

# Democracy, Dialogue and Development: How Citizen Engagement can lead to Sustainable Livelihoods!

By Mvuyisi April

## ***Introduction***

In our endeavors to answer the question of how and how much citizens in a particular context influence policies and programmes of government, we learnt from the South African context, by developing a Democracy Index that attempt to assess the quality, and evaluate the performance of democracy in South Africa through citizen participation. The Democracy Index was designed around two key principles:

- the extent to which South Africans can control those who make decisions about public affairs (elected representatives and government appointees at all levels) and,
- the extent to which South Africans are equal to one another in this process.

In other words - how much control do citizens have over the actions of government and how equal are they in exercising this control? Put differently - do the people rule and do they rule equally? Democracy is better understood as a *principle* that informs the development of political institutions, norms and procedures and so we ask the question: To what extent does the political system in a particular country bring about popular self-government?<sup>1</sup>

In terms of our understanding of democracy, therefore, the question is not so much about the institutional and procedural norms that are in place, but rather the extent to which those institutional and procedural norms facilitate the ability of citizens to rule equally, or at least participate equally in the governance of the country.<sup>2</sup>

Democracy enjoys high levels of support amongst Africans, averaging 73% across 19 countries. Even higher numbers reject one-party rule (73%), military rule (75%) and strongman rule (79%) respectively<sup>3</sup> but how much of this does actually translate to popular governance? How much of the millions of citizens in the continent influence what their governments do? Is there enough will and space between the elected leaders and their constituencies to engage on the issues that affect the daily lives of citizens? Is the democracy we have actually democratic? These are the questions that each citizen should ask as means of understanding the effectiveness of our governments in fulfilling the will and aspirations of the people.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.idasa.org.za](http://www.idasa.org.za)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Afrobarometer Briefing Paper no. 70: Are Democratic Citizens Emerging in Africa? (May 2009)

## ***Why Democracy?***

Definitions of democracy vary from country to country and so does its meaning from person to person. Many believe that a simple casting of a ballot serves the purpose while others believe that voting alone is not sufficient for democracy to hold. A number of governments continue to keep their political systems democracy free while delivering economic goods to their citizens. At the same time, some countries that have democratic systems seem to be struggling with issues of accountability and governance.<sup>4</sup> Despite these differences, the word democracy is much used around the world with comparisons being made between democratic and undemocratic countries.<sup>5</sup> The word democracy which comes from two Greek words: *demos* and *kratos*, meaning *people* and *power* is indeed at its roots about people's power yet for many countries, "government of the people, by the people and for the people," remains a tantalizing, elusive ideal.<sup>6</sup>

The idea that "the people" are the foundation of democracy is repeated numerous times in historic documents, and has laid the foundation for many liberation struggles throughout the continent where the people would be the guiding voice of government. Affirmed by the Universal Declarations of Human Rights, "The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government". But is this so in practice?

Experiences have shown us something different. Governments have become at the centre of the action. Democracy is seen to be something that good governments do, and bad governments don't do. Once citizens have elected a government into power, they all too often sit back and wait for their elected officials to respond to their needs and dreams, as spectators or consumers. The truth is that for democracy to flourish, people must rise to much bigger challenges than simply voting in elections. It is easier for people with more power, in government, schools or other settings, to fall into the trap of imposing solutions, rather than working collaboratively with citizens to develop them<sup>7</sup>. Hence citizens need to work hard to be treated with greater respect by their governments and institutions.

## ***The Pillars of Democracy***

Literature suggests that there are several pillars that support a strong democracy and at the heart of them all is the will of the people. These are: elections, political tolerance, the rule of law, freedom of expression, accountability and transparency, decentralization, and civil society<sup>8</sup>. Civil society: people as co-creators of democracy.

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<sup>4</sup> Panyarachun, A: Building the Pillars of Democracy. Centre for International Private Enterprise (2008)

<sup>5</sup> What is Democracy? An Idasa's Youth Vote Series publication

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> Panyarachun, A. Building the Pillars of Democracy. Centre for International Private Enterprise (2008)

In brief, free and fair elections lend legitimacy to democracy by preventing one person or a small group in a society from imposing certain vested interests on the general population. Although elections are necessary and may be the most visible aspect of a democracy, there are many examples of manipulating election processes to aid and abet autocracy and tyranny. In themselves, elections do not suffice to ensure democracy.

