy’ amongst local ngos if these associations are ever to counter-balance the African state. The article is illustrated with observations made during recent fieldwork in Malawi.

Why another article on ‘civil society’? Have not Africanists exhausted the use of this concept in their writings about Africa’s economic and political development? Have we not all become tired of this term, and progressively more cynical over the failure of civil society ‘thinking’ to solve all the problems it was meant to? Certainly, in the African context, ‘civil society’ has not lived up to its 1980s and 1990s billing. Yet, as this article will argue, it would be foolish to abandon the concept altogether in our haste to move on to more fashionable academic pastures. The key is to use ‘civil society’ more realistically.

It is easy to see why civil society as a concept became so popular with scholars and practitioners in the last two decades of the twentieth century. As the Cold War entered its death throws, ideas of civil society resonated positively within different communities across the globe. In Eastern Europe, self-conscious civil society groups emerged to topple the *ancient regime*. In the words of the Polish journalist Adam Michnik, rejuvenated civil society institutions allowed “people to defend themselves against the Communist state, and, at the same time, to meet their specific needs which were not being met by the Communist state.”¹ Civil Society would also be charged with keeping post-Soviet governments true to their democratic pledges. Similarly, in the West, civil society ideas dove-tailed neatly into the political environment created by the fall-out from neo-liberal policies. After years of Thatcherism, Reaganism and their equivalents, Western societies were looking for a way of tempering neo-liberalism: they were seeking a ‘Third Way’. Exploring the possibilities of empowering civil society allowed policy-

makers to put less faith in the market than their predecessors, but avoided a wholesale reversion to state institutions.

The concept of civil society also appealed, at this time, to those interested in the economic and political development of the Third World. The concept complemented notions of an extension of the 'third wave' of democracy. In Africa's case, civil society was seen as the antidote to the post-colonial developmental state that had failed economically and had become damagingly authoritarian. Indeed, investing in civil society was seen as a counter-attack on authoritarianism. If a political culture could be nurtured where there was strong associational activity outside the state, then predatory regimes could be removed from power and their successors kept in check. A buoyant civil society would, it was anticipated, underpin the new democracies that dramatically emerged across the continent throughout the 1990s.

Yet, today, hopes for civil society in Africa are somewhat tarnished amongst academics. The concept does not capture the interest amongst scholars it once did. There are dramatically fewer articles in the journals imaginatively using this concept than there were a decade ago.²

Some of this disillusionment with 'civil society' stems from the fact that it is a contested term with many definitions. Even after 25 years of debate, there are still almost as many notions of what civil society actually is as academics who have tried to 'tame' this concept. Throughout the history of political thought this has always been the case, with the term drifting in and out of scholarly consideration. Plato, for example, saw civil society as a unified whole, while Aristotle identified an aggregation of different associations. Later, de Tocqueville wrote of his worries over the state's "administrative suffocation of civil society", while Hegel argued that civil society cannot remain civil unless subject to "the higher surveillance of the state".³ Adam Ferguson emphasised civil society's independence from the state, while Gramsci showed how the state was instrumental in shaping civil society.⁴

Africanists, in the last two decades, have also struggled to reach a consensus over the true meaning of this concept. Some scholars are content to consider all associational activity between the family and the state as civil society. Others would exclude market organisation from this definition. There is also disagreement over whether a group has to be acting in the public interest to be included in this category, ruling-out 'inward' looking associations such as social and sports clubs. In this respect, is civil society merely another expression for 'associational life', or is it more political in essence? Jean-François Bayart defines civil society as those groups who are in conflict with the state.⁵ Others see such organisations employed in a combination of conflict *and* co-operation with the state. Such confusion over even the basics of what civil society is, let alone the lack of agreement over its role in the continent's economic and political development, have led many Africanists to seek more accurate analytical tools to aid their studies. In this vein, Thomas Callaghey argued: "Study political transitions; study the

emergence of new forms of associational life, changing political cultures, new social movements, new interactions between groups, new definitions of political space, and so on. Do we really need the 'concept' of 'civil society' to do this? Does it help us do these things better? I seriously doubt it."⁶

