

Accepting the gap between activism & traditional CSOs

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According to the invitation letter for this event, “the purpose of this thematic consultation is to develop policy recommendations for civil society organisations, public and private sector donors and governments to enable them to bridge the gap between traditional CSOs and online activists.”

A few things come to mind when I consider this sentence and the discussion notes circulated in advance of this webinar, including:

- How compatible is “activism” with the work of “traditional CSOs”
- How compatible is donor funding with activism?
- What can ICTs contribute to promoting activism (and what can it not)
- Where should we be focussing our attention?

Unfortunately, answering these questions in the time we’ve been allocated will entail making some generalisations along the way, but I’d like to explore these questions particularly from the perspective of a context I know well – my work with the Zimbabwean civil society information portal Kubatana.

Kubatana is probably best known for our website, www.kubatana.net. On our site, we aggregate civil society press statements, reports, research and news articles across a number of topics, including civic activism, democracy and governance, human rights, and issues like water and sanitation, health, HIV/AIDS and sexuality.

The purpose of the website is to aggregate Zimbabwean civil society content into one central, organised, searchable archive, so that the publishing of our CSOs is not lost or too difficult to find to be helpful.

But as an organisation, our key objective is to keep Zimbabweans informed about the civic issues around them, and inspired to do something about them. As such, we spend a lot of time translating between the work, publishing and research of “traditional CSOs,” and our own desire to help Zimbabweans “get active” in making a difference in our country’s many challenges.

Granted, Zimbabwe may not be the best example to draw on for a discussion around the possible intersections between CSOs and activism. As has been well documented, Zimbabwe’s political environment is very closed. The space for discussion or dissent is small, and with speaking out comes a fear of consequences for both individuals and organisations. Zimbabwe is also hugely unpredictable. Some individuals or organisations “get away” with expressing a great deal of dissent. Others are harassed, arrested, tortured, brutalised or even killed for expressing even less. The result is that the majority of individuals and civil society organisations self-censor. In so doing, they don’t push the boundaries of the already small space for conversation, and “activism” as it might be more vibrantly expressed elsewhere takes on much more muted tones.

Kubatana has operated within this context since 2001. As an organisation we have a firm belief in the value of information, and in its importance in, amongst other things, helping Zimbabweans to engage with the civic issues around them, make informed decisions about their political environment, find their voice, and become active, participatory citizens. The country’s constrained political environment is one of our challenges. The conservatism, fear and bureaucracy of our colleagues in civil society is another.

Kubatana is different from many other organisations in Zimbabwe and, I suspect, elsewhere. We are a small organisation with a staff of five or fewer; we operate with a flat, consensus-driven hierarchy; encouraging activism in its various forms is central to our objectives; and we are essentially one large information department. But even within our less traditional construct, we struggle to always find meaningful, valuable suggestions for how our members can engage actively with the issues around them.

This brings me to my first point: How compatible is “activism” with the work of “traditional CSOs?” My short answer would be not very. Rather than looking at bridging the gap, I would urge us instead to look at how do we appreciate the different roles of both activists and traditional CSOs, and make sure we are supporting each separately, and expecting from each what they are best placed to deliver.

A recent paper by Evgeny Morozov¹ questions Google’s sense of its own exceptionalism. “For all its uniqueness,” Morozov observes, “Google is increasingly beset by the same boring problems that plague most other companies.” I would argue that a similar pragmatic pessimism needs to be applied to the analysis of CSOs and their potential to learn from activism.

As Morozov also observes, organisations inherently become self-perpetuating, by nature of their institutional inertia. So it is possible that the concept of “traditional civil society organisation” is actually antithetical to “activism” as it is typically constructed. The point therefore perhaps becomes less about making CSOs more activist, and more about encouraging, nurturing and supporting activism as separate from traditional CSOs.

Certainly, new media can play a valuable role in this, as suggested by the discussion notes. But the issue I believe is less that “established CSOs risk being marginalised and appearing to be behind the trajectory of citizens’ attitudes,” and more that in many cases traditional CSOs genuinely are disconnected from the constituency they claim to serve, largely because of their own institutionalisation.

