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**Subject:** Where ARE you with the NGO study??? See below. C

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### Civil Society Analysis: Who's Watching?



Image



## The Development Sector Goes on a Tangent

by  
**Aadila Molale**

Over the years there have been a multiplicity of investigations and research into, as well as debate about the role of civil society within the developmental framework of the 'new' South Africa.

The most well known amongst these have been the CIVICUS study, Two Commas and a Full Stop and what is known as the John Hopkins Study, The Size and the Scope of the Non-Profit Sector in South Africa.

The CIVICUS study, carried out in 2001 was an analysis of the structure, space, values and impact of civil society, while the John Hopkins study looks at sustainability, employment, volunteers and sectors of activity.

No major research has been published on the sector since 2002. Strangely enough this coincides with the shift of government from policy debate and formulation to implementation.

The disinterest in the health of civil society in the past few years is disconcerting. It creates the impression that perhaps civil society has done it's job, made inputs and has now moved on to fulfilling other personal needs. (Nothing breeds complacency like consumerism, especially when profiled in international brand names.)

The results of SANGONeT's December poll certainly lend no added confidence to the role of civil society organisations in social, political and civic developments.

### Enter PRODDER

But alongside this apparent disinterest, the Civil Society Information Team at SANGONeT has received constant inquiries for more information and more directories since the re-launch of PRODDER in 2005. In the past six months SANGONeT has provided data validation services as well as continued our on-going validation of CSO's for PRODDER.

We can vouch that there definitely is still activity going on in civil society. It is in the absence of formal published research that we resort to the analysis of our own database in order to ask the question "What is going on?"

The following is a brief discussion about the environment CSO's operate in followed by a look at some of the specific areas of activity.

### An Enabling Environment

Alan Fowler, in his 2003 research report for the Centre for Civil Society, "[An Enabling Environment for Civil Society: What does it mean and how does law fit in](#)", outlines the elements of an enabling environment in three stages; existence, expression and engagement.

While all three elements contribute to the "vibrancy" of civil society and are pre-requisites for a fully enabling environment they may not all be experienced at once. In the evolution of participatory democracy, existence is a starting point, while political conditions can determine the degrees of expression and engagement. The elements of expression and engagement can become contentious depending on the subject matter. However, an enabling environment is void of prejudice.

CSO's fill the gap between the private and the public and generally fall within (two, disconnected) spheres of

activity. Charity and welfare oriented NGO's provide assistance to the state through service delivery, while 'development NGO's' monitor, contest, and influence the public domain.

Of the three elements required for a vibrant civil society, charity and welfare organisations need simply to exist, while organisations taking on an active participatory approach to development rely heavily on engagement and expression in order to reach their goals.

Fowler makes reference to the dichotomy amongst CSO's observing the 'tolerance and encouragement' charity and welfare organisations benefit from, in comparison to the critical eye their counterparts oft receive.

### **Money Talks**

Discussion around an enabling environment can not be limited to the legal framework. While South Africa is celebrated for our progressive Constitution and the Bill of Rights, it must be noted that freedom of expression amounts to very little if there is no agency for expression. So we hold ourselves peril at the mercy of donors. How enabling is their environment? The relationship between donors and government has been long discussed in the NGO corridors of post '94 South Africa when the state became a just institution. If 'partnership' is the term we are after, the state and business seems to have it.

While it may appear that social activists have folded their arms, they have not. Rather, it is the case that organisations tackling important development issues such as racism, organisational development and parliamentary monitoring have had to shut down. While the appropriate legal environment may be in place, a supportive funding environment for alternative thinkers is on the wane.

### **What am I?**

CSO's are not a uniform entity, as we have noted. The language describing their various forms and types is vague and the categories overlap; Faith Based Organisation, Non-Government Organisation, Community Based, Non-Profit, etcetera. Though somewhere in our identification of their spheres of activity a distinction of these descriptive terms can be made. The definitions used by PRODDER follow.

An NGO is a Non-Government Organisation, is not for profit, is values based, addresses development issues, carries out activities in relation to lobbying and advocacy, beneficiaries are broadly national / international, and the emphasis is on public interest.

A CBO, while it is still a Non-Government Organisation and is not for profit, addresses the development needs and issues that exist within the direct community where it operates, activities are local and self-help oriented.

### **The Conveyor Belt**

In the PRODDER experience, CBO's are flourishing, but they are also rather unsustainable. By and large the impression one gets when reading through stacks of CBO profiles is that in the face of high unemployment, people are creatively trying all avenues of employment available to them, including starting an NGO with the prospects for funding.

There is a plethora of small catering, sewing, embroidery and baking projects, with mission statements alluding to community development and a vision of upliftment. In their defence they probably are non-profit. But in the development context they are misplaced.

Certainly business has a major role to play in the development of communities, but these organisations should either be registered as SMME's or Co-operatives if they operate as such.

Community organisations of this ambiguous nature are unlikely to attract funding and are most likely to shut down. Validation work for PRODDER in the past six months indicates that within a 10 year period 60-70% of CBO's in Gauteng are no longer contactable. Granted, the 10 year timeframe that the sample is bridging includes shifting to a completely new political orientation. However, even much newer lists indicate that up to 35% of all organisations across the sector (NGO's and CBO's) shut down. There are many speculations about the reasons behind their closure, but no methodical research to back up any of the theories.

The misplacement and confusion that goes with CBO's in the development context applies to all the crèche and early childhood development (ECD) centres that are mushrooming in villages, townships and towns. There is no doubt these centres provide a necessary service to their communities. But it is rare that ECD workers in their capacity have the opportunity for engaging policy and monitoring parliamentary affairs. In this particular example the SA Congress of ECD would fulfil that role. There are exceptions and few ECD Centres do manage to pull off a development orientation, but it is not the norm.

For the most part service delivery NGO's are apolitical. It is not their function and is likely to compromise their capacity. Many home based care projects are registered with the Department of Health and behave as agencies of government. They receive funding, training and material support. While they may also participate in social movements such as the Treatment Action Campaign or be members of activist networks such as the AIDS Consortium, their primary identity is as service provider. They are able to sustain projects and provide services to the communities, government and other corporations like them.

### **Whose space is this?**

A rights based approach to development is perched on an international foundation of the rights, expectations, liberties and responsibilities that have been agreed to as necessary for all individuals in order to pursue a fair and just life. A rights based approach to development therefore speaks to all sectors but implies a level of political engagement and advocacy. It relies heavily on public participation, state monitoring and follow-up. Following a rights-based approach includes taking on activities such as campaigns, lobbying and the sharing of information through networks. Access to information is critical, so is the need to use that information to build the capacity of civil society through workshops, discussions and organisational development.

The current environment is particularly supportive of service delivery oriented charity and welfare NGO's. It is relatively easy to feed fish to the masses.

A vibrant civil society emerges when Civil Society Organisations are able to act independently and subjectively, not be silenced out of fear and are duly recognised for the role they are burdened with and the impact made. If we don't continue to empower ourselves and claim our spaces in the development framework we risk forgetting how to fish.

Development goes forward and at every stage it is necessary to reflect on where we are, SWOT the way forward and reaffirm our values and inputs to the development of a just society and a better world.

Watch this space.

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