



NGO, CSO Influence, and Media Power for Africa's Future

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Summary

Africa has seen raw materials and resources fuelled growth in many States for the last two decades. International policymakers, investors, and other stakeholders began “chomping-at-the-bit” to take advantage of the presumed opportunities Africa was projected to provide. For reasons best known to them, they crafted optimistic narratives presumably to justify their eagerness to benefit from it, even though the sceptics consistently pointed out that the fundamentals did not seem to support this narrative. African researchers and citizens highlighted their experience of political governance and its failure to yield dividends, which formed the basis of their cynicism and, incidentally, why this optimistic narrative is yet to

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materialise. It, therefore, appears that all stakeholders want to see a lively African narrative become true if only the question of poor leadership and governance could be addressed.

Political settlements among elites in Africa have not been efficient and have left them competing for access to the spoils of power, almost to the exclusion of delivery on good governance. Non-State Actors aggrieved by this situation struggle to use their power and influence to coalesce society into a productive Social Movement towards a shared vision of Africa's future. However, this is regularly thwarted by political elites who appear increasingly willing to choke civic spaces by denying citizens their fundamental freedoms such as association, peaceful assembly, and speech. NGOs, CSOs, and Media need to use their power and influence to build critical consciousness of activists, establish their organisational strength, explore political opportunities, and shape the protest frame in mobilising for change.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to explore why it seems African NGOs and CSOs appear not to have fully used their influence, and media appears not to have deployed its power towards coalescing society into a productive Social Movement in negotiating progress towards a shared vision (or narrative) of Africa's future. This topic carries several underlying assumptions, including at least the following (1) There is a shared vision (or narrative) of Africa's future; (2) Current political leadership is not leading society adequately towards that narrative; (3) African NGOs, CSOs and Media are influential or can shape the narratives on Africa's future.

Towards a Shared Narrative of Africa's Future

Many narratives of Africa have existed. It is important to understand the prevailing narratives as they have shaped the world (Hendin, 2018). Africa has at various times been referred to as the "Dark Continent" by Henry Stanley in his 1878 journals, where he noted that much of Africa was still unknown (Pimm, 2007), as the "Hopeless Continent" by The Economist Magazine in its cover story for the weekly edition of 13th May 2000 suggesting that "the new millennium has brought more disaster than hope" to Africa; however, the Financial Times of London

newspaper helps depict how the narrative on Africa has been changing since 2000 with headlines like, “Africa rising” (Johnson, 2015) a narrative suggesting that improved State performance in Africa would lead to times of steady economic growth and better outcomes for the Africa’s middle class (wikipedia.org, 2021), “From ‘Africa rising’ to ‘Africa watching’” Blas and England (2014) following the “Africa watching” term introduced by IMF Chief at the time, Christine Lagarde, suggesting the need for caution around the “Africa rising” narrative, “Africa: Rising: for whom and for how long?” by Beattie (2014) suggests the need to be more nuanced about which bits of Africa and how long will they be rising, “Africa’s rise is stalled by the Chinese slowdown,” The FT View (2015) signalling the likelihood that the growth could not be sustained, “Inability to industrialise has held Africa back” in which Rowden (2015) seems to suggest the proponents of “Africa rising” have not adequately factored in the fundamentals, “Africa is growing in fits and starts” Pilling (2016a) acknowledges that though the continent is not there yet, things may indeed have changed irreversibly since the year 2000, “‘Africa Rising’ narrative is hit by recession realities” by Fick (2016) seems the “what did you expect” kind of report suggesting “Africa rising” was hyped (Pilling, 2016b), in “Africa between hope and despair” suggests if there was a hype this arose from the vacuum created by the 2008 financial crisis that sent investors searching for “the next big growth story,” before stubbornly returning to the “Africa rising” narrative with, “Africa poised to play a major role in the world” in which Pilling (2019) suggests Africa is performing much better than people can expect given its daunting problems. Finally, the reportage returns full cycle in 2020 to declare, “This will be Africa’s Century,” in which Jackson (2020) signals once again that “demographics will fuel the continents rise in a world of shrinking working-age populations.” This is the same sort of argument that McKinsey Global Institute put forward in 2010 (Roxburgh et al., 2010) suggesting a combination of demographics, penetration of mobile telephony, rapid urbanisation, an emerging middle class in addition to vast natural and mineral resources could fuel growth in Africa, which has generated great debate ever since. This view of a transcendent Africa is also shared by Ms Bience Gawanas, UN Under-Secretary-General and Special Adviser on Africa (Gawanas, 2019), who declares she is optimistic about Africa’s future. These headlines illustrate the conflict between those who believe Africa’s development to be imminent, “Afro-optimists,” and

those who are disappointed that it is neither imminent nor likely to be sustainable, “Afro-pessimists.”

