

Civil society: balancing political and economic issues

Malawi has a rich history of organised social life, which can be summarised into three periods: pre-independence, one-party regime, multiparty democracy. Today, civil society is rather weak, but this weakness is due not only to the distrust which characterises its relations with the state, but also to some major constraints within the sector.

During the colonial period, civil society was very dynamic: in the 1940s and 1950s pressure from a large number of traditional associations, welfare societies, religious organisations, and trade unions resulted in substantial reforms; in the 1960s, these organisations participated actively in the decolonisation process.

During the post-independence period, the role and autonomy of civil society was very much undermined by the one-party regime. Even though their number grew substantially between the mid-1970s and the late 1980s, civil society organisations (CSOs) operated only in the area of development and relief, providing health care, basic education, refugee protection.

Democracy issues

In the early 1990s, CSOs became involved in democratisation issues. The most prominent was the Public Affairs Committee (PAC), a religious and inter-faith organisation made up of the Episcopal Conference of Malawi (Catholic Church), Muslim Association of Malawi and the Malawi Council of Churches (Protestants). PAC, supported by lawyers, businessmen, and students, was the key actor in the transition from despotism to multiparty democracy.

With democracy, the number of CSOs increased exponentially. Most of the new CSOs deal with governance and human rights issues, and are often urban-based. The relationship with the state, if compared with the previous regime, has improved but is still characterised by mistrust and fear. Civic education is the area which attracts several CSOs. Gender issues have lately received considerable attention: a number of organisations have emerged, dealing not only with women's rights but also with business financing. "Democracy in Malawi is in crisis. Even though we have a multiparty system, it seems that people in power have not learned much from the failures of the one-party system. The Church in particular is very much in touch with people at the grassroots level. Our task is facilitated by the fact that we have a podium every Sunday, whereas other organisations have to struggle to get authorisations and resources to organise meetings. But we are all very concerned about the deterioration of democracy: the tendency in government is to do things as if there are no other parties or forces in society", says Reverend Boniface Tamani, chairman of PAC.

Despite its coordinating role, CONGOMA has not been yet a strong force in the Malawian development process.

Economic issues

A major opportunity for CSOs to get involved in economic issues was provided by the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) process. During a meeting of 28 CSOs, a task-force, subsequently named the Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN), was created in November 2000 to coordinate civil society participation in the PRSP process (and now also in Malawi's budget cycle). Although the involvement of CSOs in the PRSP process is a major step forward, serious doubts still remain: "At the beginning we questioned the fact that we were not given enough time for a meaningful participation, but then we got an extension. Once we became involved, we saw that the major problems Malawi faces were not adequately addressed, starting from good governance. But very important, if we are serious about poverty reduction we should discuss the issue of debt relief: servicing the huge debt we have accumulated over the years is one of the major causes that prevents Malawi from developing," argues Francis Ng'ambi, chairman of MEJN.

Constraints and challenges

Overall, civil society is weak in Malawi. Several constraints have been identified, some of which lie outside and some inside the sector itself. First, some political leaders still perceive civil society organisations as a threat to their power. Second, probably out of fears from the past regime, people are not inclined to get involved in controversial political and economic issues. Third, some CSOs lack a solid constituency as they are not rooted in the Malawian society. Fourth, the majority of these CSOs lack organisational skills, do not use reliable information, are staffed with not well qualified people. Fifth, almost all CSOs have a weak financial base, as they are not able to generate resources locally, and thus are too dependent on donor funding and agendas.

In sum, balancing political, social and economic issues is a key challenge for civil society in Malawi. While much progress has been achieved in civil liberties, major emphasis should be placed on economic issues: poverty reduction should be the highest priority for everybody in Malawi, both government and civil society. ■ MC