It is not the aim of this article however to join this debate over the definition of civil society, nor to judge the term's worth. Instead, the present work seeks to highlight the fact that outside this fading academic exchange of views, 'civil society' is still alive and kicking. In particular, it is a concept readily used by the donor community in their contemporary policies to assist development on the African continent, and elsewhere. USAID, for example, currently declares on its website: "USAID is working to strengthen commitment to an independent and politically active civil society in developing countries. The range of groups receiving USAID assistance includes coalitions of professional associations, civic education groups, women's rights organizations, business and labor federations, media groups, bar associations, environmental activist groups, and human rights monitoring organizations."⁷ Other Western state agencies have similar civil capacity building programmes, as do many non-government organisations.⁸ In the practical, if not the academic, arena of 'development', civil society is still very much in vogue.

This is not surprising given the opportunities that local, Southern civil society partners give the donor community. These associations are a conduit through which development programmes can be organised and funded, reducing donor reliance on agencies of the African state which had been part of the problem in the past. Civil society's relatively untarnished reputation of probity and efficiency, when compared to the state, make local ngos attractive to potential collaborators. There is also the incentive that working with civil society provides donors closer links with grass-roots organisations within recipient societies, allowing the most needy to help themselves. Overall, there is a belief that the long term effect of supporting such groups will collectively build the capacity of civil societies to check and counter-balance the power of their respective states.

With academics becoming frustrated with the concept of 'civil society' and practitioners within the donor community still having faith in the term, there is a danger that exchanges between these two sets of professionals will become distant. What this article will argue is that, when it comes to civil society, academics and practitioners still need to learn from each other. The evidence below will show that civil society does continue to have a practical application in African economic and political developmental processes. The positive results from numerous community projects testify to this fact. Yet, donors should be aware that a more nuanced set of civil society programmes would be likely to return even better results. Donor policy strategists need to take on board some of the academics' misgivings with civil society as a concept. This

more nuanced approach, avoiding the use of civil society as a blunt instrument, would potentially bear richer fruit.

This article's objective is to highlight six 'realities' that need to be addressed in development projects aimed at supporting civil society. These 'realities' are: longevity (civil society projects need to be sustainable), depth (ideas of 'civil society' need to be infused in communities beyond urban elites), reproduction (civil society needs to be more robust to avoid state co-optation), location (civil society should reflect indigenous values), breadth (civil society should represent a wide spectrum of groups), and function (civil society groups should be more than just service providers for international donors). Occasional observations noted in recent fieldwork in Malawi will be made to illustrate the need for donors to take these highlighted 'realities' seriously.⁹

Longevity: civil society projects need to be sustainable

The donor community has put a great deal of energy into the objective of 'sustainability' in recent times. The all too frequent phenomena of development projects collapsing soon after outside funding is removed is well known, and is now addressed routinely in donor policy. Yet, civil society programmes are particularly vulnerable to the necessarily short-term nature of project funding. The objectives of building a sustainable civil society within a country, and the difficulty of providing tangible proof that this has occurred as a result of a particular project, sits uneasily with the demands for an 'outcome' based, time limited, donor budget cycle. How does a programme officer measure the success of attempts to broaden the capacity of civil society within a country? Where is the proof that this stated aim has been met? It is often easier for development workers to concentrate on narrower, materially focused projects that can provide concrete results, that can be reported back to managers. By contrast, successful civil society programmes will have to run for decades before their ultimate goals are reached. For ideas of civil society advocacy to take hold, and be sustained at a grass roots level, donors will have to offer encouragement and support consistently, requiring a long-term commitment to local associational groups. Few donor agencies have the resources or reporting structures to accommodate such long-term projects.

