

An Afrocentric Reflection on the Role of Civil Society in Developing Economies: Insights from South Africa During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic initially witnessed in China (Wuhan) brought unprecedented devastation in China and other countries. No country was immune to the virus, and heads of state and policymakers had to draw up and implement robust domestic policies to contain the spread of the virus. From an Afrocentric perspective, the virus had dire consequences for African states, considering that most are minor and driven by weak economies. Narrowing this down to South Africa, the virus brought significant repercussions. In South Africa's 29 years of democracy, the state still faces major social ills such as unemployment, poverty, and inequality. The virus's arrival worsened matters for the South African government, which needed new measures for the majority black marginalised population. As the government could not do it alone, the role of third parties, such as civil society, became fundamental as civil society is of the utmost importance globally, particularly for Africa and Developing Economies. Driven by a qualitative research approach, the purpose of this article was to ponder the role of civil society in developing



economies with specific reference to South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings show that the government's role as a single actor in dealing with the pandemic was deficient, as the pandemic crippled the health system. Civil society was pivotal in South Africa during the pandemic and assisted the government with various socio-economic activities, particularly for the marginalised population.

Keywords: Afrocentric, Developing economies; Civil society; COVID-19; South Africa

Introduction

According to Giroux (2021), notwithstanding the entrenchment of the global neoliberal order, the state's role in addressing social, political, economic, and environmental fallouts has remained at the heart of international development for centuries. Globally, and particularly from an African perspective, the renewal of interest in democracy has put the concept of civil society into a prominent position in both social theory and development policy, and in developing economies like Africa, civil society can stimulate transparency and good governance (Mlambo et al., 2020). From an Afrocentric perspective, civil society plays a fundamental role in promoting good governance and an even more critical role in assisting with what the government sometimes lacks. Most constitutions in Africa provide a special provision for civil society to play a pivotal role in the functions and progress of democratic institutions (Ibrahim, 2015).

As Edwards (2009) argues, these constitutions further enable civil society to play an essential role in overseeing government functions. They measure these concerning ethics and how they adhere to constitutional principles, monitor human rights, and be the citizens' voice. While the pivotal role of civil society has gained much-needed prominence over the years, especially during the colonial era, some African states have yet to endorse this third sector's importance in development fully. While they have been influential in stimulating good governance, some still operate in challenging terrains. Lewis (2015) noted that while many states have recognised the importance and roles of civil society, some have not been able to grant them operational independence. The unexpected COVID-19 pandemic presented a daunting task for most African states, considering that most lack the needed resources for their development.

Koley and Dhole (2020) contend that the COVID-19 pandemic had various repercussions on many livelihoods and economic production driven by the lockdown of national economies. The pandemic affected millions of people in developing states such as South Africa. As the government could not do all the work on its own, there was a need for civil society to promote social protection for the majority marginalised, older people, the



informal economy, and women and youth. While most states played an important role during the pandemic, the debate always zoomed in on the role of civil society. Like any other country, South Africa has excellent development ambitions, as stated in the National Development Plan (NDP) Vision 2030, but is continually hampered by what Khambule and Mdlalose (2022) call institutional inadequacies of the state to deliver developmental outcomes. Like any other African state, South Africa seeks developmental statehood to address its many social ills, such as unemployment, inequality, and poverty. The pandemic stoked socio-political dissent amongst political parties, citizens, civil society, and state repression in South Africa and many other parts of the world. Hence, the economic impact of the pandemic was globalised as it touched developed, developing, and underdeveloped states alike. Against this backdrop, the role of civil society in democratic developmental states can hardly be understated.

Civil Society in Developing Economies: An Afrocentric Review

According to Kasfir (2013), one of the most prominent debates in Africa over the last few decades has been around the concept of civil society. In South Africa since 1994, determination towards stimulating economic growth has been achieved in the developmental state language of some government policy assertions. It is thought that a fragile and subordinated civil society cannot yield a genuinely democratic developmental state. This has also been seen in the range of blueprint documents such as the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) (1994) and Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) (1996), the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative – South Africa (ASGISA) (2006), the New Growth Plan (NGP) (2010) and the NDP (2011) (Mosala et al., 2017).

