



# **Civil Society and Knowledge Management in West Africa**

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Ebenezer Obadare

### Preamble

The crucial point that needs to be made about “knowledge” in relation to development is that there is no universal understanding of what it is. We all “know” the world through a combination of our education, language, culture, and belief and, just as importantly, our actual physical realities—gender, location, socio-economic environment. How life is “known”—that is, how it is experienced and understood—inevitably varies profoundly according to these differences. The issue for anyone working on development issues cannot be simply how to deal with “knowledge”, but how to act effectively in an environment of multiple “knowledges”. How can this be done? What relationships are possible between different “knowledges”? (Powell 2006, 521).

My overall mandate in this background paper is to provide an overview of key issues in relation to the production, documentation and communication of knowledge by civil society in West Africa. I do so in four related stages. First, I offer and justify a working definition of knowledge and civil society respectively. Second, I discuss the emergence of civil society organisations in (West) Africa as sites of knowledge production and institutional agents directly implicated in transformations in the landscape of knowledge production. Third, I focus on some of the challenges involved in mobilising and managing knowledge for effective policy intervention. The two appendices on approaches to effective policy management have been added with a view to prompting further discussions.

In view of the nature of the subjects under consideration here, two basic questions are immediately provoked. First, what is knowledge? And second, what do we mean by civil society? Other subsidiary questions, in no particular order of importance, are: What is knowledge production and what are the (local and global) cultural, economic, political and material contexts in which knowledge production is taking place? How is knowledge acquired and transferred and who has the power to determine what kinds of knowledge are suitable for collation, communication and preservation? What is knowledge documentation for and what forms of knowledge are useful for policy influence? How should civil society approach different forms of knowledge and/or knowledge producers? Finally, what kind of relationship should exist between civil society organisations—which, to be sure, are producers of knowledge in their own right—and traditional institutions and agents of knowledge production like universities and university academics?

These questions are clearly not exhaustive and in pondering them, we are by no means breaking any new grounds. Yet, a listing of some of the basic questions that tend to arise in debates on

knowledge and civil society can be useful in reminding us of the difficulties often involved in pinning down both ideas conceptually. At the same time and given that all debates about knowledge and knowledge production in particular must unfold in *time* and *place*, it is important to be cognisant of the overall regional context in which discussions of knowledge production is taking place.<sup>1</sup>

In an African context, this means keeping in mind the decades-long devastation of universities and other centres of knowledge production by a combination of global and local economic and political factors. Ironically, the attention that many civil society organisations continue to enjoy as trusted producers of alternative knowledge about socio-economic conditions in Africa is directly related to the deliberate rationing of resources to other traditional knowledge production institutions. This latter observation is important because it speaks to the global politics of knowledge production and the so-called knowledge gap between the Global North and the Global South.

### **A Matter of Definition**

I will return to this theme in a moment, but before then, let me quickly explain how I understand knowledge and civil society in this paper. Suffice to add that these definitions are offered in complete awareness of the fact that both knowledge and civil society are heavily contested and ideologically charged concepts. Hence, the copious archive on each. Having said that, and for the purpose of our discussion here, knowledge is understood, following Vasconcelos *et al* (2005) as “the collection of expertise, experience and information that individuals and workgroups use during the execution of their tasks. It is produced and stored by individual minds, or implicitly encoded and documented in organisational processes, services and systems” (2005, 1). One obvious attraction of this definition is that it references knowledge specifically in relation to organisations. The utility of this focus for civil society organisations cannot be denied. Second, I find the definition valuable because it encompasses aspects of the knowledge production process that tend to be marginalised in high-minded philosophical debates. I am talking here about such apparently mundane tasks as information gathering, storage, codification, and documentation. Third, in presenting knowledge as expertise or experience deployed in the execution of particular tasks, the definition privileges the instrumental dimension of knowledge and knowledge production. Finally, the reference to “individuals and workgroups” is a useful reminder of the “interactive” and “participatory” aspect of knowledge production and consumption. These themes are revisited in the concluding segment of the paper.

