

Democracy and Cooperative-Based Civil Society in South Africa

Caroline Kihato

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Development Policy Management Forum (DPMF)
United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA)
P.O. Box 3001
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Tel. 251 1 515410 (DL)/443197
Fax: 251 1 515410
Email: dpmf@uneca.org
Website: <http://www.dpmf.org>

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Policy Brief

This policy brief is based on a research report titled “The Co-operative Sector and Development of Future Leaders in South Africa”. The report attempts to address the following key issues: Has the transition to democracy in South Africa enhanced popular participation of the country’s citizenry in the political process? Are the majority of the people able to voice their needs? Does civil society effectively provide a platform for aggregating citizen needs and articulating them to government? What kind of leadership is emerging from post-apartheid civil society?

Using Newtown Housing Co-operative (NTHC) in Johannesburg as a case study, the research paper looks at the nature of civil society and, in particular, the extent to which it strengthens democracy and provides a source of ‘good’ political leadership in post-apartheid South Africa. While numerous studies have been conducted on the nature and role of civil society, few have analysed the sector’s actual and potential role in providing political leadership. The DPMF project on civil society, democracy and political leadership is therefore critical as it provides African scholars in East, South and West Africa the opportunity to look at the phenomenon of leadership within the civil society sector and, by extension, to analyse its potential in strengthening democratic processes in Africa.

The study is premised on the argument that citizens who are exposed to associational life that engenders democracy-enhancing practices and values such as participation, respect of rules of conduct and fair play, consensus-building, conflict resolution, and processes such as free and fair elections are likely to develop certain expectations that will ultimately shape their views about the nature of the government they want and the style of leadership it should have. As Robert Putnam argues, horizontal rather than hierarchical civic organisations create ‘social capital’ in citizens by engendering relations of trust borne out of common experiences in creating rules and abiding by them; voting for office bearers or standing for elections to hold office in an organisation; instituting disciplinary procedures; demanding accountability from leadership; debating and participating in decision-making processes. Once gained through membership in a civic body, these experiences create what he calls “civic mindedness”, which can be usefully transferred to the wider political system through participation in the political and democratic processes.

Further, if civil society organisations are exposed to democracy-enhancing activities, they, in theory, should not only be able to demand these of their leaders, but also be the nurturing ground for leaders who abide by and respect democratic processes. South Africa’s civil society has a rich history of nurturing political leadership. The fight against apartheid saw the development of strong leaders within civil society who were then incorporated into the democratic government structures. The lack of leadership has been one

of the most cited weaknesses of post-apartheid civil society. Yet, while civil society did experience a significant leadership vacuum in the immediate post-apartheid period, recent studies have shown that a new leadership is emerging in civil society¹ with the potential to influence decision-making and strengthen democratic processes.

The study of the NTHC provides an interesting looking-glass through which civil society in South Africa can be analysed. While the study acknowledges that NTHC cannot represent all civil society organisations in South Africa, it, nevertheless, raises issues that can be regarded as applying throughout the sector. Africa has a rich history of co-operative movements that have provided platforms for citizens to improve their socio-economic and political status. The NTHC, located in decaying inner-city Johannesburg, is no different and provides an opportunity for low-income members to access decent housing and, to some extent, voice their needs to government. Our research shows that existing leadership structures of the NTHC are elected democratically and decision-making within the structures is participatory. The co-operative has a nine-member Board of Directors, seven of whom are directly elected by its members. In addition to this, there exist six sub-committees, each representing one block in the housing complex. Each of these committees comprises a chairperson, a vice-chairperson and three other members, all of whom are

¹ See P. Heller, *A civil movement or a movement of civics?* Johannesburg Centre for Policy Studies, 2001.

elected by members of the block. Members raise to the sub-committee any issues they want; the sub-committee then meets with the NTHC Board to discuss them. Once these are discussed at the Board level, a general meeting of all residents is called during which proposals are discussed and voted on. It is, therefore, clear that internal structures exist to ensure that residents exercise their right to influence the selection of their leaders and to ensure that they are accountable in the management of the affairs of the NTHC. This provides a foundation for residents to build on mechanisms for holding their leadership accountable.

Yet, as in any other community participatory processes, participation in these bodies seems to fluctuate between highs and lows although the Chairperson of the Board seems satisfied with over 60% of the membership's participation in the activities and meetings of the NTHC Board. As yet, none of the leadership of the NTHC has been into government leadership structures although it might be too early to pass judgement on the co-operative as it has only been in existence since 1999. However, the research conducted on NTHC reveals that there is indeed a potential for the emergence of leadership that can influence political processes. Together with the membership, the Board of Directors is developing strategies to engage directly with government on obtaining tenure for members of housing co-operatives. In addition, there are also plans to engage directly with donors to raise funds for various projects. There is also an understanding amongst the leadership that in order to be effective in influencing government policy and ensuring that

the needs of members are heard, it is necessary to form alliances and networks with other co-operatives. Although these plans were still in the pipeline at the time of the interview, they reveal a progressive and dynamic leadership that has the potential to contribute positively to the strengthening of the democratic process and to meeting the needs of its members.

In view of the above, therefore, do we think that civil society has enhanced the popular participation of the citizenry in the political processes in post-apartheid South Africa? Yes. Is civil society a space which can nurture and develop high calibre political leadership? Yes. However, there are certain constraints that limit the extent to which post-apartheid civil society can perform these tasks. First, it is important to ensure that we do not romanticise civil society. Indeed, South Africa has its fair share of civil society organisations that are internally undemocratic and that pursue agendas that infringe upon the democratic rights of others. Some civil society organisations are also not representative of the society, promoting sectional rather than broad based interests. Second, the capacity of civil society organisations to effectively influence decision-making is limited by the fact that it suffers severe administrative, skills and financial constraints. The NTHC, for instance, relies heavily on a Non-Governmental Organisation – COPE – and the extent to which NTHC leadership and membership can participate in public policy processes is dependent on its ability to overcome its capacity constraints.

Notwithstanding this, the co-operative sector, both in Africa and South Africa, plays a vital role in defending and promoting the socio-economic interests of their members. The sector has come to play a critical role in South Africa as a platform for providing skills training opportunities for a future pool of leaders to serve our new democracy. While the NTHC is new and still in the process of evolving and developing its organisational, administrative and leadership capacity, it has already begun not only nurturing among its members vital practices and values that are central to the functioning of modern democracies, but also serving as a grassroots training ground for the current crop of leaders who could eventually graduate to serve their wider communities and even society as a whole. The skills and expertise they acquire by managing the affairs of the co-operative are therefore invaluable resources for our society and our democratic institutions of governance. Ensuring the sustained growth and development of leadership in civil society is the challenge facing South Africa. With the right kind of training, capacity building, administrative and financial support, civil society is bound to be a critical source of strong political leadership that is imbued with democratic values.