This attests to South Africa's ambition to shape and steer a developmental state post the apartheid era. According to Asuelime (2017), four essential principles drive a developmental state: (1) electoral democracy, (2) involvement in the development and governance process, (3) economic growth, and (4) state-driven socio-economic development. The three imperatives of a state, namely the government, the economy (business), and civil society, are undoubtedly interconnected and interdependent in a healthy society. The salience of civil society's contribution to the development and governance process is recognised in this regard.

Lewis (2002) aptly observes that from an Afrocentric perspective, most colonial governments shattered most civic groups and organisations. This is because the colonial rulers often viewed these groups with suspicion, who feared they could be influential in mobilising the colonised against the colonisers. On a similar note, the colonial regimes in most African states actively discouraged the formation of civil society, which could have played an influential role in its participation in the political process in their states. This is



why, since the end of the Cold War, there has been increasing universal agreement among researchers, activists, and policymakers globally of the significance of civil society in strengthening development and democracy.

Robinson's (1995) assessment sparked an interest in the capability of civil society and new societal movements to play a vigorous role in undermining authoritarian rule and contributing to democratic consolidation. This capacity was stimulated by the fact that the 1990s saw a significant upsurge of interest in civil society and its relevance to understanding democratic transition and consolidation, particularly in the developing world. The experience of democratisation in most regions of the developing world from the early to the late 90s was a significant influence in shifting anxieties from the state to societal institutions. In the running of any state, the activities and interests of associations that constitute civil society will always be significant factors. Civil society refers to organisations separate from the state's legislative, administrative, and judicial power. These include labour unions, religious groups, cultural and educational associations, sports clubs, student groups, political parties, and ethnic groups adhering to their constitution of conduct and distinctive customs. In the modern era, some of these have also come to be known as Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs). Drawing from the neo-Gramscian literature of the 1980s, the state was seen as a hegemony protected from coercion; on the other hand, civil society was seen as a bearer of democratisation and what Mafunisa (2004) calls the agent of setting the limit on state power.

Current literature stresses the importance of civil society in driving good governance and economic growth, especially for developing economies. Drawing from this, and according to Boje (2021), a robust civil society establishes the necessary support for a mature liberal democracy. Civil society also came to be seen as crucial as it was viewed as representing various interest groups, further broadening access to and public involvement in state institutions and processes through, for example:

- I. The struggle for the liberation of South Africa from apartheid;
- II. The national strike by Swaziland (now Eswatini) workers in 1997, operating alongside other civil society organisations demanding that the political system in that country be democratised;
- III. The establishment of Zambia's Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD) in 1990 and its succession to political power in 1991;
- IV. The refusal of the one-party system by civil society groups in Malawi in a referendum which ensued in the drafting of a new multi-party constitution that ushered in the elections, culminating in the ousting of Kamuzo Banda, who had declared himself as the life president of Malawi;
- V. The rebellion of Zaire's (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) Mobutu Sese Soko by Laurent Kabila, with backing from numerous civil society groups within the country and externally.



Narrowing this narrative down to South Africa, and as Sethunya and Mlambo (2022) argue, the first few years after the democratic dispensation witnessed significant efforts and blueprints to create other institutions apart from those of government to consolidate and protect democracy. Lorch and Lorch (2017) note that a robust civil society indicates a strong democracy for any state. When making decisions for the general populace, any government will have to consider the attitudes and activities of the institutions comprising civil society.

Public institutions will often create formal contacts with and obtain the cooperation of the relevant institutions in civil society to perform their functions properly. The government and its diverse departments are there to provide essential goods and services to the general populace of any state that the private sector and other institutions cannot offer on their own. The government and private sector must drive and ensure pragmatic cooperation to meet communal expectations (Rudenko, Zaitseva, Mekush, Dmitrieva, and Vasilieva, 2016). This is of utmost importance from an African perspective, considering that most states are still developing. The 2012 World Economic Forum, to some extent, recognised the extensive roles of civil society under the following major divisions: (1) watchdogs, (2) advocates, (3) experts, (4) capacity builders, (5) incubators, (6) representatives, (7) citizenship champions, (8) solidarity support and, (9) definer of standards.

