



Is Civil Society the Answer to Democracy and Accountability?

Civil Society in Tanzania

Civil society groups had started to form and organise in Tanzania as far back as during colonial times, rallying for our independence. The following years saw civil society being less of a focus as the nation sought to integrate and consolidate its independence. It was not until the 1980s where there was a 'mushrooming' of civil society organizations as a reaction to the economic and social crisis in Tanzania. The Tanzanian government realised its own inability to provide certain services and civil society started to come together around religion, regions, ethnicity, professions, environment, education and health to name a few. More recently, there has been increasing recognition that civil society is essential for democracy and accountability in the country as it ensures that the voice of the people continues to be represented in between elections. Despite all this, we continue to hear descriptions of Tanzanian civil society as weak, fragmented, and even bogus! Can civil society be the backbone for accountability and democracy in Tanzania?

The policy maker says:

Our civil society is weak and fragmented. That is what we see. We try to consult with them on policy issues but it is hard. There are many CSOs with different views. How can we tell which ones really represent the voice of the majority in Tanzania? If they became more coordinated and were able to agree among themselves and present us with one or even several views, it would make our job a lot easier. Of course we know that we must be accountable to the people, but too much consultation means that it takes longer to make decisions and we cannot always afford the time. These same people will criticize us when they do not see improvements quickly.

Are we open to consultation? – yes we are! To prove this, we have taken many steps to encourage dialogue with civil society! The question is - who should we consult, on what issues, and how do we present these issues so that people understand them properly? It is hard enough to organise and consult with the few donors that are here, what of the 8000 plus registered non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and all the other organisations in civil society who all have something to say? Many times the views we receive contradict each other. How can we tell which ones are genuine? Many of these groups are also very quick to criticize us, sometimes without even understanding the issue at hand. Why do they never talk about our achievements and all the hard work we are doing to make life better for Tanzanians? To make matters worse, they have no alternative solutions or strategies to offer. Is this really fair?

If government is expected to be accountable, should we not expect the same from CSOs? Each year we grant exemptions worth over 200 billion shillings. This is also public money. A good number of these exemptions go to NGOs. Yet, when we ask them to be transparent about their sources of funding, many of them fail to do so. In a democratic society, citizens have rights and responsibilities. Those who demand rights must also live up to their responsibilities. Until they do so, civil society in Tanzanian cannot expect to be taken seriously.

The NGO activist says:

Every 5 years those who want to be in government make promises to the people about what they will

do if they are elected. Once they become government, someone needs to make sure they continue to remember what they have promised and to remind them when they forget. The Government will always talk about the good things they are doing for the people. We do not need to repeat this. Our job is to say what the government will not say, to make sure that the public has the full story. Finding solutions to our development problems is a primary role of Government. That is why our taxes pay for over 30,000 public servants. If we already pay for them to do this, why should we need to do their job for them?

We understand that the government may not always like what we have to say. However, if we really claim to be a democracy, we cannot allow them to silence critical voices. This way they will know where they need to do better in order to live up to the expectations of the voters.

We in civil society try to represent the views of the minorities who are often left out. If we insist on speaking with one voice, what we say will be so diluted that we will no longer represent the interests of the minority and we will therefore not be doing our job.

It is the role of Government to offer solutions. That is what they promise to do during election campaigns and that is why we elect them. We do not pretend to be able to play the role of government, although we fully agree that we should help them to do this whenever we can. We do this by sharing information in a way that generates public debate. We cannot have real development if we only allow one point of view to be heard. If we encourage healthy public debate, we will generate new ideas and lasting solutions will be found.

If everyone understood their roles clearly, and these roles were respected and upheld, civil society in Tanzania would not be weak at all. In fact the successes we have had in changing history, such as the activism and campaign that eventually led to the *Sexual Offences Special Provisions Act of 1998*, are evidence that we can be very strong. However, our roles have become confused and we seem to be losing our direction.

The Development Partner says:

In the current context of General Budget Support, the government of Tanzania has taken ownership of the national development process which is governed by the National Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty (MKUKUTA). Tanzania has tried hard to implement many reforms aimed at long term poverty reduction. However, if Tanzania wants to really reduce poverty, the entire country has to be involved, not just the government. The role of civil society is very clear; to promote effective and accountable governments and help pro-poor development by filling the gap between the government and the private sector in the delivery of services. This means that civil society needs to be active to mobilize citizens and engage in coordination, advocacy, and dialogue with government.

