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The Challenges of Civil Society in Africa

A lecture by Michael Edwards*

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I'm delighted to be here, having watched TrustAfrica grow from an idea to a dynamic reality under Akwasi Aidoo's careful guidance, and now with a stellar team of staff members. For reasons I'll return to later, TrustAfrica and other foundations like it represent one of the most important developments in civil society today, and one that I'm immensely proud to be associated with.

Speaking globally for a moment, I think it is true to say that we are meeting at a time when the high levels of support for civil society that we saw in the early 2000s have begun to decline. That's partly because the idea of civil society has been used and misused for so many different and conflicting purposes. The US invasion of Iraq, for example, was justified by some as an attempt to "build civil society" in the Middle East as a counterweight to extremism, while, across the Atlantic, "Moscow's policy placed civil society at the heart of its comeback strategy" by developing an officially sponsored NGO infrastructure to "destabilize pro-Western governments and regain influence in places like Ukraine," two examples that demonstrate the sheer slipperiness of this concept, or at least the uses to which it has been put by some politicians.

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No idea can survive this kind of manipulation, and over the last five years there has been a noticeable move away from some of the exaggerated claims that were being made for civil society as a new 'magic bullet' for the problems of democracy and development. As one noted scholar puts it, the "church of civil society" has lost some of its membership and magic. This is surely a good thing, bringing greater rigor to the debate and forcing a more analytical approach to civil society's potential as a vehicle for understanding and changing key elements of our world. We cannot afford to be too romantic at a time when the *practice* of civil society is increasingly challenged by political and economic developments in many, many countries.

On the political side, as Bheki Moyo's introductory note to this lecture reminds us, attempts to restrict or close down the space for independent citizen action have risen as governments from Russia to Brazil, Egypt to Cambodia, and Uganda to the United States have formulated tighter laws, regulations and registration requirements for NGOs and other civic groups. Many of these attempts have been justified by reference to the "war on terror" and the need to clamp down on support for organizations deemed to be conduits for terrorist funding, but very few cases of such leakage have been successfully prosecuted, and these moves seem motivated by more basic, pre-existing suspicions of civil society's rising influence—the inevitable price of our success, one might say. Another line of attack has been against civil society accountability, long seen as a source of concern by civic groups themselves (and subject to substantial improvements over the past few years) but now taken up by the critics as an entry point for a broader questioning of their voice, role and legitimacy.

These are important developments, because everything we know from recent history tells us that successful civil society formations, social movements and NGO-government relationships are more likely to develop in open regimes, so placing restrictions on citizens' rights to free speech, association and access to information will make it even more difficult to identify and strengthen the connections we need to make between associational life, the public sphere and the good society, connections that form the central theme of the civil society debate.

The second set of challenges have come from the economic arena, most obviously from the global financial crisis that is hurting all of our budgets and our endowments but also from the increasing encroachment of business and the market into areas traditionally seen as the preserve of civil society. For many years, there has been a tension between radical and neo-liberal interpretations of civil society, the former seeing it as the social, cultural and political ground from which to challenge the status quo and build new alternatives, and the latter as the service-providing not-for-profit sector necessitated by "market failure," and it is this second approach which is on the rise—nicknamed "philanthrocapitalism" by journalist Mathew Bishop—and characterized by a mania for business metrics, commercial revenue-generation and induced competition between civil society groups, supposedly designed to deliver better results.

What is missing from this picture are the more traditional approaches of collective action, democratic decision-making, community organizing and the non-commercial values of solidarity, service and cooperation. "A society that reduces everything to a market inevitably divides those who can buy from those who cannot, undermining any sense of collective responsibility, and with it, democracy." So we need to ask ourselves, will these

twin developments of philanthrocapitalism and increased government regulation undermine civil society's transformative potential by reducing the ability or willingness of citizens' groups to hold public and private power accountable for its actions, generate alternative ideas and policy positions, push for fundamental changes in the structures of power, and organize collective action on a scale large enough to force through long-term shifts in politics, economics and social relations? That question sets the context for the work of TrustAfrica and of all the other organizations gathered together in the room today.

In Africa these concerns are underpinned by more fundamental criticisms of civil society in both theory and practice that will be familiar to all of you, I'm sure: the charge that this is an irrelevant concept in African societies and that civil society groups are simply mirrors of outside interests and agendas; the complaint that civil society is a dangerous distraction from the unfinished business of building national identities and developmental states which have the authority and legitimacy to redistribute land and other assets and give coherent direction to social and economic development; the refrain that African societies are too fragmented along particularistic lines to create any sense of a public or common interest; and the labeling of civil society activists as urban elites with no constituency beyond the Internet café and the departure lounge to Davos or the World Social Forum.