Faced with these realities, many agencies direct their 'civil society' programmes at a small number of groups within the host society. These become the specialist 'civil society' partners. Such groups can be sustained on a more long-term basis, and provide outputs that can be directly measured against 'civil society' aims and objectives. However, making civil society capacity building the remit of such a narrow collection of local ngos, rather than infusing these ideas at a broader grass roots level, has inherent dangers. Although much good work has been done in this field by elite groups, two significant problems arise from this narrow donor strategy: a potential failure to spread civil society advocacy deeper in to a society, and the possibility that

civil society will fail to reproduce itself after any serious political transition (both these dangers are discussed below).

Depth: ideas of 'civil society' need to be infused in communities beyond urban elites

The concept of a 'briefcase ngo' is well known within donor circles. These ngos consist of a small urban/skilled leadership, who have only rudimentary contacts with the communities they claim to represent. Yet, all too often, the weak links between these individuals and their constituency are overlooked by donors in favour of what these groups can offer. Above all, briefcase ngos have the necessary 'grantmanship'. Contained within this leadership is an ability to draft coherent project proposals, produce audited budgets, and write monitoring reports. These individuals have the education, knowledge and experience of working with donors, enabling them to meet the procedural needs of international project managers. Such elite groups are able to propose a valuable programme, run it, and report back to their sponsors. In these respects such organisations are ideal partners for donors.

As time has progressed, donors have reacted to this reality, and sought to also 'empower' individuals and groups beyond the urban leadership. For the reasons outlined above, however, this is less likely to be the case with projects addressing issues of 'civil society'. Civil society advocacy seems to be an issue that continues to be dealt with by elite groups. Grassroots health, educational and poverty reduction projects have flourished in the last couple of decades, where similar, local civil society advocacy programmes have been absent. As one official within the main civil society umbrella organisation in our case study country of Malawi puts it: issues of civil society "do not get much exposure beyond town".¹⁰

Given that donors, by necessity, need to deal with groups that can provide a degree of grantmanship, it is inevitable that elites within a society become the main conduit and local managers of development programmes. The key, however, is to ensure that this elite represents a wider constituency, and that the ideas of advocacy and of monitoring the state spread beyond just this leadership class. All too often it is the elite themselves who benefit most from civil society education and training initiatives. Indeed, recent fieldwork investigating associational groups in Malawi revealed a good grasp of civil society and advocacy thinking amongst (urban) ngo leaders. Several had attended national and international conferences to discuss the role of civil society within the development agenda. Familiarity with these ideas beyond this elite, however, was sparse.¹¹ Civil society as a concept and a tool remains the preserve of leaders.

Such a shallow section of society self-consciously representing civil society, acting as the state's 'watchdog', is dangerous. There is a risk that if such advocacy skills are only contained within an elite, then civil society will fail to reproduce itself.

Reproduction: Civil Society Needs to be More Robust to Avoid State Co-Optation

An active civil society lacking depth is vulnerable to state co-optation. The state is able to isolate civil society leaders, divorce them from their constituents, and satisfy the 'watchdogs' by meeting elite leadership interests, rather than meeting the demands of civil society as a whole. Civil society groups may still challenge the state in certain areas, and on certain terms, but co-optation means that state actors do not have to concern themselves too much with grassroots interests. Civil society 'consultation' takes place at an elite level, within networks and committees in the capital city, and not locally. In short, where associational activity lacks depth within a society, state actors and civil society leaders can come to an accommodation without being too troubled by opinion held deeper in society. In this respect, international donors need to pay attention to the link between civil society leaders and their constituents, as well as the more obvious link between civil society leaders and state actors.

