Western NGO-ism as the fly in the ointment of Pan Africanism

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Abstract

At the dawn of Independence, and during the subsequent emergence of new States, the dominant, unifying sentiment was that Africans everywhere share a common heritage and should cooperate to attain political unity. These aspirations envisaged a unified African nation, shared values and racial justice.

Along came the Western-funded nongovernmental organisation, then seen as a solution to the service delivery inadequacies of the State, and later, a mouthpiece for civil rights and political liberties (supposedly allied with Pan Africanism). The crusade would soon shift its gaze away from the ideological and focus on the material, in the shapeless, formless, ambiguous name of "development".

Decades later, the NGO has mutated into a critical component of a corporatised billion-dollar ecosystem that is grounded in and perpetrates erroneous remedies to society (like the defective Human Rights Based Approach), which have reduced the original creed of Pan Africanism into a convenient buzz word that simultaneously means everything and nothing.

Today's Pan African academy and movement must euthanise the NGO, find our bearings and return to the revolutionary ideals that underpinned the Pan Africanism that gave us a tangible sense of identity, self worth and dignity.

Full Submission

Introduction, in Lieu of Chapter One

Aptly referred to as the "winds of change that were blowing across Africa", the continent experienced a groundswell of opposition to colonial rule from the mid- to late Twentieth Century, climaxing in 1960, which was referred to as the "Year of Africa". Sustained protracted guerrilla struggles, popular uprisings, and the rising costs of administering colonies all contributed towards the drawing of the curtains on several decades of the colonial project. From Ethiopia, where Italian attempts at foreign rule were roundly defeated, to Egypt (1922), Ghana (1957) and several others thereafter, the common thread that defined the diverse efforts against colonial rule was the notion of Pan Africanism.

The mouthpieces and handmaidens of this revolutionary moment were drawn from all quarters, not least the student movement, workers, scholars, clerics, cultural leaders, farmers and the nascent professional and business communities. These rooted, authentic and organic constituencies mobilised resources, organised politically and set the pace and tone for discussions and action pertaining to the struggle for self-determination, not only from a national but from a Pan African standpoint. The cause was articulated through political parties, social movements, cooperative societies and unions.

There also emerged a potent Pan African Diaspora community, which took the fight to the heartlands of colonial power like London, Paris, Lisbon and Berlin. The said Diaspora community also connected with like-minded efforts in the Global South, namely in the Caribbean and Southeast Asia. The height of this collaboration was the Non-Aligned Movement which was born in 1961, and gave a Socialist, if not Leftist flavour to the fight against imperialism.

Notably, a tremendous output of literary, economic, legal, scientific, artistic and political works further eroded the legitimacy of the colonial establishment. Thus, the school curriculum, the extractive economic model, alien and racist legal system, Judeo-Christian and Islamic canons and the cultural influences that

these powerful institutions imposed on Africans (be they under French, English, German or Portuguese rule) were challenged as part of the effort for a Pan African renaissance.

In many cases, of course, and out of necessity[1], the push for Independence took on an armed posture. This explains the emergence of armed wings that complemented the political effort, primarily through guerrilla warfare and acts of sabotage. Together, the foregoing constellation of nonviolent, violent, scholarly, artistic and economic organisation collectively threw off the yoke of foreign subjugation suffered at the hands of the French, British, Germans or Portuguese.

This remarkable start to reclaiming Africa's sovereignty significantly contributed towards the delivery of the third wave of democratisation, which was also accelerated by the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent dissolution of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (the USSR). Africa's new States aspired towards democracy and economic emancipation for their people, as contained in seminal documents like the Africa Lagos Plan of Action of 1975 and similar policy frameworks at the level of individual national governments.

Unknown or perhaps not fully understood by the governments and peoples of newly-minted African States was that their former colonial masters never recovered from, nor forgave their expulsion from Africa and the rest of the Global South. Many former colonial masters entrenched their control through agreements that retained economic management, even though the more overt political authority had supposedly been given back to Africans.