Weak Political Leadership Towards Africa’s Future

In 2021, the FT covered the story about Africa-dedicated venture capitalist firms raising \$900m, acknowledging an emerging middle class (Pilling, 2021). The article quotes a certain Hendrik Du Toit, Chief Executive at Ninety-One, an Anglo-South African Asset Manager as saying, “...investor interest in Africa is still limited” as “...African policymakers have not delivered on the ‘Africa Rising’ narrative that did the rounds 10 to 15 years ago...” This begs the question, whose narrative of Africa’s future is “Africa rising”? According to Blas and England (2014), international policymakers have coined these narratives. According to an African researcher (Addo, 2015), African States have for too long been pulled and jerked about by the twists and turns of ideas from foreign powers without much thought being given to context and what Africa needs. These leaders have typically been seen as weak and ineffectual feeding the narrative that Africa cannot survive without foreign intervention.

Clift (2011) warns that the “Africa rising” narrative has lulled both African Governments and their foreign advisers away from the core tasks of building prosperity in the African States. Another African researcher, (Khisa, 2019), questions the “Africa rising” narrative, stating, “First, the ‘Africa rising’ narrative at best sits on a shaky foundation. African economies may have registered modest growth in recent years, but the growth is either superficial or not in the sectors that matter the most. Second, the rather rosy picture of a rising Africa masks the continent’s continued marginal position in the global capitalist structures of power, domination and exploitation.” Lopes and Hirsch (2020) tell us, “...contemporary afro-pessimism...is about risk perceptions, levels of conflict, political instability, and the variety of economic experiments. Many continue to identify Africa as uniformly beset by conflict, crisis, bad governance, and a dangerous place for making investments.” Even with increased penetration of the mobile telephony (Teagle, 2021) warns that Africa could once again be left holding the low-value end of the stick since Africa is not in a position to add value to and benefit fully from the data it produces and may end up having to repeat historical patterns—exporting raw data to reimport intelligence built from its data, perpetuating Africa’s failure to add value to its resources to break free from poverty.

If their role in preparing a satisfactory narrative for Africa's future is to ensure sustainable and sustained improvements in standards of living of Africans in ways that reduce disparities in income and wellbeing between different groups in society while being mindful of the right of future generations to also partake of Africa's endowments then, Leaders also need to start telling more stories about the future than about the past (Naudé, 2019). Brooks (2018) argues that despite the optimistic "Africa rising" narrative, what could be observed in Mozambique, for example, shows that the rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer. Elites continue to arbitrage between global and national markets to line their pockets resulting in a skewed distribution of wealth.

So, it would appear that Afro-pessimism results from disappointment with weak political leadership performance towards this narrative of Africa's future even if Beattie (2014) thinks that holding Africa up to higher standards than she one should is the real problem here. If a shared narrative of Africa's future can emerge through capable, effective, and accountable leadership—it would appear Africa's stakeholders can unite behind the idea of an "Africa rising."

Role of Africa's NGOs, CSOs, and Media in Shaping the Narrative

Tobi (2017) suggests that "changing the narratives on Africa has to do with exploiting Africa's full potential: plural identities evolving in various fields, booming content production, and bringing forward experts and academics from the continent itself, in a better position to ... nuance ... their analysis about Africa. According to all panellists, shifting preconceived notions must come from the junction between youth, media and academics." The position taken by Makura (2020) is that what Africans know of each other is what they learn through international (Western) media prisms and not directly through relating with each other. She believes this to be part of the general intolerance and mutual distrust Africans have for each other. She goes on to assert that "...we need to share more of our stories – contextualised, nuanced human stories that show us who we are. Stories matter – they're a window into the continent's multi-faceted personality and the most powerful way of informing us about who we are." According to Boakye (2021), "...armed with tools to create their own stories and with an audience through social media, African people and governments have begun to create their narratives, often focusing on stories that celebrate the normalcy of African

lives and contributions, working towards an Africa-optimistic future” Pointer (2020) suggests that young African women, in particular, are finding ways to express themselves and shape their identities by relying on technology, despite marginalisation by mainstream media. African youth are the primary users of Social Media. They are optimistic about Africa’s future; they list infectious diseases, terrorism, unemployment and corruption as issues they are most concerned about (Pointer, 2020).