In a recent provocative piece on Zimbabwe in the *London Review of Books* Mahmood Mamdani echoed these doubts when he wrote as follows: "the arguments are not new and they turn on questions of nationalism and democracy, pitting champions of national sovereignty and state nationalism against advocates of civil society and internationalism. One group accuses the other of authoritarianism and self-righteous intolerance; it replies that its critics are wallowing in donor largesse. Nationalists speak of historical racism that has merely migrated from government to civil society with the end of colonial rule, while civil society activists speak of an exhausted nationalism, determined to feed on old injustices. Nationalists have been able to withstand civil society-based opposition, reinforced by western sanctions, because they are supported by large numbers of peasants."

These implied criticisms have more than a grain of truth embedded in them, and I'm not going to ignore their implications in the remainder of my remarks, but the vision of civil society they portray is too rigid, too static, too absolute, too bifurcated and too distant from the diverse and complicated lived realities of citizen action that provide the most important sources of learning and experience for the conversation we need to have, and they are too narrowly focused on a certain definition of civil society dominated by foreign-aid funded NGOs. Let's remind ourselves that civil society means much more than this—it means a certain kind of society marked out by equality and justice, democracy and tolerance; it means *all* forms of voluntary collective action—formal and informal, traditional and modern, secular and religious, and not just formal NGOs; and, because these diverse associations generate competing views about the ends and means of the good society—it also means the public sphere, the places and the spaces both real and virtual in which different visions can be reconciled and societies can secure a political consensus about the best way forward.

Civil society is simultaneously a goal to aim for, a means to achieve it, and a framework for engaging with each other about ends and means. When these three 'faces' turn towards each other and integrate their different perspectives into a mutually-supportive framework,

the idea of civil society can explain a great deal about the course of politics and social change, *and* serve as a practical framework for organizing both resistance and alternative solutions to social, economic and political problems. Civil society represents the endlessly creative power of human agency expressed through collective action in search of the good society, expressed in a million different ways, but facing questions and dilemmas that stretch across the boundaries of time, nation, language and culture. And as such it is also a complicated idea that doesn't give rise to simple or universal policy prescriptions. I want you to hold these complications in your minds as I go through the rest of my remarks because—paradoxically—they make it easier to talk about we can do to protect and extend civil society's role in the world with the necessary degree of nuance and sophistication.

Turning closer to home, what do these ideas have to say about civil societies in Africa? It's obviously impossible to generalize across contexts as diverse as Egypt, Senegal, Somalia, Malawi and South Africa, and I claim no particular expertise in any of these contexts, but a thumbnail sketch of key issues might start by recognizing that early work on civil society in Africa—which tended to deny the applicability of the concept completely or look for patterns of associational life that replicated those familiar from the West—has been replaced by new approaches to creating civil society theories and practices with distinctively African flavors. Central to this effort is the need to reinterpret and recombine the relationships between associations based on primordial attachments of tribe and clan (a natural consequence of the ways in which African societies have been structured) and those based around cross-cutting ties and affiliations, which have grown steadily over the last fifty years.

We know that both kinds of association existed even in colonial Africa, where nationalist movements emerged alongside independent churches, women's and self-help groups, professional and neighborhood associations, credit and burial societies, trade unions, farmers' organizations and politico-cultural networks that cut across traditional lines. These associations were spurred on by urbanization and rural-urban migration, increasing access to education, and the development of the market economy (which both required and created an increasing range of intermediaries, mutual-support and interest-based associations); by the struggle for independence, in which civil society activists often played key roles; and by the trend towards decentralization and democracy in the post-independence era, when advocacy, development and human rights NGOs began to emerge across the continent.

During the 1980s, the flowering of democracy in Eastern Europe and rising controversy over economic policies such as "structural adjustment" gave new impetus to NGOs and community organizations such as these, which also received increasing amounts of foreign aid in an effort to exert greater accountability over newly elected governments, to provide additional routes to citizen participation where representative political systems fell short, and to deliver development-related services to low-income and other marginalized populations.

The future of civil society in Africa (and much else besides) will be determined by the interplay between these different kinds of associations and the changing nature of the State, the economy and international forces. Will new publics emerge over time that are strong enough to out-vote primordial identities, or will those identities continue to provide the strongest source of security (and therefore loyalty) to those who feel excluded from the benefits of political and economic progress? Perhaps the future will contain elements of both, since one cannot assume that all "new" associations are "good" by definition or that all "old" ones are bad.

