



How CSOs get it wrong and what we should do instead: Reflections from Tanzania

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Introduction:

how much do we matter?

- Interviewing job applicants
 - Not being able to name a single NGO they admired
- Surveys/opinion polls
 - Consistently bottom of list as source of information, services, value, importance
- Effectiveness self assessment
 - Struggling to identify major long term achievements

Intro continued

- What would happen if 95% of NGOs closed down tomorrow?
 - At national level
 - At local levels?
- Who would protest? How vociferously?

Outline of presentation

- Seven things we do poorly
- Three things we need to get right
- Two final reflections on the meaning of all of this

I. Slogans not critique

- Quality of evidence and analysis often poor
- Create straw enemies: IMF and World Bank are the favourites
- Calls for more (e.g. more money should be spent in education)
- Same old tired, predictable messages; tendency to complain
- Little debate and challenge to the internal political correctness

2. Romanticize the people

- An uncritical promotion of ‘people know best’, but do they? Everything?
- A fetishizing of participation; key marker of development
 - Does it add value?
 - Does it foster ownership?
 - Process trumps results

3. Depoliticized capacity building

- People need capacity to develop themselves, so lots of:
 - Training
 - Facilitation
 - Sensitization
 - Workshops and seminars
- Technocratic approach that views capacity as lack of skills or consciousness, little attention to motives, incentives, feasibilities
- Paying people for the opportunity to advance themselves?

4. Very small is beautiful

- Numbers reached tend to be very small
- ‘Pilot projects’ used as justification when evidence shows pilots rarely succeed (pilots a retreat from politics?)
- Intense quality of inputs make interventions difficult to reproduce
- Little calculation of unit costs and possibilities of scaling up
- A self-marginalization towards the cute and quaint?

5. Clamoring to count

- Demands for a seat at the table in processes, meetings, structures
- Demand to be part of the decision-making
- Reinforcement of 'stakeholders' instead of 'public'
- Reinforcement of a parallel governance structures
- Cooptation?

6. Chasing the money

- Leading the call for more aid (0.7%, more funding for Africa, etc)
- Constantly fundraising (increasing capacity building in this area)
- Limited questioning of received wisdoms that come with cash (e.g. HIV/AIDS)
- But
 - How often is more money the answer?
 - Do we grapple with the debilitating and corruption effects of aid?

7. Easy legitimacies?

- What is the practice and reality of the claims we make?
 - Represent interests of the people?
 - Can bring innovations?
 - Can be nimble and flexible?
 - Can be more cost effective?
- What is the level of internal debate on these matters? public perceptions?
- An unholy convenience that allows donors/ govt to check boxes and us in business?



Ways forward

**What should CSOs
do instead?**

I. Promote internal debate

- Independent, rigorous evaluations (not rigid bean counting)
- Question received wisdoms
- Frown on bashing straw enemies
- Promote dialectical thinking instead of only one side of a binary position
- Foster culture of sound analysis and rigorous learning

2. Move from stakeholders to public engagement

- Less workshops and stakeholder consultations; more opportunities for ongoing public engagement
- Less parallel 'development' spaces (where you bribe people to show up) and more use of local governance, media and trades unions (institutions with reach)
- Less preaching and more debate; engaging the public imagination (e.g. use of media)

3. Be strategic

- Clear (political) analysis of context and of what drives change
- Focus on results (not in the narrow, short term bean counting sense) but in terms of the differences that count
- Develop a strategy, program, budget and accountability framework and get donors to line-up behind it (not the other way around)

Conclusion

Two reflections

I. Historicizing our place

- What role have CSOs played in social change in the last 100 years? Contrasting programs/projects vs social movements?
- Monitoring implementation and change vs participation in decision-making?
- Patronage vs democratic space and rights?
- Where CSOs fail to be compelling should we wonder why people become more pragmatic (the best we'll get)?

2. What we need most

- From resources to resourcefulness and imagination
 - Cultivate savvy and creativity
 - Ability to make new connections
 - Stimulate debate that grabs public interest
 - Ability to articulate
- This is a different business from the one we know – more culture and politics and less development. Can we do it?