Just like knowledge, the idea of civil society is susceptible to contradictory definitions. While scholars like Ralf Dahrendorf (1995) envision it as “the anchorage of liberty”, some prefer to see it as the moral antithesis of the state. For others, the idea of civil society is used to describe the socio-cultural dimension of society responsible for the abridgement of state hegemony. There is most probably a grain of truth in each of these conceptualisations and the variations in emphases are more often than not a product of the specific analytic lens through which civil

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<sup>1</sup> As attested to in part by Powell (supra).

society is being apprehended. Nevertheless, a clue as to the essential idea that civil society seeks to capture may be gleaned from the Eastern European dissidents (Vaclav Havel *et al*) whose experience, mobilisation and political work are widely regarded as foundational to the contemporary resurgence and global circulation of civil society. For those actors, the ideational core of civil society is the principle of an independent social life, one free from state intrusion and overreach; and as Havel brilliantly articulated in his famous *Power of the Powerless* essay (1985), its pursuit need not involve organisational forms *alone*. It is against this background that I propose a working definition of civil society as: the variety of organisational and informal initiatives elaborated by private individuals in their pursuit of autonomy from the state. One advantage of this definition is that it allows us to side-step knotty questions about, say, the social boundaries of civil society, especially the nagging question of whether or not it involves the market and/or the economy. In my deliberately anti-purist formulation, it is illusory, if not pointless, to delineate sharp boundaries between civil society and the economy, given the entangling of both in reality. On the contrary, it seems more fruitful to focus on the role that individual agents whose identities simultaneously straddle various social spheres—politics, the economy, culture—play in the fashioning of an independent sphere that is protected from the state.

In the specific context of West Africa, civil society can be used to refer to the broad variety of organisations and formal and informal strategies historically involved in the attempt to carve out a public sphere that is inoculated against political authority in whatever guise. I say historical because here, I am consciously including organisational forms and praxes that date back to the pre-colonial and colonial eras. In the current global conjuncture, civil society includes, but is not limited to the vast associational spectrum that emerged starting from the late 1980s against the backdrop of the simultaneous delegitimising of the state, and the valorisation of the third sector. This includes social and human rights organisations; trade unions; gender and sexual rights associations; student and peasant associations; advocacy and pressure groups; social and political movements, and last but not least, different kinds of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) addressing an infinite variety of socio-economic, cultural and political problems.

### **Civil Society and Knowledge Production**

Given the focus here on knowledge production *by* and *as it affects* civil society, it would seem perfectly logical to privilege the way in which, in an African context especially, civil society has become implicated in the global process and politics of knowledge production. This will provide a much-needed intellectual framework within which the everyday activities of civil society organisations engaged in knowledge production can be viewed. It will also provide an optic for analysing the intervention of civil society groups, especially NGOs in policy making, especially at the state level.

To ponder the role of NGOs and CSOs (civil society organisations) in the construction of reality and production of knowledge *about* Africa is to extend the theme (adumbrated above) of a firm and sustained connection between the colonial and the postcolonial in Africa. The emergence of NGOs and CSOs as key institutions in a universe of increasingly influential social agents—

foreign-sponsored think tanks, research institutes, private foundations, charities, et al—makes it mandatory to grapple with (1) the consequences of their nascent identity as standard bearers in the process of knowledge production and (2) their new social power as determinants of what qualifies as knowledge.

Central to their emergence, as previously mentioned, is the African crisis of the 1980s. While, on the one hand, the imposition of a severe structural adjustment regime disabled the state economically; on the other hand, the disprivileging of higher education by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) undermined public universities and research institutes as primary producers of knowledge about and for African societies. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) have profited from the ensuing hiatus, their social status clearly inflated by their idolisation as vectors of economic rejuvenation.