These divisions have been driven by civil society organisations being essentially bound up with promoting democracy and good governance development. Therefore, in a world where many people feel they have little influence over their circumstances and the nation-state grows too large for its residents while becoming too little concerning the global international order, civil society organisations are crucial for fostering identity.

COVID-19 and its Impact in Africa: A Concise Review

The coronavirus (COVID-19) was first reported in China. The virus spread globally, becoming one of history's most severe global health catastrophes. Owing to the increasing number of COVID-19 cases, socio-economic costs also began to increase. In the face of losing people daily, immediate precautions, such as lockdowns, were implemented. Developed and developing countries also opted for creating frontiers to eliminate the spread of COVID-19 and the temporary closure of schools, social services, and businesses (WHO, 2020).

Delving into the Social Impact

Africa has always battled to deliver public services sufficiently and efficiently; as a result, it lacks social protection and struggles with inadequate public health care (ILO, 2017). As argued by the Brookings Institute (2019), these scenarios are worsened by uncontrollable



poverty due to unemployment, which further contributes to too many citizens being dependent on government-financed free services, grants, hospitalisation, and other basic needs. Notably, COVID-19 claimed thousands of lives, especially among the older population. Anyanwu and Salami (2020) noted that the lack of alternate sources of income distressed businesses and individuals since they had to adhere to social distancing policies. Some jobs were lost due to shutdowns without an alternative source of income.

One of the main issues was that most African governments' social welfare systems could not support the lockdowns related to COVID-19. Some workers in Africa are paid a daily wage, thus, a total shutdown would result in them losing all their money (IATA, 2020). African international airlines with massive staff bases, including domestic enterprises at the lowest levels, such as Ethiopian Airlines, Egyptair, Kenya Airways, and South African Airways, were impacted by travel restrictions.

Africa is also challenged by familiarity and social weakness; the informal labour force experiences the most significant weakness, and employees are exposed to unfortunate working health and safety circumstances (ILO, 2017). Even though it was vital to go under various stages of lockdowns for the safety of people and to eliminate the spread of the virus, the problem is that 86% of total employment in Africa is informal, and informal workers were forced to stay home during the lockdown (World Bank, 2020). This extreme action was necessary, but on the other hand, it was problematic for informal employees in Africa. Many traders, retail, and manual workers lost their jobs due to social distancing or self-isolation. It is well known that many informal workers work under challenging conditions. In the formal sector, the ILO projected that 82% of employees in Africa are without social protection (ILO, 2017), and during COVID-19, inequality further increased.

The World Bank (2020) estimated the prospect of 49 million people falling into extreme poverty in 2020 globally and 23 million in sub-Saharan Africa. One of the contributing factors to poverty is that African countries have been affected by unstable social and political conditions, namely, shortages of food and medication (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020). According to The New Humanitarian (2020), Sudan, Nigeria, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are the most exposed countries due to poor health systems.

Health Impact

Before the arrival of COVID-19, Africa already had the highest number of diseases of both morbidity and mortality, namely lower respiratory conditions and HIV, among other social ills (WHO, 2019). On the other hand, globally, Africa has the least health security (GHS Index, 2019), which makes it challenging to deal with COVID-19. African countries depend on importing approximately 90% of their pharmaceutical merchandise from outside the continent. ECA (2020) states that medical and pharmaceutical products are imported



mainly from the European Union (EU). In Africa, personal protective equipment, diagnostic material, and other medical equipment are in short supply (Simpson, 2020). For instance, millions in public hospitals across 41 African countries were served by fewer than 2,000 ventilators compared with more than 170,000 in the United States. Even with the case of Ebola in 2014, Africa was negatively affected due to the lack of medical imports (Primi et al., 2020).

The IGC (2020) observes that in Africa, the health system still stumbles and struggles to render public health services to the growing population. Even though the spread of the COVID-19 virus was slow in African countries initially, it would eventually strain the health system. Countries like Italy were the most affected and had limited equipment, such as 700 Intensive Care Unit (ICU) beds for a population of 10.4 million people. Conversely, the US seemed more prepared for such events, predicting they would need more than 200,000 ICU beds. Another African country badly affected was Uganda, with an estimated population of 42 million people but only 55 ICU beds. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Liberia had fewer than 20 ventilators each to cover their large populations.