An obvious symptom of the fragility of a civil society is too often displayed should a country under go a major political transition. Civil society simply struggles to reproduce itself. De Tocqueville wrote in his work *Recollections*, "If many conservatives defend government only in order to preserve gratifications and positions, I have to say many opportunists seemed to attack the government only in order to achieve this."¹² Reflecting upon these words, it is fair to say that civil society may have correctly been accredited with promoting the transition from the one-party state in Africa to multi-party democracy during the 1990s, but a question has to remain about the state of health of civil society after this transition.

During the 1980s and 1990s elites mobilised within civil society, expanded the political space they inhabited, and then successfully challenged and replaced the old ruling class and their failing predatory states. The fact that these activists came from civil society, however, provided no guarantee that associational activity would be promoted in the future. The new rulers did not necessarily prioritise the building of a new positive and productive relationship between civil society and the state after the multi-party elections. In several post-transition African countries we have seen civil society activists capture the state, and then the new government revert to type and return to old authoritarian ways. Instead of opening up political space for civil society to develop and reproduce, the new rulers share the reflexes of their predecessors, with civil society organisations once again being co-opted or repressed by the state.

This problem is compounded by the fact that so many of the original 1980s and 1990s civil society activists moved from their civil society associations into the instructions of the state as part of the political transition. Most of the poachers turned into game-keepers over night. This

has left civil society bereft of organisers and experience to challenge the familiar state dominance. If a civil society is to survive such a political transition it needs strength in depth to make sure associational leaders are replaced and pressure is maintained on the state. With 'civil society' issues still being the preserve of the elite, however, this strength in depth remains illusive in Africa. There is a danger history will repeat itself. Just as nationalist leaders, forty years ago, emerged from civil society at decolonisation to capture the state, and then largely abandoned civil society in favour of one-party government and their own authoritarian rule, it is now possible that the civil society leadership groups of the 1990s will also hinder future associational activity.

One only has to look at the case of Zambia to see this pattern. Activists from labour organisations led the movement for multi-party democracy, and the union leader Frederick Chiluba replaced Kenneth Kaunda as head of state in 1991. Yet, once in power, Chiluba used his position within the state to hinder political opposition and obstructed the reproduction of civil society. Given the problem that so many of Zambia's civil society activists were now actually part of the MMD government, choosing to work for the state rather than remain in civil society, civil society reverted to its customary post-colonial role as a poor relation to the state. The path to democracy is not always assured. It is wise to remember, in a different context, that the Nazi party in Germany gained power as a result of building the very civil society institutions it then destroyed on accession to government.

In Malawi we also see traces of this same phenomenon. President Hastings Banda's centralised and authoritarian regime was finally removed by multi-party elections in 1994. Groups from within civil society had successfully challenged the state and Bakili Muluzi, head of the United Democratic Front (UDF), took over the reins of power. Despite a promising start, by the turn of the century, the UDF government had become unpopular. There were allegations of vote rigging, corruption, and Muluzi was seeking to manipulate the new constitution to win himself a third term in office. Such acts were familiar to Malawians who had lived through the Banda era. Importantly in this case, however, Malawian civil society did manage to reproduce itself, and eventually mounted a campaign against Muluzi's proposed constitutional amendment. The so-called 'third term' debate was won, and Muluzi was forced to stand aside in 2004.

Muluzi's climb-down was no foregone conclusion. There had been a lull in the effectiveness of civil society groups after the 1994 elections. With so many civil society campaigners joining Muluzi's government, Malawian civil society lacked leadership and organisation. It was only the third term debate, in part encouraged by international donors, and Muluzi's blatant attempt to subvert the constitution to his own ends that reinvigorated civil society. Prior to this, associational groups shorn of their 1990s leadership showed an unhealthy deference to

Muluzi's style of rule. It was almost a decade before civil society reclaimed the political space it had won earlier and started to challenge the state.¹³

The cases of Zambia and Malawi illustrate that it is one thing for civil society groups to defeat an authoritarian regime, it is another for civil society to survive the subsequent political transition and then take up a position of counter-balancing the state. Donors need to support projects that ensure civil society groups can survive losing their leaders to government. A capacity to reproduce needs to be installed. If this is not ensured, there is a danger that civil society has to be rebuilt from scratch after each political transition. Once again, the need is for civil society to be supported at its grass roots, as well as at the elite level.