Cracks in what seemed to be an ironclad Independence begun to show as the teething problems of the young States manifested in the form of economic downturn, famine, civil unrest, coups d'etat, civil wars, genocide and interstate conflict. The evidence shows that a lot of this misfortune had links to jilted colonial masters who could not let Africa be, and therefore weaponised their intelligence agencies, armies, multinational corporations, international lending institutions and banks to retain control.

To numb or sedate Africans from feeling or seeing the brunt of these new, insidious and often violent forms of control, subtle tools and methods were deployed. They include the choreographed mainstream media, pop culture as curated by the entertainment industry, variants of established religions and the ubiquitous ecosystem of humanitarian, charitable relief works and so-called development practice (also known as "poverty reduction). It is to the latter half of soft power tools that this article will now turn, focusing particularly on the creature known as the nongovernmental organisation (NGO) through which the Pan African project has been appropriated, diluted and derailed.

Chapter Two: The Advent of NGOs

Nongovernmental organisations in Africa gradually carved out a niche on the continent as the first responders to humanitarian crises, emergencies and disasters. They also distinguished themselves as charitable institutions that stepped in to augment or assist public authorities with service provision, especially in the areas of healthcare, sanitation, education and related forms of social security. Thus, hospitals, schools and boreholes, for example, were constructed for the benefit of communities. Mosquito nets, contraception medicines, clothing, temporary shelters and food rations were distributed to the needy, refugees or other disadvantaged groups. The initial lot of NGOs were global operations that run country-level programmes, but this would change later, as local entities were incorporated or registered locally. The

[1] See Page 11 of Nelson Mandela's Closing Argument at the Rivonia Trial

years between the 70s and 80s decades saw the tremendous proliferation of NGOs across the continent, and this made them a darling of the governments of the day.

Beyond the charitable aspects of their existence and work, NGOs lessened the burden of service provision, if not subsidised their incompetence by shifting the obligations of the social contract to the NGO community. Populations learnt to expect more from NGOs than from their leaders or representatives at the local and national government level. In turn, NGOs, fueled by "righteous", messianic motives relished the relevance and prominence they enjoyed due to the noble works they were engaged in. Funding soared over the years, as did the scope and geography of operations, and the human resource required to save the world.

To a degree, Western guilt over the more glaring failures of state formation in the new African States contributed towards the exponential growth of the NGO ecosystem on the continent. In fact, countries that suffered natural disasters, armed conflict or other such catastrophe experienced influxes in the number of NGOs sprouting up. Invariably, the largest donor institutions came from the recipient country's former colonial master. The work of these funding institutions slowly distorted the resourcing component for civil society by shifting its attention from local, organic sources to the new moneybags in town.

Alongside these distortions was the gradual migration of all well-intentioned or like-minded actors from the workers unions, social movements, political parties, professional associations to the NGO fraternity. Over the years, this shift has taken centre stage, and it is worth noting that today, NGOs are the most prominent amongst the family of non-state actors. Workers unions, social movements, political parties, professional associations and cultural institutions have been so eclipsed that the word "civil society" is comfortably interchangeable with "NGOs".

One mammoth and seemingly indispensable feature, known as monitoring and evaluation, came to life over the years and has since only grown by leaps and bounds. Monitoring and Evaluation (M & E) was and still is the NGO community's attempt at proving the relevance of their work (i.e., "impact" in NGO parlance). M & E is the use of numbers (referred to as indicators that can be rendered as 'inputs', 'outputs', 'outcomes' among others) to assess the progress or lack thereof made through their work.

An additional transformation that occurred in the 90s was the change in worldview that switched from humanitarian relief and poverty reduction to advocacy and governance monitoring. The argument in favour of the transition to advocacy and governance held that poverty cannot be ameliorated through charity, but by marshalling the levers of political and economic power to improve the quality of life in society.

