

# Knowledge and research – theory and practice for Dialogue and Dissent

Keynote speech at Oxfam Novib seminar ‘Knowledge and Research: Theory and Practice for Dialogue and Dissent’

## **Désiré Assogbavi**

*On the 9 January 2019, Oxfam Novib, in collaboration with the INCLUDE Platform, organized the seminar ‘Knowledge and Research: Theory and Practice for Dialogue and Dissent’. Researchers from various countries working on the research programme ‘New roles of CSOs for inclusive development’, staff of CSOs and NGOs, and staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Netherlands involved with the policy framework for Dialogue and Dissent came together to discuss and reflect on knowledge and experience concerning the role of civil society in influencing pro-poor policies. Désiré Assogbavi was one of the speakers and shares the following keynote speech.*

Today, we aim to have a conversation about building bridges between different stakeholders – including academic researchers, researchers working in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), practitioners and policymakers – and we seek linkages and collaboration among those different actors when it comes to generating knowledge and evidence in support of civil society taking up its role in pro-poor policies. Under the ‘New roles of CSOs for inclusive development’ (the Assumptions Programme), we reflect on the following three sub-themes:

- Evolving relationship between global, regional, national and local civil society actors
- Legitimacy and effectiveness of civil society organizations (CSOs) in influencing
- Stretching civic space in practice

While discussing this, we should be deliberately guided by how we generate, use and integrate evidence from academia, practitioners and NGOs in order to increase impact.

## **Evolving relationship between global, regional, national and local civil society actors**

There are many reasons for universities and NGOs/CSOs to explore working together to influence policy and practice. NGOs and CSOs can build on the trust enjoyed by university research, while universities can capitalize on NGOs and CSOs’ success in reaching policy and practice.

NGO research is rooted in real life – the experiences of partners and communities. NGOs are pioneers in participatory methods and their media teams are quick to make their findings noticed by policymakers. NGO people are ‘doers’ and activists, with little time for theorizing. They think in terms of guidelines and toolkits. They tell stories that stick in the minds of policymakers. On the other hand, research from universities is better structured. As academics, they have the education to make research smarter and they enjoy more credibility. They can take a more long-term reflective perspective, which activists often lack. Research from universities is the most trusted, but the least used, source of evidence. NGO research is

generally less trusted than university research, but their output is far more likely to be read than that of academia. On a timescale, the focus of NGOs is urgent, immediate and often in response to events. Academics work to a different rhythm, both in terms of the issues they address and the way they respond to them.

So, there is a strong need for more ‘knowledge brokers’, not only to bridge the gap between science and policy, but also to synthesize and transform evidence into an effective and usable form for policy and practice. We should talk to each other early on: academics should not wait until they have written a paper before looking for an NGO or knowledge broker to help disseminate its message. At the same time, NGOs (or donors) should not decide their policy line, then commission an academic to do policy-based evidence making. We should create research ideas together. Donors, could also help by encouraging collaboration through 50/50 funding, half for action and half for research. Better cooperation among those actors would lead to better policies – policies that meet the most important and urgent needs of the people.

I have spent 15 years of my career seeking to promote impactful citizen’s participation at national and Pan African levels. I would like to share a few stories on how the actions of NGO actors have had a serious influence on policies. In 2007, Oxfam, the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) and Safer World published a report titled *Africa’s Missing Billions*<sup>1</sup>, showing how Africa suffers enormously from conflict and armed violence, costing the continent around USD 18 billion per year and seriously derailing its development. It was the fruit of a collaboration by NGO researchers, then later used by NGO advocates to influence important policies at the continental and regional levels. That report catalysed a Summit of African Union (AU) heads of state and governments in Tripoli, Libya in 2009. The report of the Summit, drafted by the African Union Commission, is extensively quoted this report.<sup>2</sup> At the Summit, a detailed plan of action<sup>3</sup> was adopted, including institutional reforms, to deal with the conflicts in Africa. This was a direct result of the action by NGO/CSO researchers and activists at various levels. The report has also been a strong catalyst for the signing and ratification of the Arms Trade Treaty by many African governments.

However, the publication of a report in the media is not enough to bring about policy impact. Activists have to create an influencing space, but also use existing invited space, to showcase their findings. Local organizations have identified victims and survivors of violations, convinced one or two progressive states to put the issue on the agenda, and brought the victims and survivors to speak directly to the Peace and Security Council of the AU. I have seen an ambassador crying when a Somali woman brought by a local partner described to the Council how she was raped. Personal stories such as this can have great impact. But these reports are usually strongly criticized by academia, because of lack of academic rigour. Publishing NGOs have recognized the issues linked to research methodology. But, despite this, the policy impact is there.

In 2014, Oxfam published a global inequality report<sup>4</sup> with concrete suggestions for action by policymakers in order to tackle inequality. This report catalysed a special session of the AU

Peace and Security Commission on the issue and its links to conflict and humanitarian challenges. The session gave important policy guidance to other organs of the AU and its member states on how to tackle the issue, including dealing with Illicit financial flows.

Here again, the findings were not kept on the shelves of libraries or merely uploaded onto a website. Activists had to co-create space 'conspiratorially' with friendly governments, and the result is that the AU and its member states have become aware of the findings. Several ambassadors have formally written to receive copies of the report. Once this happens, then local civil society can follow up at the national level. In addition, the recommendations from the reports made it into the AU's strategic plan of action. In a similar case, a paper by NGOs promoting universal health coverage during the Ebola outbreak convinced a number of governments to come on board and support the agenda. So research by NGOs/CSOs can have a powerful impact.