The main issue was that the admission numbers kept increasing, exposing other patients to COVID-19. Patients living with HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria were easily affected by COVID-19 because they were already affected by chronic diseases (AUC, 2020). Africa lacks local drug manufacturing capacity; as a result, COVID-19 was a wake-up call to increase local drug manufacturing. Some patients practice home remedies due to insufficient funds to purchase pharmaceuticals. African countries should prepare for the unknown and implement the Pharmaceutical Manufacturing Plan of Africa and Medicine Agency that will work as a tool for investment regulatory capacity and economic growth while sustaining the health system.

Economic Impact

Farrell and Wheat (2016) further point out that African countries have been challenged with high debt levels, such as trade tensions concerning significant wealth, economies, inequality income, and job stability. COVID-19 increased the unemployment rate since some workers could not work from home due to the nature of their jobs. This resulted in many companies experiencing either bankruptcy or immediate closure. Because agriculture, forestry and fishing, tourism, industry and manufacturing, mining, and the financial sectors contribute to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of all states, there is a need for severe alternative intervention techniques (AfDB, 2020).

The World Bank (2020a) found that in 2018, Sub-Saharan Africa's GDP per capita was at \$1 585 before the COVID-19 epidemic. Over the years, Africa's economy had been predicted to be 3.9% in 2020 and 4.1% in 2021. The African Development Bank (2020) states that global value chains were interrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the increased



number of infections, the recession was anticipated to worsen globally, especially in developing countries. The lockdown policies reduced Africa's foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows in many sectors, such as tourism.

Even though the World Bank (2020a) declared the accessibility of US\$160 billion from 2020 to the end of 2021, some African countries need more than just financial assistance to resolve their economic and social welfare issues (Coulibaly et al., 2019). Africa has a dual public health and economic crisis affecting the progress of the region's growth prospects (OECD, 2020). One of the major problems is that in 2019, Africa's GDP growth was at 3.6%, not enough to accelerate economically. The growth per capita was around 0.7%; as a result, job creation was slow (AUC/OECD, 2018). Due to COVID-19, Africa's exports decreased, such as oil, mineral resources, and agricultural commodities (McKinsey, 2020).

As a result, Sub-Saharan African borrowers were in debt distress (Griffiths, 2019). The IMF (2020) adds that highly indebted countries such as Sudan, Eritrea, and Cape Verde were much more at risk from unsustainable public debt levels. Anyanmu and Salami (2021) emphasised that from the tourism and travel sector, Africa lost US\$ 50 billion in revenues and US\$ 2 million in direct and indirect jobs because of COVID-19. Even though COVID-19 caused much distress globally and troubled economic growth, the digital change of African economies was put to good use. Some businesses benefited, and some were forced to shut down due to the nature of their activities. In some instances, digitalisation enhanced the industrial performance of companies, whereas, in some workplaces, it did not add any value. This proved the dual and colossal gap between big companies in Africa. Once again, online retailing was convenient, but some jobs were lost due to reduced employees.

From Apartheid to Democratic Transition: South Africa's Continued Social Struggles

As Ankabi (2016) reiterated, one of the world's most unequal societies is South Africa, not only disfigured by high levels of inequality but also by endemic and widespread poverty and a high unemployment rate. This triple challenge of inequality, poverty, and unemployment has its genesis in colonialism and apartheid, whose legacies persist even today.