There is no question that a strong, active and vibrant civil society is central to the development of any country and for democracy to really work.

While there are pockets of civil society that occasionally show strength, for the most part, they are largely concentrated in urban areas. The initiatives to reform government are not well

Jukwaa discusses a public topic. Three fictional people's points of view on the issue are presented, and the reader is encouraged to consider all three of them to see if their own opinion is represented. If your opinion is not here, let us know what you think! Readers are encouraged to discuss the issue and respond to Policy Forum by email, by post or through the website. Readers are also encouraged to ask questions if they would like to find out more information about the issue. Finally, readers are encouraged to use Jukwaa to stimulate dialogue in their community and with their leaders.

known or understood within civil society. Even the strong NGOs struggle to make Government listen to them on their own and they even sometimes ask us to intervene on their behalf.

Having said this, we do see a move in the right direction. The recent advocacy around the Freedom of Information Bill was a clear sign that when CSOs work together, they can effectively influence government.

A well-functioning civil society cannot come from outside. It needs to grow from within the country. Many of us would like to see a stronger, more vibrant civil society and would welcome ideas about how we can support this better.

Do you think civil society can be the backbone to accountability and democracy?

With the 'mushrooming' of different organisations that belong to civil society, the question asked is whether or not these organizations truly represent the people of Tanzania and more specifically, the poor and marginalised who often do not have a voice. Looking at what we as Tanzanians expect from our government, can civil society provide that voice for us and increase accountability and democracy in our country? Is civil society something that is needed in Tanzania and what is the role of such organisations? Is there something more that civil society can do for us as Tanzanians? Please contact us with any comments or ideas you may have. Our country can only become more democratic and accountable with all of your voices!

Civil society is good for accountability and democracy	Civil society is not good for accountability and democracy
Organised civil society is able to ensure that the voice of the people continues to be important to elected governments even in between elections.	There are many different organisations in civil society with different opinions. When the options become too many or the choices become too difficult it becomes easier to listen to those with the loudest voices. This means that the strong, well resourced CSOs are given priority over smaller, less organised groups.
Civil Society provides a forum for individuals and minorities who are often left out of the official dialogue process with government to be represented.	Civil society must also be held accountable. If this does not happen, we end up with 'bogus' organisations that do not represent the interests of citizens.
Civil society sometimes delivers services where government is unable to reach. They can therefore help government be more effective in going its job.	Too much participation can make decision-making slower. Sometimes the issues are complicated and uninformed participation can lead to worse decisions than would have been taken with no participation at all.

Definitions:

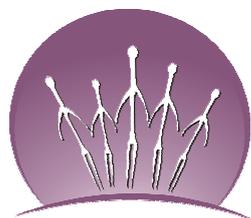
Democracy: this is a system whereby the country's decisions are to be made directly or indirectly by the majority of its citizens through fair elections.

Civil Society/ CSOs/NGOs: Civil society is non-profit, organised groups, clubs and associations in society that operate independently from the government and the state. Examples of civil society organizations (CSOs), can include, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), environmental movements, media associations, women's groups, organised local communities and trade unions. Civil society can be organised at the local, national and international level.

Governance: looks at the traditions, institutions and processes that determine how power of the government is exercised, how citizens are given a voice, and how decisions are made on issues of public concern.

General Budget Support: This is the current mechanism used by development partners to provide development aid to the government of Tanzania. Donors and other agencies used to put money into specific projects but now all the money is to go directly to the Ministry of Finance and is included in the national budget. This is to increase country ownership in poverty reduction.

Send us your comments!



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About Policy Forum: Policy Forum is a network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This growing network currently has over 50 member organizations, all of which are registered in Tanzania. The aim of Policy Forum is to make policies work better for the people of Tanzania, and especially for Tanzanians living in poverty. As a member-led network, Policy Forum strives to enhance and augment the voice of ordinary citizens in national policy processes while advocating for poverty reduction, equity and democratization in Tanzania. Policy Forum's work has three main areas of focus: local governance, public money and active citizen voice.

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*Background photograph by R. Van den Bergh