Location: Civil Society Should Reflect Indigenous Values

Leaning on the work of Alexis de Tocqueville once more, the Frenchman observed of the United States of America in the nineteenth century that:

As soon as several of the inhabitants of the United States have taken up an opinion or a feeling which they wish to promote in the world, they look out for mutual assistance; and as soon as they have found one another out, they combine.

By comparison, de Tocqueville noted of the French

When the revolution started, it would have been impossible to find, in most parts of France, even ten men used to acting in concert and defending their interests without appealing to central power for aid.¹⁴

There is a danger that donors today are distorting African civil society. They have become the 'central power' which African associational groups appeal to, and in the manner that they provide aid, international ngos are dictating the agenda of these groups.

In a society starved of economic resources, there will always be individuals willing to establish ngos to implement projects sought by international donors. The themes that successfully attract funding are well known, and there is no shortage of local ngos bidding for project money in these defined areas. Indeed, one can find numerous local ngos that have developed into multi-faceted organisations. They are as capable of delivering health projects as they are educational programmes, or addressing the needs of cooperative workers. Many such groups have moved considerably beyond their initial declared mission, following the funds available and adapting to the changing agenda of the donor community. Yet, does assisting these groups to deliver services in these particular areas genuinely build the capacity of civil society? Beyond the problem of "focus derailment" created by the changing donor agenda, what type of civil society are international donors helping to create? For a civil society to best counter-balance the state, should not associational groups represent the interests and aspirations of the indigenous population, rather than delivering a western agenda?

Evidence that civil society organisations in Africa tend to be responsible to donor needs first, and local demands second, can be found in the nature of the projects they oversee. Many donors look for partners to promote women's rights, children's rights, general human rights, and environmental conservation. These projects, however worthy, are not born of the demands of indigenous civil society. It is a case of donors importing post-material social values to Africa. Indigenous demands would be far more basic and material, but as one ngo worker puts it, you are "told what you need by the west".¹⁵

Even if one accepts that donors are promoting universal values and not just western ones, the nature of their projects skews the nature of civil society in the target state. Groups within African society are being empowered beyond their indigenous strength. Constituencies enjoying popular support are passed over, while minority groups are promoted. Westerners select who should be the leading and most powerful associations within African civil societies. USAID, for example, runs several programmes on the continent promoting democracy and pluralism, yet this agency is careful who it includes in this project. No left-leaning or Islamist groups are part of this civil society capacity building.¹⁶ As Marina Ottaway points out: "The problem with civil society assistance is that the political pluralism it promotes is not rooted in social pluralism but is often a free-floating political pluralism without a real social base."¹⁷

To help capacitate civil society, donors should be looking not to construct groups meeting the needs of alien priorities. Resources should be directed at building the capacity of groups right across society, helping all to express themselves. It is not up to outside donors to pick and choose which groups are valuable within a civil society. A breadth of views, after all, is the mark of pluralism and a healthy democracy. One could even argue that the most powerful indigenous groups in society should be targeted for empowering. These, after all, are the organisations that have most chance of keeping the state in check.

It is often written in both the academic and donor literature that such powerful groups do not exist in Africa. Civil society is weak. Yet, what about the organisational capacity that ushered in the end of colonialism and defeated the one-party states in the 1980s and 1990s? Africans clearly identify with clans, village groups, other ethnic identities, churches, mosques, amongst other associations. Should not these be the priority of donors seeking to help build sustainable organisations that could negotiate with and challenge the state? Would not these indigenous community organisations be more legitimate and representative of the people? These are the organisations with genuine popular support. After all, the idea of civil society consisting of voluntary, not-for-profit interest groups, promoting issues such as liberal rights and environmental concerns, is a very western view. And it is certainly desirable for the more powerful indigenous movements within Africa to be working in harness with the state, rather

than disengaging from it. Donor resources should be committed to bringing indigenous groups into the political process.

