Perspectives on the Constituency Building and Accountability of CSOs: Missed Opportunities and The Way Forward in Transitional States

Sketch for Discussion Bangalore Leadership Forum
Sep, 2019
Context

**POLITICAL:** Diverse Interests (mainly parochial & disconnected) with historical grievances vs Nation-building and Democratization; Conflicts (ethnic based) vs Governance and Rule of law; Gender-based violence and inequities vs. robust Top-down Empowerment; Corruption and criminal HR abuses vs Accountability, Justice & Reconciliation

**ECONOMY & CLIMATE:** Backward Agrarian and Pastoralist Economy vs Manufacturing; Huge Unemployment with pervasive corruption vs State-driven inefficient Growth; All on the background of desertification, draught, poor infrastructure, double-digit inflation, etc.
Context...

**DEMOGRAPHY & EPIDEMIOLOGY:** Expanding young population with rise in life expectancy and huge illiteracy; IDPs and immigrants; double burden of communicable and non-communicable diseases

**TECHNO:** Analogue and manual to digital and automated
Ethiopia: State vs Civil Society: 1960s

• Informal local associations have been there for ages
• Civil Code to govern all voluntary organizations (the law of associations) was issued in 1960,
• By the latter part of the 1960s - a small number of professional associations registered with the Ministry of Interior
• As a formal entity (NGO, CSO) the voluntary sector goes back only to the last years of the Imperial regime.
Ethiopia: State vs Civil Society: 1970s and 80s

• 70s and 80s witnessed the two growth spurts of CSOs/NGOs enforced by the two famines
• Red Cross and Save The children Sweden were among the oldest NGOs
• Christian Relief Fund, later called CRDA, now CCRDA, was formed as an umbrella organization in 1973
• Transition from relief to rehabilitation and Development happened under the watchful eyes of military regime
Ethiopia: State vs Civil Society: Mid to late 1990s

• Quantitative and Qualitative Explosion
• Growth in the numerical strength of the sector as a whole.
• Growth in the strength and activism of local or national organizations
• Beyond relief and development: human rights, governance and advocacy programs, women’s rights, voter education, environmental advocacy, and public policy investigation and monitoring activities
• Relative decline of international NGOs
Ethiopia: State vs Civil Society: Turn of the Century

• The Elites of Political Opposition in Ethiopia have worked for or are associated with or are supported by NGOs

• The HRBA language shares visible territory with the opposition ‘manifesto’ – complementarity of messages

• NGOs control significant resource (foreign currency) – bigger than the coffee revenue – and AUDIENCE

• Part of “the 4 walls of the fence” (laws enacted on Press, Political Parties and Terrorism)
Ethiopia: State vs Civil Society: Turn of the Century

- NGOs are not CSOs
- There is pervasive ‘policy rent seeking’ within the NGO sector
- NGOs are agents of neoliberal ideology
- Huge operation cost
- Poor Accountability and Transparency (Little/No constituency base; many are ‘MoNGOs’, ‘FoNGOs’ or ‘GoNGOs’)
- Internal Brain-drain
- Some harbour and/or nurture extremism/terrorism
Ethiopia: State vs Civil Society: Turn of the Century

• NGOs bring significant resources (Foreign Currency)
• They provide domestic “green pasture”, thus moderate external brain drain
• NGOs are faster in responding to emergencies
• They are better in taking risk and modelling new ideas
Ethiopian Civil Society: The Missed Opportunity

The Contention:
During the period of explosion emerging Advocacy/Rights Institutions could have moved with speed and focus more in creating citizen’s solidarity forums across interests
CSOs: Mix of Current Players

• Most are service providers – errand boys of donors, not agenda setters
• A few emerging specialists on rights and issues were nipped in the bud
• Most rebranded fast to fit the mould and (some moult faster to remain in the good books of the powers that be)
• INGOs, some LNGOs and ‘connected personalities’, not citizens’ movements, prominent on state-CSO interface & it didn’t help
CSOs: Loose Coalition

• Partnership and CSO leadership tested in trying times
• Some were staunch and stayed the course
• Other ‘Veteran and eternal Leaders’ opted to go quiet – Wisdom? Survival?
• Quiet a few pointed accusing fingers at vocal rights NGOs, not the state
• Absence of organized citizens and communities in the movement acutely exposed
• Donors opted to take the back bench and became mediators, not influencers
Opportunities and Challenges Now

• The opening up in the background of:
  • Lost or weak institutional memory of the few rights CSOs
  • Dwindled skills and expertise on rights advocacy and campaigns
  • Acute need for conflict resolution, peace-building and national dialogue
  • Mistrust of existing NGOs by emerging informal formations (especially disenfranchised youth)

• Deficit in institutions and people with value synergy

• Some appreciation from development partners on HRBA - funding
Going Forward

• Transition reconfirmed organized people’s voices, however diverse, matter & vacuum costs!

• The focus should be on empowering genuine people’s rights movements to populate the space fast- don’t occupy it as NGOs!

• Existing stakeholders may form a consortium of INGOs, LNGOs and Donors working to support organizations based on values and rights

• ‘RIGHTS’ groups may mushroom but identifying and nurturing value-driven partnerships is a challenge (LNGOs does not mean People’s Organization)
The New Role – Generic ToC for CSOs

Stable, Peaceful & Dynamic Communities

Empowered & Engaged Citizens

Just, Prosperous & Sustainable Society

Responsive & Accountable Institutions

Strong & Networked CSOs

Empowered & Engaged Citizens

Just, Prosperous & Sustainable Society

Strong & Networked CSOs
Transition Scenarios & Program

• Rapid review of context, VMV, strategy, programs (in-house then with partners)
• Identify key scenarios, emerging challenges, risks & opportunities
• Adjustments or Transformation?
• Fingers-on-pulse, communication and agility to adapt