The 1994 democratic breakthrough has not completely transformed the lives of the black majority. The new democratic government in 1994 inherited a society deeply entrenched in abject poverty. During apartheid, the notion of 'race' enriched whites and impoverished the non-white majority. Apartheid created a predominantly landless indigenous African majority through spatial segregation and land dispossession, which was legislated through the Land Act of 1913, which catalysed the large-scale land dispossession of Black and Non-White South Africans; people were forcefully removed from prime real estate and



relocated vast distances away from the economic centres of cities. Even though this Act was passed over a century ago, it resulted in socio-economic injustices that still exist today; blacks remain without equitable access to land while whites have access to land and, therefore, secure generational wealth. Most black, indigenous people are exposed to open sewers and decaying refuse and shacks, while whites live in tidy streets, behind electrified fences, and in spacious houses. In other words, apartheid created an entrenched social order of privilege for whites. The racial distribution of poverty further fuels tensions between racial groups, worsening social cohesion (Mlambo, 2019). The land dispossession of indigenous people of South Africa under this Act is responsible for the indecencies and humiliations associated with low-income people. Many black South Africans are trapped in a cycle of poverty that emerged because of apartheid.

There have been significant changes in legislation and policy since 1994 and a considerable amount of transformation in the economy to dismantle the legacy of apartheid. However, undoing the injustices of the three-and-a-half centuries of imperialist and colonial domination cannot be reversed in 29 years of majority rule. The democratic government still faces numerous challenges. Many of South Africa's citizens remain in dehumanising conditions of extreme poverty, inequality, and unemployment..

Civil Society and COVID-19: A South African Perspective

In many developing states, civil society actors have been recognised for the pivotal role they played during the expansion of the COVID-19 pandemic through the provision of life-saving services, raising awareness, campaigns promoting vaccination, dissemination of information about the coronavirus and response measures, and advocating for people-centred policy decisions (Kumi, 2022). According to Khan, Combaz, and McAslan (2015), civil society actors and organisations are recognised as pillars of development as they provide a transformative change in the immediate and long term by increasing accountability, defending collective interest, influencing decision-making, promoting community participation, and engaging directly on service delivery. According to Wong and Wu Hamann (2022), civil society actors played a significant role in responding to the social crisis of COVID-19. From a South African perspective, we may draw attention to Community Action Networks (CANs) established in Cape Town and adopted by other provinces, Gauteng being one of them (DailyMaverick, 2020). Hence, CANs emerged as networks of neighbourhood-level community support, and mutual aid groups began across Cape Town. This is a movement that was initiated by a team of community workers, public health specialists, and social justice activists who were of the view that having a coordinated, organised, and solid community response to the societal challenges faced by the South African people in the face of COVID-19 would be fundamental. These challenges were limited to health, social, and economic factors.



Kövé (2021) believes that the spread of COVID-19 brought challenges as the actors and authoritarian political leaders could not engage and communicate with their civic societies. This is because, in the face of COVID-19, civil society activities were restricted, subjected to government authorisation, and controlled by the state, depriving civil society actors and members of their participation in social and economic matters. This was the case even in South Africa, where the government was the only key role player in dealing with challenges faced by the members of civil society. In most cases, the government failed to handle situations to help civic society overcome the pressure of COVID-19 and other related consequences. Despite the concern over imposing extraordinary measures to control the spread of COVID-19, measures were in place, and the country experienced a drastic economic decline as economic activities were suspended (Donga et al., 2021). In their work, Stevenson and Wakefield (2021) emphasise that the procedures to comprehend the spread of COVID-19 were quite challenging, especially those the South African government announced during levels 4 and 5. These measures contributed to reducing access to economic and social support systems for many families (especially those in low-income communities) within the country.

A recent study by Goldman, Bassier, et al. (2021) shows that COVID-19 has harmed the country's development as the members of civil society suffered from various economic situations. These economic situations include the loss of employment that exposed many households to poverty and the lack of social protection for working-age people. In response to the situation, the government called for civil society, communities, and academics to provide socio-economic relief measures to alleviate the impact of the virus, especially during the lockdown (Zembe-Mkabile et al., 2021). While calling for the intervention of civil society, the government took emergency steps to support the affected members of society through various support mechanisms. However, the socio-economic relief measures were deemed ineffective as communities lacked food and financial resources. Hence, this pushed poor communities to participate in hunger riots and loot food retailers and shops (Gumede, 2020). This was despite the contribution made by several civic society actors and associations to help provide food and distribute food parcels for the poorest communities organised by the government. It seems that for many, this assistance was not enough.