### **Legitimacy and effectiveness of influencing by CSOs**

I would like to say a few words on the legitimacy and effectiveness of influencing by CSOs, but also on the relationship between global national and local civil society. Civic space is defined as the set of conditions that determine the extent to which members of society, both as individuals and in informal or organized groups, are able to freely, effectively and without discrimination exercise their basic civil rights. Civic space is the foundation of any open and democratic society. When civic space is open, citizens and their formations are able to organize, participate and communicate without hindrance. In doing so, they are able to claim their rights and influence the political and social structures around them. Civic space enables citizens to participate and hold governments and the private sector to account. Civic space is, therefore, a critical enabler in the fight against poverty and pursuit of social justice.

The legitimacy of civil society participation at the international level was affirmed by the UN Charter<sup>5</sup>, which states that the United Nations Economic and Social Council may consult with NGOs on matters within its competence. In a prosperous and democratic society, the state and a vibrant civil society are two sides of the same coin and complement each other. Civil society must be seen as a reservoir of social capital capable of contributing to all aspects of a country's development including health, education, peace and security.

The influence of civil society in national and continental policy making does not diminish the relevance of governmental or inter-governmental processes, but rather enhances it. If we look at the area of peace and security, for example, because of its immersion in society, civil society is able to contribute to peace-building initiatives and social cohesion. Civil society has shown its capacity to organize, collect, analyse and evaluate first-hand information, allowing the identification of the sources of potential tension as well as emerging conflicts. Although 'traditional' conflicts are usually well understood by diplomats and specialists in political science, addressing new conflicts requires a much more on-the-ground knowledge, new skills in

social and cultural analysis, the active involvement of communities and their leaders, links to vulnerable groups, bridges into mainstream development processes, and new ways of working. Many civil society organizations have unique capacities in all these areas.

But, is this picture still the same today and everywhere that CSOs operate? That is the question. Are today's CSOs really linked to the grassroots where the directly affected populations live? How much are elite, frequent travellers working on the rights of marginalized people in touch with those affected people living in rural areas? How much of the donors' money accounted for in global statistics actually reaches the beneficiaries?

In January 2010, I met with the then Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, who introduced one of the most restrictive CSO laws in Africa. On that subject, he indirectly referred to the instrumentalization of national CSOs by big international NGOs, as well as the lack of capacity development of local actors, whose agenda is defined by western NGOs. In this way he partly justified some aspects of his NGO law. However, shouldn't we consider a more genuine solidarity between national and international CSOs and make a deliberate plan for capacity building, leading progressively to the 'localization' of interventions by CSOs?

### **Stretching civic space in practice**

Around the globe there is a proud history of civic activism that is under threat today. Social movements and activists has been a vital component in most independence struggles, and civil society a driving force behind state formation. It has also been instrumental in the affirmation and realization of human rights and dignity.

Civil society across Africa has played a central role in the continent's history and development. Today, however, the gains brought about by citizen participation are being reversed by increasing restrictions on civic space. The consequences of this have not only been felt by the activists, social movements and civil society groups at the sharp end of these restrictions, but by society at large.

Without CSOs and the independent voices they represent, the ability to address abuses of power and build responsive, accountable institutions is severely constrained. In almost every constitution, there are commitments to allow citizens' participation in one form or another. However, these commitments to protect civic space are being eroded as many governments across the region characterize civil society more as political opponents than organizations making a positive contribution to social change. While exceptions exist, the current trend is for citizens, activists and the organizations that represent them to have less space to operate in.

We have talked about shrinking space, but there is also shifting space: space can be open for some time and closed at other times or for other people. It can also open for some issues, while blocking others. Sometimes, in order to enforce their restrictions, governments create their own NGOs (GONGOs), which only pretend to speak for the people.

Looking at the current geopolitical trends with the rapidly growing influence of China in Africa promoting the idea of a development state, it is not expected that civic space will reopen again just like that. This is the moment to invest strategically in promoting active citizenship, nationally, but also regionally. Regional civil society and coalitions targeting regional and Pan African institutions have an important role to play, complementing and backing up national groups.

Interventions at the regional level are less exposed to risks, compared to those by national CSOs. In many cases regional CSOs can really contribute, influence and pressure member states through regional and continental bodies on regional policy issues. For example, the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) forum reacted differently to CSO/non-state actor engagement. Another example is, ECOWAS, which seems to be more open to CSOs than the RECs. But the general trend is more encouraging at the regional than at the national level.

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<sup>1</sup> Oxfam, IANSA, & Safer World. (2007). *Africa's missing billions: international arms flows and the cost of conflict*. Briefing paper 107. <https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/africas%20missing%20bils.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> African Union. (2009). *Report of the chairperson of the commission: enhancing Africa's resolve and effectiveness in ending conflict and sustaining peace*. Special Session of the Assembly of the Union on the consideration and resolution of conflicts in Africa, 30–31 August 2009, Tripoli, Libya.

<sup>3</sup> African Union. (2009). *Plan of Action*. Special Session of the Assembly of the Union on the consideration and resolution of conflicts in Africa, 31 August 2009, Tripoli, Libya.

<sup>4</sup> Seery, E., & Arendar, A.C. (2014). *Even it up: time to end extreme inequality*. Oxford: Oxfam GB. <https://www.oxfamamerica.org/static/media/files/even-it-up-inequality-oxfam.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> United Nations. (1945). *The Charter of the United Nations and statute of the International Court of Justice*. <http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/introductory-note/index.html>