Again, I speak from the perspective of my work with Kubatana in Zimbabwe, where organisation-led activism is rare, and unique to a handful of non-traditional organisations. That said, individual activism is also not widespread here.

Kubatana comes in at three places. Firstly, we take civil society content and current civic issues, and suggest and promote activist initiatives around these. This can include things like sharing information about an upcoming organised event – such as the “pregnant woman’s march” to promote ante- and neo-natal health for mother and child, sharing requests for solidarity – such as around the highly political ongoing trial of Munyaradzi Gwisai and five others from the International Socialist Organisation of Zimbabwe, or highlighting existing campaigns – such as efforts by the local residents’ association to gather voice around high levies and poor municipal services.

Secondly, Kubatana amplifies dissent around issues, and suggests actions our subscribers can take about it. For example, a recent blogger wrote a piece expressing her frustration with the lack of coins in Zimbabwe’s shops. Since the introduction of the multi-currency system in 2009, the South African Rand and US Dollar have become Zimbabwe’s main currencies of exchange. However, shops are notoriously short on change, particularly coins, and instead customers are offered low-cost items such as sweets, headache tablets and pens, to round the purchase cost up to the nearest dollar, or are given “credit notes,” till slips with the remaining value on them, which can be used at a later

¹ Don’t Be Evil. Evgeny Morozov, The New Republic. 13 July 2011.

<http://www.tnr.com/article/books/magazine/91916/google-schmidt-obama-gates-technocrats>

date. As you can imagine, after more than two years without change from the shops (and even more years without change from our politicians!) many Zimbabweans are frustrated. So we used our platform not only to publish this blog and attract readers to it, but also to encourage subscribers to contact the Ministry of Finance to express their frustration and call for government action around this issue.

Thirdly, Kubatana can help to verify or “vet” new campaigns and initiatives. This role as “gate keeper” is a sensitive one, and should not be treated lightly. Kubatana’s reputation, built over 10 years of consistent activity, gives us a loyalty amongst our subscribers which newer initiatives lack. When we encourage our subscribers to support or participate in an initiative, it lends a credibility to that event. However, with that role comes a responsibility – both to investigate new initiatives before we promote them, and to not let our own potential bias prevent us from telling others about an otherwise credible initiative.

In thinking about these three entry points and more traditional civil society organisations, there is some room for action. Whilst they’re unlikely to generate events or suggest individual action on their own, they certainly could do more to support and promote existing initiatives. They could also serve as useful verification and filtering mechanisms for campaigns as they emerge. To this end, their established, institutional nature comes in handy. People potentially know, respect and trust them because they have been on the scene for an extended period of time. Encouraging traditional CSOs to vet new activist initiatives and tell their members about the ones they trust is not as big of an ask as expecting them to Become those new activist initiatives themselves.

My second question is related to the first: How compatible is donor funding with activism?

In an effort to secure donor funding, CSOs find themselves in a challenging position if they want to remain light, agile and untraditional (in other words, potentially more “activist”). Donors put more confidence into organisations which are established, trusted and reliable. Clearly, some activist organisations manage to attract financial support from donors for their work. And, just because an organisation is established doesn’t mean it will account properly for funds received, manage them well, not embezzle them and will direct them towards projects that contribute positively towards their community. But a discussion about how to help CSOs be more activist in their work would be naïve if it did not raise the role that donors play in keeping CSOs more laden rather than flexible.

A requirement for board meetings, organograms, five year strategic plans, line item budgets and monthly financial reporting certainly helps a donor assess an organisation’s credibility and track its use of funds. But how does it add to the bureaucratisation of this organisation’s functioning?