Breadth: Civil Society Should Represent a Wide Spectrum Of Groups

Building upon these ideas of 'depth' and reflecting indigenous interests, donor projects should also encourage a breadth of representation within African civil society. If capacity is to be built, and these associations are truly to be a counter-balance to the African state, more people have to be represented by civil society advocacy. Associational activity should be built upon a broad range of interests, with inter-locking memberships bridging social cleavages, not reinforcing them. If donors concentrate on supporting only certain sections of society, then one faction of society will be promoted at the expense of another. The 'watch-dog' role is best maintained when all have access to associational advocacy, with all major cleavages in society being prominently represented, and more minor interests respected.

Yet, this representative width is rare within African societies. We have already seen how groups tend to cluster around certain issues, resourced by international donors. As well as promoting issues not necessarily regarded as the most pressing by locals, donors also tend to shy away from potentially controversial areas of civil society. Only interests that are 'ideologically sanitised' gain support. It is rare, for example, for groups advocating more radical left or right wing ideas to secure backing; nor do projects overtly ethnically organised. Certain religious organisations will also be left out in the cold.

Obviously, donors will not want to support all areas of civil society activity in a target state. Criminal elements of civil society, for example, are usually best left alone, and western governments and ngos have responsibilities to their citizens and supporters to fulfil defined missions, but donors need to be careful not to distort the civil societies they work in. By picking and choosing existing groups they wish to sponsor, and by encouraging new associations to form around 'alien' ideas, donors usually narrow the civil societies they seek to capacitate. Conscious effort is rarely made to increase the number of interests able to express themselves in the political arena. Certain interests are promoted, giving them an unfair advantage in the internal struggle that shapes the very nature of civil society. Consequently, across the continent we find the same issues being the most prominent, run by personnel sharing similar social backgrounds, giving certain 'classes' and ideas the greatest representation. It is then this distorted civil society that is charged with counter-balancing the state. The state is forced to listen to the sponsored interests, but has few incentives to accommodate the less (internationally, if not locally) popular sections of society who do not receive this external backing. Perhaps if civil society groups of a more diverse nature enjoyed such resources, African states would be faced with a broader spectrum of interests to accommodate, and thus be more representative of their citizens.

Function: Civil Society Groups Should Be More than Just Service Providers for International Donors

Perhaps the greatest challenge for international donors with respect to their 'civil society' projects is to remember the broader agenda. Civil society groups are meant to be opinion formers and active public advocates, not just service providers.¹⁸ Associational groups, if they are to counter-balance the state need to interact with government. Public demands should be aggregated and channelled, and the state challenged. This public advocacy role is the key to civil society activity promoting democratic development. All too often, however, African civil society groups fail in this advocacy role. Instead of forcing rights and alternative interests on to the state's agenda, associations are content to look inward, prioritising their own immediate parochial interests and survival.

This failure of public advocacy is often compounded by the behaviour of international donors. The key function of most donor 'civil society' projects seems to be primarily to find a reliable service provider in the host country. If an aid agency wants to initiate, for example, a micro credit model or an agricultural programme in a certain part of the world, it looks for partners on the ground to implement it. The only 'civil society' thinking contained within this project comes from the fact that experience has shown that the state is not always the most reliable partner to rely on for managing these projects. Cooperation with a civil society organisation is sought instead. This project may help sustain a civil society group while it manages a programme on a donor's behalf. The donor's support, however, does not in itself transform this organisation into a public advocacy group counter-balancing the state.