Essentially, civil society influence in the new knowledge economy can be perceived in four related forms. First, the most successful CSOs and NGOs manage to command intellectual capital for short- and long-term consultancies, and can therefore offer remunerations that easily outshine the conventional award structure in local universities, policy think tanks, and research institutes. Second, NGOs and CSOs play a very visible and influential role in the circulation of ideas and information because of their capacity to organise regular international conferences, workshops and seminars. One major criticism of such fora is that in a significant number of cases, they are tailored to suit, if not directly inspired by, externally-determined socio-economic and political agendas. Third, because they are often found at the nexus of overlapping regional and transnational networks, civil society organisations are an important meeting point for diverse knowledges, ideas and policy frameworks. This recalls Julie Hemment's statement that the third sector is "a site where global and local knowledge come together" (2004, 236). Finally, even as public libraries have fallen on bad times in many African cities, relatively well-stocked libraries and documentation centres housed in NGO offices have emerged as spaces for the storage of crucial information and up-to-date literatures.

There is ample material in this sketch for a critical engagement with the role of civil society in the emergent knowledge economy in (West) Africa. Inter alia, there is an opportunity to ponder the sociologies of knowledge and knowledge production, focusing solely, but by no means exclusively, on the role of a resurgent third sector in the construction of a post-postcolonial African archive. This can be linked to questions of who has the licence—and power—to produce knowledge, how the social location of civil society determines the kind of knowledge produced, the social and intellectual agenda of civil society, and what that means for the forms and rubrics of knowledges produced.

### **Knowledge for Policy Influence**

Without knowledge, providing aid is rather like taking a shot in the dark. All that can be hoped for is that it will do some good somewhere, but sustainable poverty reduction is impossible. Non-governmental organisations must know what the problems are in

the various developing countries in which they operate, and they must have an idea of what interventions are possible—what will work and what will not. They must also be aware of the ambitions, experiences and knowledge systems of those who receive aid (Heres 2007, p.1).

One critique of the otherwise legitimate focus on the dynamics and intricacies of knowledge management—especially within the corporate world—is that it tends to overlook three antecedent questions: What is the nature of the ecosystem in which knowledge management is taking place? What is the social organisation of knowledge? Finally, what are the overarching aims of knowledge management?

These questions must be posed as part of an effort to nudge civil society organisations towards the all-important political dimension of their work, i.e. realising that the collation, distribution and management of knowledge will be eventually futile if not used to leverage political capital for development. For this to happen, civil society organisations must be attuned to the local and global drivers of knowledge production and policy making. Specifically, they must be cognisant of:

1. The ambiguous status of civil society organisations as sites of knowledge production, as bearers of specific forms of knowledge and partly as a result of these, as perennial targets of adversarial policy formulated by the state;
2. The general context of the apparent global explosion of knowledge and the emergence of modern telecommunications technologies as media of knowledge communication and dissemination instruments;
3. The expanding knowledge gap between the global North and South, and the cultural, economic and political obligations arising therefrom;
4. The conditions under which ‘relevant’ knowledge can be produced; what counts for relevant knowledge and the role of language, especially as it relates to communication and thought (cf. Powell, *op. cit.*);
5. The physical workplace as a site of knowledge production (see Winberg 2006, 162) and the organisational culture as a symbolic medium for facilitating or impeding knowledge production;
6. The dynamics of the policy environment within African states, highlighted by the profound disconnect between knowledge and statecraft; and finally, as a corollary,
7. The attractions and perils of civil society’s engagement with the African policy elite.

