How CSOs get it wrong and what we should do instead: Reflections from Tanzania

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Introduction: how much do we matter?

- **Interviewing job applicants**
  - Not being able to name a single NGO they admired

- **Surveys/opinion polls**
  - Consistently bottom of list as source of information, services, value, importance

- **Effectiveness self assessment**
  - Struggling to identify major long term achievements
Intro continued

- What would happen if 95% of NGOs closed down tomorrow?
  - At national level
  - At local levels?

- Who would protest? How vociferously?
Outline of presentation

- Seven things we do poorly
- Three things we need to get right
- Two final reflections on the meaning of all of this
I. Slogans not critique

- Quality of evidence and analysis often poor
- Create straw enemies: IMF and World Bank are the favourites
- Calls for more (e.g. more money should be spent in education)
- Same old tired, predictable messages; tendency to complain
- Little debate and challenge to the internal political correctness
2. Romanticize the people

- An uncritical promotion of ‘people know best’, but do they? Everything?
- A fetishizing of participation; key marker of development
  - Does it add value?
  - Does it foster ownership?
  - Process trumps results
3. Depoliticized capacity building

- People need capacity to develop themselves, so lots of:
  - Training
  - Facilitation
  - Sensitization
  - Workshops and seminars

- Technocratic approach that views capacity as lack of skills or consciousness, little attention to motives, incentives, feasibilities

- Paying people for the opportunity to advance themselves?
4. Very small is beautiful

- Numbers reached tend to be very small
- ‘Pilot projects’ used as justification when evidence shows pilots rarely succeed (pilots a retreat from politics?)
- Intense quality of inputs make interventions difficult to reproduce
- Little calculation of unit costs and possibilities of scaling up
- A self-marginalization towards the cute and quaint?
5. Clamoring to count

- Demands for a seat at the table in processes, meetings, structures
- Demand to be part of the decision-making
- Reinforcement of ‘stakeholders’ instead of ‘public’
- Reinforcement of a parallel governance structures
- Cooptation?
6. Chasing the money

- Leading the call for more aid (0.7%, more funding for Africa, etc)
- Constantly fundraising (increasing capacity building in this area)
- Limited questioning of received wisdoms that come with cash (e.g. HIV/AIDS)
- But
  - How often is more money the answer?
  - Do we grapple with the debilitating and corruption effects of aid?
7. Easy legitimacies?

- What is the practice and reality of the claims we make?
  - Represent interests of the people?
  - Can bring innovations?
  - Can be nimble and flexible?
  - Can be more cost effective?

- What is the level of internal debate on these matters? Public perceptions?

- An unholy convenience that allows donors/govt to check boxes and us in business?
Ways forward

What should CSOs do instead?
1. Promote internal debate

- Independent, rigorous evaluations (not rigid bean counting)
- Question received wisdoms
- Frown on bashing straw enemies
- Promote dialectical thinking instead of only one side of a binary position
- Foster culture of sound analysis and rigorous learning
2. Move from stakeholders to public engagement

- Less workshops and stakeholder consultations; more opportunities for ongoing public engagement
- Less parallel ‘development’ spaces (where you bribe people to show up) and more use of local governance, media and trades unions (institutions with reach)
- Less preaching and more debate; engaging the public imagination (e.g. use of media)
3. Be strategic

- Clear (political) analysis of context and of what drives change
- Focus on results (not in the narrow, short term bean counting sense) but in terms of the differences that count
- Develop a strategy, program, budget and accountability framework and get donors to line-up behind it (not the other way around)
Conclusion

Two reflections
I. Historicizing our place

- What role have CSOs played in social change in the last 100 years? Contrasting programs/projects vs social movements?
- Monitoring implementation and change vs participation in decision-making?
- Patronage vs democratic space and rights?
- Where CSOs fail to be compelling should we wonder why people become more pragmatic (the best we’ll get)?
2. What we need most

• From resources to resourcefulness and imagination
  ◦ Cultivate savvy and creativity
  ◦ Ability to make new connections
  ◦ Stimulate debate that grabs public interest
  ◦ Ability to articulate

• This is a different business from the one we know – more culture and politics and less development. Can we do it?