Indeed, the short-term nature of project funding mentioned above actually hinders such groups developing this public advocacy role. The 'output' demands of donors invite groups to concentrate on delivering the service they are contracted to do, rather than fulfil a wider advocacy role. The partner therefore concentrates on day-to-day service provision, meeting its contractual obligations, filling out forms, returning accounts, writing reports, and the securing of funds for the group's future survival. Advocacy is often at the bottom of the list. There is little time and few resources for this broader role.

Donor agencies seem to be relying on the gap between service provision and advocacy to be bridged 'organically'. Perhaps it is the idea that if enough civil society groups are externally supported within a country, and capacity is built to make these groups self-sustaining (breaking out of the external funding cycle), these groups will automatically comprise a strong civil society able to counter-balance the state. There will be strength in numbers. The reality is, however, that such a strategy may underwrite a range of important services being provided within a society, and it may even encourage economic stimulation, but ultimately these groups will still

be a series of isolated associations concentrating on parochial issues. They will remain service providers, not public advocates. The idea of, and rewards for, advocacy have to be built into projects to encourage groups to consider their role as advocates.

USAID's work in Malawi underlines this difficulty of bridging the gap between underwriting services within civil society and developing groups that are political advocates for citizens. Like all donor agencies, USAID concentrates on the basics: health, education and poverty reduction. These are projects where it is easy to show success, and where USAID has made a difference.¹⁹ Local partners are therefore sought within civil society and capacity built to enable USAID to help deliver these services. Thanks to this agency, many lives have been improved in Malawi and several civil society groups now have a more secure footing. Yet, have these projects helped Malawian civil society counter-balance the state?

USAID does fund a number of dedicated 'advocacy' projects addressing this issue. Work has been conducted with groups of journalists and MPs in this area, with workshops organised to discuss these ideas. USAID has also facilitated interaction between a group of Malawian economic advisers and their government. Is it right, however, that political advocacy is isolated into these specialist projects amongst elites? Should not all donor projects contain an element of public advocacy training?

Indeed, USAID does pay some attention to advocacy in its 'bread and butter' health, education and poverty reduction projects. Several Malawian school programmes, for example, have included workshops developing communication skills between parents and teachers. Roger Yochelson, USAID's Mission Director in Malawi, however, does not regard such public advocacy work to be a priority. Instead, simple service provision and capacity building has to come first, and he believes this will be the case for the "foreseeable future".²⁰

And here is the key problem when it comes to "civil society" programmes. The work of academics encouraged the switch we have seen in the last 25 years involving more donor funding being channelled through local civil society groups rather than state institutions. Scholars argue that committing resources to these associations can help build capacity and encourage advocacy, which would, in turn, protect liberal rights, and generally provide a much needed counter-balance to the predatory African state. This was the whole logic and substance of promoting civil society as a concept in the first place. Yet we are barely making progress in the initial capacity building step of this political transformation. The accompanying political advocacy promotion is trailing a long way behind.

When it comes down to it, as one programme manager puts it, with poverty and HIV/AIDS "in your face"²¹, you have to put the bulk of your resources into projects that save and improve lives. The priority of basic health and education provision is so acute, civil society remains

merely a practical concept where donors can find partners to help them address this overwhelming development agenda. However desirable public advocacy promotion programmes may be theoretically, and whatever the potential they have to improve lives, existing material projects have amore immediate pay-off, and they are easy to sell to funders and the local community. In the eyes of international donors, civil society associations, are primarily partners in service provision. The broader vocation of a political counter-balance is largely left to the academics to discuss.

Conclusions

Despite recent scepticism surrounding the concept of 'civil society' in academic literature, it would seem that this term is still highly valued amongst practitioners addressing Africa's political and economic development. Within the donor community, 'civil society' is a phrase in daily use, and considerable resources continue to be committed to projects articulating this concept across the continent. Few practitioners share the distrust of the scholars.