A healthy civil society needs both strong bonds and strong bridges, associations that meet the needs of citizens in all their expressions, and ties that reach back in time to provide continuity as well as forward to a new sense of Self. In Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria and elsewhere, ethnicity has already provided a focus for popular mobilization in contexts where existing power arrangements have closed down other routes to participation in democratic governance. What appear as “ethnic” conflicts are often more straightforward struggles over access to resources and political power that are manipulated along clan or tribal lines.

Nevertheless, the continued strength of these ties obviously raises questions about the relationships between civil society, democratic governance and the achievement of peace and other developmental goals in Africa. One of the most disturbing aspects of the violence and intimidation that followed rigged elections in Kenya in 2008, for example, was the speed and ferocity with which the conflict unfolded along ethnic lines. “We are at our best out there in the world,” wrote Kenyan activist Wambui Mwangi at the time, but “here at home, nothing but the lowest common denominator will do. We do not only deny dreams, we devour them, and ask each other ‘who do you think you are?’, as if the success of another is an affront.”

Some commentators argue that it will always be easier for the state to co-opt, or be co-opted by, primordial associations, thus reinforcing the inability or unwillingness of governments to act in the long-term interests of society as a whole—a key weakness of development in Africa when compared to the success of East Asian countries such as South Korea and Taiwan. Infiltration and even direct control of civil society associations by government is common in Cameroon, Benin, Ethiopia, Sudan and other African contexts. Academic battles continue to rage between those who claim that African societies are too fragmented along particularistic lines to support any notion of the public good and those who argue that traditional associational life carries with it the seeds of a true civil society, but on the ground in Kenya, Senegal, South Africa and elsewhere this argument is being answered in societies that are developing a richer tapestry of associational life containing threads from both these traditions. Whether these threads will knit together to produce sustained social and political gains depends on a number of factors, some of which are internal to civil society and some of which lie outside.

The most important of these external factors is the nature of the political regime, which in most African countries continues to restrict the ability of anyone in civil society to influence public affairs, regardless of the kind of associations to which they belong. As David Sogge puts it, “where Africans could organize to transform the political order ... rights and collective self-esteem have advanced. Yet where the interplay of global interests and national vulnerabilities has had the upper hand the advance of citizenship has been halted or reversed.... African Leaders have squandered public goods and public trust. Political competition and space for active citizenship have been marginalized or pushed underground.” In situations like these, civil society associations face a constant struggle for survival, but where survival is easier they can and do develop into successful social movements. South Africa’s Treatment Action Campaign is one good example.

Internally, it is clear that civil society is not always a source of support for democracy and peace. Some associations have an explicit commitment to deepening rights and citizenship while others hold few broader ambitions, preferring instead to concentrate on defending

their members' cultural, religious or economic interests. Those that do express these democratic commitments often have weak roots in constituencies and communities beyond the urban elite, so their influence is limited. Therefore, inclusive public spheres and broad-based civic action are rare, often emerging only at times of crisis and difficult to sustain beyond the first wave of democratic elections—even in South Africa, where NGOs and community-based organizations were so influential prior to and after the end of apartheid and now number over 50,000 strong, or in Kenya, which has three times that number of civil society associations. Dependence on foreign donors is high, raising suspicions about “external agendas” that make civil society groups an easy target for attacks.

The question we are left with is not “does civil society *exist* in Africa?” (for clearly, it does), but “how are African civil societies actually evolving on the ground?” and how can we help them to achieve more going forward, in ways that are adapted to, and effective in, different local contexts? One of the most important aspects of the vibrant contemporary debate about civil society that is unfolding across Africa and the Muslim world is the conscious rejection of imposed Western models and the “clash of civilizations” thesis that sometimes accompanies them, in favor of a much more nuanced exploration of how patterns of associational life are taking shape on the ground in different settings.

Debates about the supposed incompatibility of African or Islamic culture and civil society (or democracy) are much more frequent in the West than in the Muslim world, where the focus of attention is on actualizing forms of civic and democratic behavior that are feasible under authoritarian or semi-authoritarian rule. As Anwar Ibrahim observes, “we do not talk about Christianity and democracy or Hinduism and democracy,” but “Islam and democracy” has become the geo-political narrative of today. “The compatibility or incompatibility of Islam and democracy is not a matter of philosophical speculation but of political struggle,” concludes Asef Bayat. The weakness of civil society is the result of a political conflict between oppressor and oppressed, not a religious conflict between Islam and the West, a conclusion that has considerable resonance throughout Africa today.