A huge number of NGOs left humanitarian work for advocacy and just as large a number were incorporated to engage the State with policy alternatives on governance, service provision and macroeconomic policy. Yet again, many people left academia, community organising, movement building and mainstream politics and joined "civil society" to advocate for human rights, civil liberties and the rule of law.

The transitions that have been recounted in this chapter caused an erosion of the Pan African ideals that informed the struggle for Independence and the cause for attaining political unity as Africans. Chapter Three, which follows, illustrates the ways in which the said Pan African vision was derailed and how it continues to be dismantled by the NGO model.

Chapter Three: Pan Africanism eroded

Building on the foregoing, below are the salient features of the NGO model that upended the Pan African project and continue to cause the kinds of distortions we see to-date.

'Privatisation' of Pan Africanism

It is ironic but stands to reason that the opening of the floodgates of neoliberalism by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in the 80s and 90s inspired the proliferation of NGOs in Africa, and simultaneously weakened the broader civil society enumerated in the foregoing. Donors availed generous amounts of funding for service-delivery NGOs, and later, advocacy NGOs, ostensibly to "strengthen" civil society.

Unfortunately, this narrow conception of civil society excluded the historic, authentic and organic formations listed in previous chapters. As Angey and Nilsson[2] show, the overdependence of NGOs on foreign sources of funding weakened them both financially and in terms of autonomy and adherence to Pan Africanism. Thus, their capacity to be drivers of Pan Africanism was eroded and replaced by charity ventures, service delivery, and other apolitical forms of work, which were not the objectives or ingredients of Pan Africanism. a rights-based approach, insofar as civic competence is concerned.

Bazaara's[3] verdict, pertaining Uganda's experience, is fitting:
"Their programmes alleviate but do not eradicate the pain of poverty. They rarely seek to influence policy and change it in ways that expand the space for democratic activity. NGOs cannot challenge the social and political power that reproduces poverty or oppression. This is because, they are not membership-based organisations, and they are philanthropic…

Donors have not supported the old face of civil society such as cooperative societies and trade unions to a meaningful extent. This is not surprising because if they did, this would run counter to the neoliberal agenda. Theoretically, the donors' denial of support to such organisations may in itself serve as a catalyst for them to push the state to create some space for democracy. The problem is that the entire environment of structural adjustment undermines their ability to push for a democratic agenda."

The liberalisation, deregulation, and privatisation of the social commons (i.e., amenities like public parks, forests, wetlands, education and healthcare) relegated the State to spectator status, with little control over the allocation and distribution of resources. In an environment where the State is absent regarding social service provision, and where civil society has been narrowed to NGOs, the Pan African vision remained a pipe dream.

Donor-driven human rights-based approach

NGO project design, funding, programming, and evaluation is greatly influenced, if not dictated, by the donors who provide financial and 'technical' support. Right from the conception of a given project, the NGO completes a series of templates that are tailored by the donor, and this formulation continues throughout and past the implementation period, into evaluation and reporting.

This means that the everyday NGO in Africa has a striking resemblance with its funder(s), often based in the affluent global North. Modalities of delivery often, if not always, distort the natural or prevailing environment in which the target population is found. A Gambian respondent who was interviewed by this article noted with frustration that the social movement he leads no longer enjoys the liberty to take on

[2] Silvia Angey, Christina Nilsson, The Financial Sustainability of Ugandan NGOs: Are we no Better than Government? Community Development Resource Network, 2004
[3] Nyangabyaki Bazaara, Contemporary Civil Society and the Democratic Process in Uganda: A Preliminary Exploration, Centre for Basic Research Working Paper 54, April 2000

various Pan African causes spontaneously and with a variety of actors because he accepted the overtures that were being made to him by a grants-making international NGO. "The funding has helped us secure an office where we keep documents and where our members can access internet as well as do some work, but the conditionalities have transformed us into an NGO; we now spend a lot of time writing endless stuffs (sic) and less time in the struggle…"

Implicit in this respondent's narration is the loss of Pan African identity that has been occasioned by the imposition of the rights-based approach onto his social movement, without context or regard to the causes he and his colleagues champion or seek to advance.