On one level this gap between donors and academics does not matter. Practitioners have found the concept of 'civil society' useful for finding local partners in target states. By building the capacity of these associational groups, much needed services can be provided, and assistance can be given at a community level, avoiding previous over-reliance on state institutions. Despite remaining dangers of inefficiency and corruption even in institutions outside the state, civil society thinking has helped donors develop local partnerships that fit more appropriately into modern styles of project management.

Yet, the fact that donors use 'civil society' in this selective manner, fits squarely into the pattern of how the concept has been used through history. As it was shown above, each generation seems to take what they can from this term, failing to satisfactorily define it, or to use the concept to its full capacity. Practitioners today are narrowly using 'civil society' as a tool to identify potential partners to deliver services. The wider agenda of assisting these associations to be public advocates, enabling them to counter-balance the state, seems to be largely ignored. This public aspect of civil society has been overwhelmed by the necessity of putting service provision first. It was very apparent when talking to Malawian ngo personnel that most regarded the primary role of civil society to be the provision of material services the state cannot. Association activity, aided by international donor resources, was therefore complementing the state, rarely its challenger. Amongst these individuals the concept of public advocacy was not widely recognised.

In that 'civil society' has been used successfully to help establish numerous projects in Africa that have saved and improved lives, one can have no complaint. There is, however, a great deal more that can be drawn from this concept when it comes to political development on the continent. Only when the issues of longevity, reproduction, width, depth and location are

addressed, alongside public advocacy awareness being built into each and every donor project, will representative forces be built outside government intuitions, capable of counter-balancing the African state. This counter-balance is as important for Africa's economic development, as it is for the continent's future political progress.

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- ⁷ http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/democracy_and_governance/technical_areas/civil_society/ [10 December 2004].
- ⁸ See, for example, <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/aboutdfid/intheuk/workwithcs/cs-how-to-work-why.asp> [10 December 2004].
- ⁹ I would like to thank the UK's Economic and Social Research Council for providing funding, making the Malawi fieldwork possible. I would also like to express my appreciation to all those who agreed to be interviewed for this project.
- ¹⁰ Personal interview with Ronald Mtonga. Council for Non-Governmental Organisations In Malawi. (CONGOMA). 11 November 2004. Blantyre.
- ¹¹ A conclusion reached after visiting several Malawian civil society associations, at different stages of development, during November 2004.
- ¹² De Tocqueville, Alexis. *Recollections of Alexis de Tocquville*. London: Haverhill Press, 1948. Cited by Adam Michnik <http://www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/global/Michnik89.htm> [10 December 2004].
- ¹³ Personal interview with Robert Phiri, Head of Programmes, Public Affairs Committee (PAC), Lilongwe, 4 November 2004. And personal interview with Catherine Munthali, Executive Director, Society for the Advancement of Women, Lilongwe, 5 November 2004.
- ¹⁴ Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Ware: Wordsworth, 1998. 218. Tocqueville, Alexis de. *The Ancien régime and the French revolution*. Manchester: Collins, 1966. 223.
- ¹⁵ Personal interview with Denny Morgan, a programme manager working closely with the Gambian ngo umbrella organisation, TANGO. 27 October 2004, Coventry.

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- ¹⁶ See, for example, Al-Sayyid, Mufsapha Kamel. A clash of values: U.S. civil society aid and Islam in Egypt. **In:** Ottaway, Marina and Thomas Carothers, eds. *Funding virtue: Civil society aid and democracy promotion*. Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000.
- ¹⁷ Ottaway, Marina. Social movements, professionalization of reform, and democracy in Africa. **In:** Ottaway. *Funding virtue*. 82.
- ¹⁸ I would like to thank Bruce Baker of Coventry University, in particular, for taking time to talk to me on this issue. Personal telephone interview, 28 October 2004.
- ¹⁹ Personal interview with Roger Yochelson, Mission Director, USAID, Lilongwe. 4 November 2004.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Personal interview with Maggie O'Toole, Programme Manager, Concern Universal. 10 November 2004, Blantyre.