Methodology

The current paper is based on a qualitative approach, which is relevant as it allows researchers to reflect on the role of civil society in developing economies and South Africa during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The study depended solely on secondary data to engage with existing literature produced by other scholars on the problem under investigation. The main interest was in the role of civil society and economic challenges in the face of COVID-19 from an Afrocentric perspective. Largan and Morris (2019) argue that secondary



data sources are crucial if researchers aim to collect information from academic papers, government reports, peer-reviewed journals and books, and other online sources. The researchers exclusively consulted different databases for this study, including Google Scholar, Sabinet African Journals, Scopus, and Taylor and Francis Journals. The search pattern to draw data from these data sources was guided by the following key words and phrases: "role of civil societies," "challenges of civic societies during COVID-19," "economic impact of COVID-19 and government or civic society response", and "civic societies and developing economies". "South Africa" was added to limit the data search to the context of South Africa since the study aimed at providing an Afrocentric perspective on the challenges of COVID-19 with particular reference to South Africa.

Regarding data analysis, thematic analysis was deemed the most fitting in this study. This method helped the researchers to understand and make sense of similar themes that emerged from the literature review collected to fulfill the aim of the study. Supported by the work of Neuendorf (2018), thematic analysis is pivotal for researchers who are interested in determining similar, intersecting, and diverging findings and conclusions from different types of literature focusing on the specific phenomena and the role of civil society and developing economies in the context of this study. The themes that emerged from this method of data analysis include the role of civil society in developing economies: an Afrocentric appraisal; COVID-19 and its impact in Africa: a concise review; from apartheid to democratic transition: South Africa's continued social struggles; and civil society, COVID-19, and development: a South African perspective.

Findings

All over the world, especially in developing countries and from an African perspective, civil society is typically seen as a sector that plays an essential role in development. This conclusion is drawn from diverse factors, such as the fact that because of limited resources, the government cannot do it alone, and there is a need for third parties to come to the fore as an extra helping hand. COVID-19 brought numerous and diverse challenges for developing and developed states. From a South African perspective, with the continuing social ills post-1994 still at play, the government also relied on other external actors, such as civil society, to play a vital role throughout the pandemic. Thus, one may deduce that the COVID-19 pandemic should serve as a learning curve for future and unforeseen pandemics. However, perhaps African heads of state need to integrate the role of third parties, such as civil society, into their policies and legislative documents in both the short and long run. Such a move would further outline the government's initiatives to work with other non-government structures that can vigorously aid the government in its developmental state objectives.



Conclusion and Recommendations

This article drew a nuanced appraisal of the role of civil society during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. The results showed that the government's role as a single actor in responding to the pandemic's consequences was insufficient. COVID-19 not only affected the health system in South Africa. The pressure has also been felt in terms of social and economic factors. Some critical aspects of the findings show that sources of livelihood were disrupted, especially by the measures introduced by the government to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. The measures included the announcement of a national lockdown with strict regulations that limited the movement of people, social distancing, self-isolation, and the shutdown of economic activities. The worst problem to surface was the harsh level of poverty, which struck poor communities. Unforeseen events such as COVID-19 shed light on the fact that the government cannot stimulate development initiatives alone and that continuous support given to civil society organisations is essential for addressing challenges of this nature. However, this is only possible if civil society is granted the platform to participate in the governance process, including policy-making that affects individuals at the grassroots level.

This is drawn from the fact that civil society plays a fundamental role in the continuous development of local communities by stimulating social capital and cooperation between communities, individuals, government, and international communities. To further strengthen the significant work done by civil society (in any socio-economic development initiative), the South African government should increase the public's knowledge of the critical role of civil society. This is based on the fact that a well-informed citizenry, aware of the importance of the third sector (as civil society is formally referred to in some circles), is vital in underpinning a national integrity system. Thus, many of the social ills that continue to be witnessed in South Africa can only be solved via an effective and robust governance system supported by other parties, such as civil society. As COVID-19 made its presence felt around the world, the role played by civil society did not go unnoticed. Hence, in future pandemics, the South African government should recognise the value of civil society and work to create stronger partnerships. The government should also support civil society operations through national funding mechanisms. This further support from the government would grant civil society the platform to effect more change, reach more vulnerable individuals, and guide future advocacy work.

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