Political tolerance is the second pillar. This simply means that free and fair elections do not give mandate to oppress and sideline those who voted against the government. This is acceptance of diversity in the society in order to have sustainable democracy.

Following on that is the rule of law where citizens can be able to judge the lawfulness of the government. There has been much debate on this idea. What is clear though, is the close connection between the rule of law and democracy. Where the rule of law is rooted in a system of acceptable moral values; in a properly balanced political and legal system that protects the rights of citizens and where justice and equality are upheld.

The fourth pillar of sustaining democracy is freedom of expression. This was thought important enough to be placed as Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Unfortunately democracy is about multiple voices, which maybe very contradictory or more informed than others, while others maybe personal opinion, gossip or speculation. The key is to balance national and societal interests to create and maintain the level of discussion required for participation in democracy to be meaningful.

Accountability and transparency of institutions follows as the fifth pillar where individuals in those institutions must be held accountable for their actions by the people who elected them into power. A government must be accountable to an independent judiciary or other impartial institutions established to check government action. Be it agricultural policy, fuel pricing, or health care services, decisions must not advance the agendas of vested interest groups over the public interest. This in essence is protecting citizens against misguided policies or decisions that enrich a few at the expense of the many.

Accountability and transparency calls for political empowerment of people at all various levels of government. The closer the government is to the people governed, the more responsive the government is likely to be. At the same time, for decentralized democracy to work, funding must also be decentralized, material and human resources, and institutional capability. Decentralization of the political process is another way to curb the concentration of power and influence exercised by political forces. Citizens become more aware, interested, and willing to participate in democracy when they see what is at stake is something close to home.

An active civil society plays a critical role in this sense by beginning its engagement at grassroots. This creates an opportunity for shared interests and common values around which information is gathered and analyzed, views are formed, and advocacy pursued. Be it community forums, clubs, charity groups, cooperatives, unions and associations;

civil society provides a mechanism whereby the collective views of citizens can shape and influence government policy.

As Nelson Mandela put it in a famous challenge to citizens during the 1994 election campaign, "...government alone cannot be able to solve the nation's problems". It is the collective partnership between citizens and government between elections that make democracy come alive.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Dialogue key to Development***

Considering at all the arguments above, we can only conclude that the role of civil society is critical in the development of a country. It is key in mapping a way for which the economic system, health, education should shape in support of a better future and well being of every citizen. In many developing countries citizens tend to be content with their own well being forgetting that it is more beneficial to invest in the collective interests than individuals.

A recent Afrobarometer study has shown that the development of democratic citizenship among Africans is still relatively weak.<sup>10</sup> While a sizeable majority of Africans are both interested in politics (64 %) and discuss politics with friends and family on a regular basis (68%), interest in politics does not appear to translate into high levels of political knowledge. Just under half (46%) can't even name their own member of parliament.<sup>11</sup> Contact with government officials is relatively low, with one in three having contacted either a local government official (27%), an MP (13%) and other government official (13%) in the last year.<sup>12</sup>

This is a very wide gap as compared to the percentage of people who vote in each and every national election held and this could be both an indication of citizens not engaging with their government post elections. Recently we have seen South Africa sparked with a series of protests less than three months after the national elections, which can be both positive (on how people collectively raise their concerns) and also negative (in how violently that process is done).

As much as civic participation is trending upwards in most of the 20 countries surveyed, civil society networks show a marked decline.<sup>13</sup> This might be simply because people talk more in passages with no structured dialogue aimed at achieving positive results. Or simply because people have seen no real value in forums and meetings and thus decided to withdraw.

Noticeably, there is a close relation between the level of education, financial stability and how much citizens engage in political engagement. The view is that there more educated and wealthy people are, the more likely that they would challenge and engage their government.

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<sup>9</sup> What is Democracy? An idasa's Youth Vote Series publication

<sup>10</sup> Afrobarometer Briefing Paper no. 70: Are Democratic Citizens Emerging in Africa? (May 2009)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Afrobarometer Briefing Paper no. 70: Are Democratic Citizens Emerging in Africa? (May 2009)

It is also an unfortunate interested of some leaders to keep their constituencies in a less advantageous position so that they don't challenge nor engage them due to their low levels of education and income. This we don't only see in national issues but at local community and family levels where women tend to be more sidelined in decision making due to their dependence on their husbands for income. It also goes as far as being instituted in customary laws where women are not allowed to own and inherit land even if their husbands die, the land would be inherited by a male relative member unless she has a boy child.<sup>14</sup>