One could well ask why more “activist” initiatives are seeking funding in the first place – and use this question to draw a valuable distinction between traditional CSOs and more activist groupings. But in contexts like Zimbabwe, where unemployment is over 90% and the vast majority of the population lives below the poverty line, how realistic is it to expect anything more than occasional, ad hoc activism if would-be activists are also struggling to make a living elsewhere? At the same time, how does the quest for donor funding contribute to an organisation or its staff shifting from being passionate about a cause to being more concerned about perpetuating its own financial survival? How does this undermine each of our commitment to “working ourselves out of a job?”

My third question is: What can ICTs contribute to promoting activism (and what can it not)?

As the discussion notes rightly point out, ICTs are not the new quick-fix that will radically transform all of us into activists. Yes, some Egyptians and Tunisians used new media to express their support

for and encourage others' participation in the people power revolution there. But, as Nancy Messieh points out in a recent paper², "The number of people who took to the streets because of a call on Twitter cannot be compared to the number of people who took to the streets because of on-the-ground efforts of activists, who ventured into areas of Cairo and Egypt where Twitter was virtually unheard of the spread awareness."

Like traditional CSOs, ICTs need to be put into perspective and appreciated for what they can offer – and not be expected to deliver more than they can.

To again draw on the example of Kubatana, in our work, we use a range of new media tactics and old to share information with Zimbabweans, and to receive information from them. Throughout our work, we focus on two-way communication channels. We use a community blog to share informal opinion and observations about life, and encourage comments on these posts. We use a weekly email newsletter to share news articles, civil society statements, event announcements, scholarships, opportunities, civil society job vacancies, inspirational quotations and suggestions on how our subscribers can be active around the issues we raise. We invite feedback on our featured articles and welcome contributions for our mailings. We use SMS to share information alerts and solicit feedback on topical issues. We use the Freedom Fone interactive voice response software we've developed to share pre-recorded audio information with our subscribers, and to secure their feedback via SMS and voice mail. Wherever possible we share print publications and other hard copy materials with our subscribers, to further bridge the digital divide.

We do so mindful of the efficiencies which ICTs can offer – for example the speed with which a text message alert can be sent to tens of thousands of Zimbabweans, and the cost efficiency of email as a communications tool. We also take advantage of the ways in which ICTs can create a buffer between people and actions – making certain actions feel safer or easier because a person "just" has to send an email or reply to a text message. But we are also mindful of the limitations of these tools, particularly in terms of their ability to create the "stronger ties" that the likes of both Messieh and Malcolm Gladwell³ acknowledge are so essential for creating activism on the ground.

This brings me to my final point: Where should we be focussing our attention? If we acknowledge that traditional CSOs differ from activist constructs, and that it's unrealistic (and possibly undesirable) to imagine the one becoming the other, what should we be encouraging traditional CSOs to do to better support activism? And if we acknowledge that ICTs are not the magic bullet to transform our communities or promote activism, what are they good for? How do we be proactive in using them to their best advantage?

Some ideas on both scores:

- Use traditional CSOs for what they're good for (report writing, data collection, verification, networking, lending credibility where appropriate)
- Promote activism through non-traditional structures which can promote flexibility, unconventional thinking and tactics, encourage excitement and participation
- Bring activism thinking into traditional CSOs (campaign logic and strategising, the focus on participation and two-way communications, the building of contact databases)
- Bring traditional CSO thinking into activism (record keeping, accountability)

² Why Egypt wasn't waiting for WikiLeaks to ignite a revolution. Nancy Messieh, The Next Web. July 2011. <http://thenextweb.com/me/2011/07/10/why-egypt-wasnt-waiting-for-wikileaks-to-ignite-a-revolution/>

³ Small change: Why the revolution will not be televised. Malcolm Gladwell, The New Yorker. October 2010. http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell

- Use ICTs for what they're good for (exploit efficiencies, encourage two-way communications, build participation via online fora where relevant)
- Use the "buzz" around ICTs to the advantage of your campaign (draw attention, gather followers, cross link to other issues and campaigns)
- Don't lose sight of what ICTs can't do (the importance of person-to-person interaction (postal materials, feedback channels, meetings, events, the building of "strong ties."))