What CSOs need to know	What CSOs need to do	How to do it
<p><b>Political Context:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who are the policymakers?</li> <li>Is there policymaker demand for new ideas?</li> <li>What are the sources/strengths of resistance?</li> <li>What is the policymaking process?</li> <li>What are the opportunities and timing for input into formal processes?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Get to know the policymakers, their agendas and their constraints</li> <li>Identify potential supporters and opponents</li> <li>Keep an eye on the horizon and prepare for opportunities in regular policy processes</li> <li>Look out for—and react to—unexpected policy windows</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work with the policymakers</li> <li>Seek commissions</li> <li>Line up research programs with high-profile events</li> <li>Reserve resources to be able to move quickly to respond to policy windows</li> <li>Allow sufficient time and resources</li> </ul>
<p><b>Evidence:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is the current theory?</li> <li>What are the prevailing narratives?</li> <li>How divergent is the new evidence?</li> <li>What sort of evidence will convince policymakers?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish credibility over the long term</li> <li>Provide practical solutions to problems</li> <li>Establish legitimacy</li> <li>Build a convincing case and present clear policy options</li> <li>Package new ideas in familiar theory or narratives</li> <li>Communicate effectively</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Build up programs of high-quality work</li> <li>Action-research and Pilot projects to demonstrate benefits of new approaches</li> <li>Use participatory approaches to help with legitimacy and implementation</li> <li>Clear strategy and resources for communication from start</li> <li>Face-to-face communication</li> </ul>
<p><b>Links:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who are the key stakeholders in the policy discourse?</li> <li>What links and networks exist between them?</li> <li>Who are the intermediaries and what influence do they have?</li> <li>Whose side are they on?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Get to know the other stakeholders</li> <li>Establish a presence in existing networks</li> <li>Build coalitions with like-minded stakeholders</li> <li>Build new policy networks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partnerships between researchers, policymakers and communities</li> <li>Identify key networkers</li> <li>Use informal contacts</li> </ul>
<p><b>External Influences:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who are main international actors in the policy process?</li> <li>What influence do they have?</li> <li>What are their aid priorities?</li> <li>What are their research priorities and mechanisms?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Get to know the donors, their priorities, and constraints</li> <li>Identify personal supporters, key individuals and networks</li> <li>Establish credibility</li> <li>Key an eye on donor policy and look out for policy windows</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop extensive background on donor policies</li> <li>Orient communications to suit donor priorities and language</li> <li>Try to work with the donors and seek commissions</li> <li>Contact (regularly) key individuals</li> </ul>

## How to Influence Policy and Practice

Source: Julius Court, et al, *Policy Engagement: How Civil Society Can be More Effective* (ODI, 2006) p. 48.

## Approaches for Effective Policy Engagement

Key Obstacles to CSOs	Targeted solutions for effective policy engagement
<b>External</b>	<b>External</b>
Problematic political contexts constrain CSO work.	Different responses include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Campaigns</i> – to improve policy positions and governance contexts.</li> <li>• <i>'Boomerangs'</i> – working via external partners to change national policy.</li> <li>• <i>Policy pilots</i> – to develop and test operational solutions to inform and improve policy implementation.</li> </ul>
<b>Internal</b>	<b>Internal</b>
Limited understanding of specific policy processes and the politics affecting institutions and actors.	Rigorous <i>context assessments</i> enable a better understanding of how policy processes work and the opportunities for policy entrepreneurship.
Many CSOs remain in a mode of opposition to government and have weak strategies for engaging with policy processes.	<i>Better strategy</i> would help CSOs to identify crucial policy components (agenda setting, policy formation and implementation, monitoring and evaluation) and the different engagement mechanisms and evidence needs required to maximize their chances of policy influence.
Inadequate use of evidence.	<i>Better evidence</i> could help CSOs have a greater impact on policy processes. CSOs need to ensure that their evidence is: relevant, objective, credible, generalizable, and practical.
Weak communication approaches in policy influence work.	<i>Better communication</i> aids CSOs in making their points accessible, digestible and timely for policy discussions. Two-way communication is critical. CSOs should use existing tools for planning, packaging, targeting and monitoring communication efforts.
CSOs work in an isolated manner.	<i>Network approaches</i> help CSOs make linkages and partnerships with other stakeholders. CSOs need to be aware of the 10 keys to network success.
Capacity constraints for policy influence.	<i>Systematic capacity building</i> helps CSOs build their own capacity or access it through networking.

Source: Julius Court, et al, *Policy Engagement: How Civil Society Can be More Effective* (ODI, 2006) p. 44.

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