In this respect, Barr and Others[4] found that 86% of NGOs' income was provided by institutional donors, although income from the corporate sector, while tiny, is growing. Just under one quarter of surveyed NGOs had ever been paid to provide a service, 40% by another NGO or 25% by government. One third owned a business to finance charitable activities, although revenues in volume terms were still dwarfed by donor funds.

For the above reasons, this Chapter finds that the overdependence on (mostly foreign) donors impedes their ability to deliver on Pan African ambitions, as these funds are short-lived, fraught with preconditions, and not sustainable over the mid- and long-term because of the nature of projects which do not exist beyond a particular funding cycle.

Disregard of informal civil society by donors

The arena of civil society has been erroneously limited to nongovernmental organisations by donors, who have "defined civil society as an arena of formal and modern associations, distinct not only from a venal, inefficient but also from an amorphous array of informal and primordial associations[5]." This limited view means that other forms of civil society which do not conform to the formal trappings and structures are sidelined or altogether left out of policy processes, funding, and other engagement with the development community.

Yet, informal, small-scale, self-help entities are more rooted, organic, and relevant in the lives of Africans, in comparison to the conventional NGO whose contact with people is short-lived, project-based, and perfunctory. Insofar as the rights-based approach is concerned, this means that efforts at engaging citizens are at best misdirected and at worst, futile.

Matters are not helped by the fact that successive post-independence governments, across Africa, were invariably invested in the suppression of the other iterations of civil society such as trade unions, agricultural cooperatives, and professional associations through co-optation, suppression of freedoms, and/or intimidation.

Mechanistic vision of development

A Zambian respondent that this Chapter interacted with noted that over his eighteen-year experience in the NGO subsector, the terrain of funding for NGOs is one that is rife with unrealistic assumptions borrowed from affluent Western contexts and preconditions which reduce local programming into a

[4] Cited in Uganda's Civil Society, History, Challenges, Prospects (eds. John De Coninck and Arthur Larok): Bar et al, 2003, Nongovernmental Organisations in Uganda, A report to the Government of Uganda, Oxford, Centre for the study of African economies, Oxford University

[5] Howell, J and Pearce, J, 2001, Civil Society and Development: A Critical Exploration, Boulder: Lynne Reiner

straightjacket that is not conscious of existing conditions. He noted that an NGO must develop a proposal within the remit of the strategic plans of the funder, whether or not this is reflective of local needs. Notions like 'participation', 'gender issues', and lately, 'climate justice', are treated as non-negotiable and therefore must find accommodation lest a prospecting organization loses out on funding. The funding ecosystem limits NGOs to short-term projects which are herded within the limits of the indicators in a log-frame.

This is followed by a reporting template which mirrors the interests of the funder that are not necessarily in sync with the implementing NGO's experience in the field. The risk of loss of initiative and under-reporting of peculiar experiences, as well as other factors contributing to success is high, to say nothing about the fact that Pan Africanism cannot thrive where inflexible blueprints trump local initiatives on notions like 'holding government to account.'

This environment of upward accountability to donors (to the exclusion of the target population for whom a project is being implemented) means that the receiving NGO has little reason or incentive to engage in authentic Pan African movement building work. As more organisations become forced to prioritise implementation as stipulated by funding agreements and conditionalities—as opposed to a greater vision or worldview—the objectives of Pan Africanism are relegated to the periphery.