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Measures that increase women's voice in politics and policy making can have far-reaching implications for gender equality – because they enhance women's ability to act on their own behalf. And by fostering greater participation, transparency, and availability of information, increasing women's voice in politics and public life can improve the impact of policies and programs, reduce corruption, and strengthen governance. More active measures are then needed to enhance women's ability in politics and policy making in the short and medium terms since strengthening women's economic status is likely to contribute to greater political influence in the long run.<sup>15</sup>

In the developing countries there is a considerable increase in women participation in local and national politics but strengthening women's participation in the public arena goes well beyond formal representation in local and national bodies. It entails engaging them in budget processes, development planning and design of other government interventions.

Each year there are budget planning and review processes where citizens have the opportunity to contribute; and often there are new policies and programmes introduced but very few take the time to do so. Unfortunately politics is a game of numbers and those that have the numbers get to have influence and decide. Numbers themselves are about being mobilized as one voice towards a specific goal and purpose. This is a process of mobilization through which action is stimulated by a community itself. It relates to building the capacity of community groups to be able to work together coherently towards achieving sustainable use of natural resources and local capacity.

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<sup>14</sup> Nchimbi, R: Women in the Economy Society and Laws: Facts and Figures. UDSM (1996)

<sup>15</sup> *Engendering Development through Gender Equality In Rights, Resources and Voice. A World Bank Report*

This is not a campaign but a continual cumulative communicational, educational and organizational process that produces a growing autonomy and conscience. A community can be multilateral institutions and or civil society organizations focusing on various issues at local level like agriculture and livestock development, credit and enterprise development, gender equity and empowerment, natural resource management etc. Most of the time local capacity exist in communities but needs empowerment to be harnessed. Empowering communities means communities should have a voice, decision making power, and access to resources.

### ***Agriculture and Development***

Tanzania's economy is largely based on agriculture. Recent reports indicated that agricultural production growth between 2004 – 2007 has increased by an average of 5% while during 1995 – 2002 agriculture accounted for 45%<sup>16</sup> of the GDP while services providing 39% and industry 16%. Above all the agriculture sector still employs 80% of the labour force with most of this labour force concentrated in cotton, coffee and cashew nut farming. Agriculture also accounts for 85% of exports with dominant export products being coffee, cotton, cashew nuts, sisal and others even though the sector is heavily dependent on rain for outputs.

As in other countries in the region, land distribution has been unequal. The majority of farms are operated by small scale farmers who work 5 hectares or less. The last estimated number of small scale farmers was approximately 2,660,000 while large scale privately held land were 1,000 with an average land holding of 1,000 hectares.

The Tanzanian small scale farmer is burdened with high transaction cost. Its electricity tariffs for industrial users are among the highest in Africa. This is largely attributable to the large amount of diesel generated power and a rural electrification programme that is trying to cover a dispersed population and long term loans owned by the national electricity distributor to the Government.

The national water company also faces difficulties in terms of infrastructure. Currently they have outdated, leaky and in-efficient pipe system. The supply of water is irregular which resulted in many industrial companies having their own wells or pay for water to be trucked in. This is further compounded by the fact that both the electricity and water supplier have difficulties in collecting payment for their products.

In spite of this, the donor community also plays a key role in the agriculture sector. Over the last five years, Tanzania has received \$6 billion in aid. The World Bank has contributed over \$1 billion by the end of March 2006. 25% was composed of concessionary grants.

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<sup>16</sup> Tanzania Country Report. EIU. (2006)

DFID's portion has been GBP 500 million. Much aid, although no exact figures are available, takes the form of direct budgetary support.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic has infected 7% of adults in the 15-49 age category. This seriously hampers economic productivity but also on a social level increases communities, especially children's vulnerability to exploitation and hunger.

Thus, among others the challenges faced by small scale farmers are as follows:

- Limited size of land ownership which results in limited productivity;
- Agriculture production to a large extent is still not mechanized for many farmers;
- There are extension services in place but there are very few agents. It is estimated that 1 agent serves approximately 15, 000 farmers;
- Agriculture is rain fed dependent. Thus vulnerability to droughts, there is a lack of irrigation infrastructure with an estimated less than 1% of potentially irrigable land irrigated;
- There is overall limited access to agricultural inputs. The key problems are that subsidized inputs mechanisms are not effective (late deliveries, corruption), high prices on open markets, lack of availability in some areas, poor management of district input trust funds (farmers excluded from the management);
- There are poor access to markets and market information. Government personnel in district agricultural departments do not play their role effectively, there is a breakdown of cooperative societies and increase middleman cartels;
- Lastly, poor infrastructure in terms of roads, processing equipment and plans and unfavourable fiscal policies on lending to small farmers.