When we look at African civil societies in this way we find some surprising results. Take Egypt, for example, where despite continued political repression, associational life has produced a fascinating cocktail of secular and Islamic flavors that conflict and re-combine to produce new openings for democracy and development, even if none of them have yet achieved sustained or broad-based gains. They include pro-democracy elements of the Muslim Brotherhood, moderate Islamists, repentant Jihadists, Kefaya, the pro-democracy “movement for change” which began in 2004 with a sit-in outside the Courts of Justice in downtown Cairo; strikes among textile workers which produced a break away from the state-controlled union hierarchy (described as an “official illegitimate organization” in contrast to the “legitimate non-official organizations” of the strikers); the coming together of blogger-activists who have created an “aggregator” to strengthen links between themselves in cyberspace (numbering more than 10,000 strong and doubling every six months, according to one recent estimate); the March 9 Movement to Reclaim University Independence, Writers and Artists for Change, women’s rights activists, networks of writers and intellectuals, and Egyptians against Torture (organized to confront the excesses of the state security services).

So there is always social or civic energy, and therefore hope and potential, even when the circumstances seem unpromising. What therefore should we *do* to protect and promote civil society in Africa, and what can we learn from efforts to do so elsewhere? I think there are two key issues. The first is the issue of social difference, and whether civil societies can forge new connections across old boundaries in order to cement broad-based constituencies in favor of reform and accountability. The second is the issue of relations with the State, and whether civil societies can find the right balance between support, and independence. Underlying these issues are some common questions about the legitimacy, accountability, capacity and resourcing of authentic and sustained civic action, to which I'll turn in my conclusion when I talk about TrustAfrica's role. Because context really does matter, it's important to resist the temptation to move too quickly to prioritize certain organizations, networks or legal frameworks as the answers to these questions. Instead, we should focus on building the conditions in which civil societies can shape *themselves* and their relationships with the state and with the market by providing more security, opportunity, and support. That means attacking all forms of inequality and discrimination, giving people the means to be active citizens, reforming politics to encourage more participation, guaranteeing the independence of associations and the structures of public communication, and building a strong foundation for institutional partnerships, alliances and coalitions.

Turning first to the issue of social difference, it's important to recognize that ethnic and other identities cannot and need not be eradicated since they form important parts of our Selves, so they have to be managed, and managing them is impossible while large asymmetries of economic and political power and representation remain. If civil society replicates those asymmetries it becomes part of the problem, not the solution. Only from security are people willing to reach out and make connections with others, and forge new alliances with those they traditionally regard as rivals or enemies.

In that sense, inequality and insecurity are poisonous to civil society, so things like support for a fair and inclusive economy, universal health and education, and equal representation in politics and government—which are not usually seen as civil-society building interventions at all—may be among the most important. Maintaining an explicit linkage, as TrustAfrica does in its programs, between the promotion of social and economic equity and the deepening of democracy is the key to avoiding the usual anemic donor shopping list of NGO capacity-building interventions.

Secondly, civil society needs both strong bonds and strong bridges, associations that build on primordial identities and others that cut across them. Too much bonding will embed potential conflicts in the structures of civic life, while too much bridging may leave behind those who are weakest and most vulnerable, before they are ready to be equal partners. We also know from civil society research in India, Indonesia, Rwanda and elsewhere that associations which tie the interests of different groups together in some common cause can be particularly effective in mitigating the risk of conflict and managing it when it breaks out. When people are jointly or mutually accountable for results that are important to them, new relationships can form across old divides. Like rocks in a steam, the hard edges of our differences can be softened over time as they knock against each other. So an emphasis on dialogue and deliberation between and across interest groups in civil society is critical, as TrustAfrica tries to do in all of its work.

Turning to relations with the State, we know that strengthening the links between civil society and political life is central to the ability of democratic governance to deliver peace and social justice. Experience shows that it is groups in civil society with strong networks and connections to institutional political actors like parties and parliaments that are most able to engage new spaces and institutions for citizen participation. Yet we also know that this is difficult and dangerous work, carrying with it the constant threat of co-option, and manipulation.