Creation of a local elite who are not invested in Pan Africanism, but career progression

One of the respondents that this Chapter interacted with confided about an inadvertent consequence that the environment within which HRBA is delivered has had on the feasibility of a rights-based approach, as currently conceived and practiced. One respondent said that because NGOs are in competition with the private sector for skills and talent, they have been compelled to structure their remuneration and benefits attractively enough to retain staff.[6] Over the years, this has created an elite class of professionals whose lifestyles, accoutrements, and benefits mirror corporate executives—in itself not a bad thing—but thereby alienate the everyday Ugandan in whose name they purport to work.

In their piece, Isooba, Mboizi and Kusiima[7] outline the challenges that proceed from the societal expectations that attach leadership (and working) in NGOs as carrying significant social clout, personal privilege, and power. A leader of an NGO is really unfortunate because the notion is that immediately you step into leadership, then people say, you have "fallen into things," literally meaning you are bound to be rich. Leaders (and staff) of NGOs are thought to have high status in society and are generally expected to relate with those of the same status, for example politicians. High social status among CSO leaders could lead to considerable skepticism when an NGO was seen as a leader's personal cash cow or when leaders award themselves very high salaries.

"Similarly, the visions of civil society as 'addressing poverty', 'undertaking advocacy on behalf of disadvantaged groups', and providing 'voice' for 'empowered citizens'…belies the class identity of CSOs; at both centre and periphery, the leaders and staff of CSOs usually come from a contextually defined elite. At local levels, elite status is closely related to educational profile, as well to the position of an individual in social and family networks. Similarly, those engaged in CSOs at the centre are also likely to be highly educated, and to be urban based."[8]

[6] Director of a Kampala-based NGO
[7] Moses Isooba, Betsy Mboizi, Ida Kusiima, "Webisanga Kabaka!" (You behave like a King!) Civil Society Leadership in Uganda, Community Development Resource Network, 2005.
[8] Ibid. 7

For a sector that prides in a not-for-profit identity, espouses altruistic ideals, and norms of frugality, this contradiction is self-defeating, not least because it creates a moral hazard that suppresses the drive to challenge the status quo. From a political economy point of view, the reluctance to challenge the status quo, or push for social justice causes is a natural progression, if not outcome.For citizens at whom the same NGOs direct their programmes, this is alienating and impedes the nurturing of the partnerships requisite for the successful implementation of the HRBA.

Whereas this cannot be entirely blamed on HRBA in itself, it is a blind spot that adversely impacts the realization of a Pan African vision, at least as we know it.

Conclusion, in lieu of a Closing Argument

The case against the NGOs' adverse role in the erosion of Pan Africanism has been made. This paper concedes that since its emergence in the 1990s, NGOs have deservedly gained notoriety and acceptance. The aegis of the United Nations, African Union, international bodies, and the development community have recognised the NGOs as a viable model for the realisation of human rights and development, unfortunately at the cost of Pan Africanism. This remarkable journey has been spurred on by the moral authority that the domain of human rights commands, right from its cradle in natural rights, which uphold the notions of dignity and wellbeing.

That said, however, the evidence from this inquiry has led us to appreciate the deterioration of the African States from partially open and nascent democracies to increasingly militarised societies, with little regard for due process.

On the hand, citizen engagement across the continent remains hamstrung by the prevailing operating environment in which liberties and rights are suppressed by law, decree, or outright use of force. Limited civic competence of voters, the disenfranchisement of scores more, and the emasculation of representative bodies like district councils and the national parliament present major hurdles for attaining optimum civic agency, a precondition for the success of the Pan African vision.

This inevitably raises questions about what the hundreds of millions of dollars that have been sunk into NGO work have done over the decades, but this paper has showed that the orthodoxy which informs the rights-based approach has assumptions which do not reflect the realities of the environment in which NGOs exist, much less the Africans they purportedly serve.

If the abysmal relationship between citizens and the state in Uganda is to be cured and if the prevailing oppressive structures, disenfranchisement of citizens, and the inequality that comes with both in Uganda are to be robustly challenged and ultimately overcome under the HRBA, it must be rethought.

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