Despite all these challenges, small –scale farmers can still be more viable with enough emphasis on smallholders, implementing coherent strategies that double will their yields.<sup>17</sup>

In Tanzania like many other African countries women form the crux of the agriculture sector and by mobilizing them through mechanisms such as dialogue, advocacy campaigns, public awareness forums, formal and informal workshops it will be a great benefit not only for improving income generation but for achieving food security and dietary requirements for the rural population as well.<sup>18</sup> Economic equality and development for women in agriculture should also extend to the small grant financing, technical assistance, capacity building, identification and supporting of priority projects as well as participatory planning and budgeting.

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<sup>17</sup> Ngongi, N. Food Security in Africa. AGRA(2009)

<sup>18</sup> Idasa's Case Study on Agriculture in Tanzania (2009)

At the recent G8 Summit the world's wealthiest countries committed to US\$20 billion over the next three years for sustainable agriculture development while the Obama administration, which pushed the proposal, is ready to spend US\$3-4 billion over the next several years.<sup>19</sup>

The Minister of Agriculture, Mr. Steven Wasira recently reported that small-scale farmers in the southern highlands produced a record maize harvest in 2008 / 2009, ensuring food security in a year of serious drought. The minister attributed this success in part to its partnership with other organizations whose programmes are making it possible for small-scale farmers to get additional support and capacity building to be able to deliver good outputs while also accessing new opportunities the markets offer.

### ***Way forward***

Currently there is a need for more engagement of both civil society and small scale farmers in issues pertaining to agricultural development. There is a need for a collective dialogue by all stakeholders in the sector to sensitize governments, regional bodies and the likes on issues affecting small scale farmers including small budget allocations and poor disbursement of those funds at district level, lack of access to farming land, high input costs, poor conditions of roads and long distances to markets<sup>20</sup> and many others concerns. Continuous engagement in a structure dialogue on these issues would not only lead to better sharing of information but to increased farmer influence in policy formulation and implementation, increased public expenditure tracking, increased budget allocations in line with the of the Maputo Declarations, availability of technology and improved infrastructure, reduced taxes and better availability of medical support and related services<sup>21</sup>.

Government also need to ensure that all district plans are backed by comprehensive Opportunities and Obstacles to Development (O&OD) information; District Agricultural Development Grants (DADP) are inclusive of farmers so that allocation of funds and other resources from the central government is uniform and consistent; support and development of databanks; capacity building for land committees and tribunal to ensure gender equity and also improved public-private partnership that can enable the creation of a sustainable institutional framework to support the agricultural sector.

All stakeholders must then organize themselves in strong alliances as it is through networking that a solid advocacy voice can be made<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> [www.nation.co.ke](http://www.nation.co.ke)

<sup>20</sup> *Views of the People: A Report by the United Republic of Tanzania on Mkukuta.* (2007)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> ANSAF. *Farmers in Tanzania: The unsung heroes.* Dar Es Salaam (2008)

Change is always possible but difficult and with lot of resistance. Working together for a common good has proved beneficial in many places and so can Tanzania benefit from it.

Partnerships between government, civil society and the private sector can only be made possible if there is a common vision shared by all these stakeholders. Democracy is about continuous engagement in governance processes at all levels and organized dialogue through formal sessions can serve that purpose.

As an agrarian economy whose 80% of the population depends on agriculture to earn a living,<sup>23</sup> it is thus the obligation of the citizens of Tanzania to take advantage of their sovereignty as the source of power of the state<sup>24</sup> and engage in all levels of governance as a united voice, to ensure that the leaders take account and deliver on their promises to ensure that agriculture becomes a well supported and developing sector.

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<sup>23</sup> ANSAF. Farmers in Tanzania: The unsung heroes. Dar Es Salaam (2008)

<sup>24</sup> Shivji, I.G.; Majamba, H.I.; Makaramba, R.V.; Peter, C.M. Constitutional and Legal System of Tanzania: A Civics Sourcebook. MNN (2004)

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