Civil societies must walk the fine line of “critical friendship”, showing loyalty and independence at different times and in different circumstances so that they can both support government officials who are championing reform from within and hold them accountable when they fall short. Building the demand for, and the supply of, effective, democratic governance, is equally important—they are not substitutes for each other. We need to find and support the virtuous circles that connect efforts to strengthen government’s ability to protect citizens’ rights, with efforts to put more civil society pressure on States to live up to their social obligations. Some form of formal compact between State and civil society is probably the best way to do this (along South African lines, however imperfect), and is a much better way forward than the repressive legislation that many governments favor.

Unfortunately this is never going to be easy, nor can we promote security for civil society on rational grounds alone. The contribution that civil societies make to democracy and development is clear from recent history (“you need us and we need you”), but politicians tend to love civil society only until they get elected, a lesson learned from pretty much every recent episode of democratization from Poland to Brazil. So there is no escape from the ongoing tension that is built into a healthy state-civil society relationship, and therefore no escape from the risks involved in civil society activism and the courage to speak truth to all forms of power.

Building a continental coalition to defend civil society in Africa can help, especially when allied to advocacy in favor of supranational laws and conventions, something that TrustAfrica has already started to work on by strengthening regional organizations and treaty systems for democracy and human rights, but the most important efforts remain at the national level because of the stubborn state-centricity of politics in Africa and elsewhere.

Underlying effective civil society action in all these areas are some basic and familiar issues of independence, authenticity, capacity and resources, which form the core of TrustAfrica’s work as I understand it, along with the need to foster an ongoing public conversation about civil society and its role in order to build confidence and support and reduce the doubts and suspicions that permeate relations both with the State and with many of its citizens, or subjects.

If one looks at civil society assistance from across the world one finds that even the most effective support has only strengthened the basic *infrastructure* of citizen participation in democratic governance—the capacities and opportunities people need to secure their rights and fulfill their responsibilities of agents of social change. Major questions remain about the *influence* of this infrastructure on the transformation of society, perhaps because too much grant-making has focused on national civic elites instead of building from the bottom-up, paying particular attention to democracy, diversity and accountability in civil

society itself. And despite the rhetoric of donors about sustainability, very little money has been invested in different ways of mobilizing indigenous resources in order to embed civic groups in their own societies, increase their social and political legitimacy, and reduce their vulnerability and dependence on foreign funding.

This is absolutely critical to the future health and independence of civil society in Africa, so both the TrustAfrica model itself and its broader work to strengthen African philanthropy are hugely important. I can't make a stronger case than that to donors in the room for further investments in TrustAfrica and other organizations like it, so that there will be many donors across the continent who do *not* see civil society solely in instrumentalist terms, as a delivery agent, in other words, for foreign aid that is not trusted to be channeled through African governments.

In conclusion, in all of its many expressions and disguises, and especially when viewed openly, creatively and holistically, civil society can provide a valuable framework for understanding and changing key elements of our world. The civil society debate will never be closed, because the essence of civil society is collective action, negotiation and struggle. In the years to come, I think these struggles and negotiations will place civil society under even greater pressure from a combination of "social engineering and state encroachment," "resurgent capitalism and hyper-individualism," and the old and familiar forces of nationalism and fundamentalism that are sure to walk across the stage wearing new accents and new clothes. These pressures will test and reshape the practice of citizen action in service to the good society in both positive and negative ways, and all of us who are involved in the struggle to protect and enhance civil society will need to understand and respond to these changes in sophisticated ways in and through our work.

In the rush to embrace the new we often forget to value our own inheritance, confusing innovation with effectiveness and eliding the very differences that have made civil society groups such valuable actors in society—the fact that they are *not* businesses or the State, the fact that they are *not* just the result of government or market failure but the outcome of the creative power of collective action, the fact that they exist to preserve and *extend* values of solidarity and sharing and not those that underpin the coercive power of government or the financial incentives of the marketplace, and the independence of mind and spirit (if not always funding) that enables them to hold both themselves and these other institutions to account, and give voice to alternative ideas and policy proposals that favor public over private interests.

At its best, at its core, in its deepest sense, civil society both provides and calls for a vision of a world transformed, a world transfused by love and justice, the "beloved community" of Martin Luther King, Tikkun Olam, Ummah and "Ubuntu", the African tradition of a common humanity characterized by unity in diversity, a line of thinking that moves us away from building NGOs and other civic groups as an end in itself, and re-focuses the debate on the kind of society we are trying to create together. Civil society is not simply a set of institutions or practices like philanthropy, it represents a different way of living and being in the world, a way that will be critical to our future survival and prosperity as one human race. Defending and extending civil society is therefore the work of all of us in the many years ahead. I wish you every success. Thank you for listening, and I look forward to continuing the conversation.