Suppose the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are anything to go by. In that case, concerns raised by Africa’s youth, about 70% of Africa’s population, is that they would want a future in which progress is made towards achieving development goals and reducing corruption in Africa in addition to the value-addition, industrialisation, economic diversification and so on implied in the “Africa rising” narrative. NGOs, CSOs and traditional Media, along with women and youth (inclusive of their digital technology and social media tools), the emerging middle class, academia, business, and government, must come together to mobilise society against these ills. In other words, it would take collective action on the part of all these stakeholders to shape the narrative.

Civil society (and I dare say media) in Africa has taken a prominent role to curb the menace of corruption (Essoungou, 2013). The African political elite has honed formal and informal institutions to ensure they, or “corruption, fights back” efficiently when civil society, media or other actors try to use their influence and power to mobilise to curb it (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2011; Ejiogu et al., 2021; Okonjo-Iweala, 2019). The push back against the possibility of such social mobilisation to demand change is now narrowing the civic space in Africa. The ability to shape the narrative around Africa’s future will depend on how well these actors can band together to keep open and expand the civic space to regain the narrative. This is expected to be a challenge as international donors tend to be the main funders in that space, leaving a paucity of funds for anything beyond the donor-driven agendas (Fowler, 2021).

RECLAIMING THE CIVIC SPACE

The civic space which Africa needs the most is closing. “Civic space is the bedrock of any open and democratic society. When civic space is open, citizens and civil society organisations can organise, participate and communicate without hindrance. In doing so, they can claim their rights and influence the political and social structures. This

can only happen when a state holds by its duty to protect its citizens and respects and facilitates their fundamental rights to associate, assemble peacefully and freely express views and opinions. These are the three fundamental rights that civil society depends upon” (civicus.org, 2021). Regaining and keeping control of these three rights on the part of African non-State actors (such as NGOs, CSOs, and Media) will take all the power and influence they can muster within the context of the political opportunity available for them to do so.

*For African NGOs, CSOs, and Media to Shape the Narrative
on Africa's Future*

Doug McAdam's Political Process or Political Opportunity theory was first published in 1982 from the USA Black Civil Rights Movement study, 1930–1970. The idea has since been modified several times over the years. McAdam (1999), in his theory, closely examined the role of black churches, black colleges, and Southern chapters of the NAACP in supporting protests and concluded that “political opportunities, a heightened sense of political efficacy, and the development of these three institutions played a central role in shaping the civil rights movement.” We shall use this theory to examine what power and influence African NGOs, CSOs, and the media could muster to shape narratives about Africa's future. The power and influence are expected to mobilise society into a social movement that could persuade African leadership to provide sustainably good leadership and deliver on the Afro-optimist narratives that seem to be preferred by all under capable, effective and accountable leadership. Today, “political process theory outlines five key components that determine the success or failure of a social movement: political opportunities, mobilising structures, framing processes, protest cycles, and contentious repertoires” (Crossman, 2021).

“Political Opportunities.” Most countries in Africa do not fit O'Toole's (1995) Libertarian, Communitarian or the Egalitarian States. They fall within some shade of the Corporatist State, where power is exercised through large organisations, or the state is controlled by large interest groups (like business, trade unions, the military, politicians, peasants, and so on). Such Corporatist Coalitions of political elites could have broad or narrow social support, and power could be focused within their group or be more widely dispersed. Khan (2018) calls political settlements the

resulting political climate. The leadership of a few states in Africa (like Rwanda) could be said to enjoy broad social support and have power held narrowly, leaving political elites "... incentivised to provide broad-based development and have the ability to make and implement decisions accordingly" (Kelsall & Hickey, 2020). This is the sort of leadership needed in the narrative of "Africa rising"; however, what is typical is a situation in which "elites lack incentives to create institutions for broad-based development and instead compete among themselves for rents and perquisites" (Kelsall & Hickey, 2020). This political arrangement leaves vulnerabilities in the relationships among elites and between elites and the populace, presenting political opportunities for African NGOs, CSOs, Media and other actors who feel deprived, mistreated, or have other grievances against the system, to intervene (Crossman, 2021).

"Mobilising Structures." There is a multiplicity of NGOs, CSOs, Media, Academia, Youth Social Media clusters, Women's groups, etc., in Africa. According to Crossman (2021), Mobilising Structures are forms of organisation that activists already use. They provide a corporate existence, leadership, logistics, and communication to all involved. Africa is not short of organisations with robust and efficient administration and access to sufficient resources, especially from outside the movement. They can collaborate with existing organisations to recruit and motivate actors to join and participate in an action. These are the mobilising structures. Political elites try to attack the freedoms to associate and assemble peacefully and thus curb the Civic space and with it the influence and power of NGOs, CSOs, and Media to coalesce society into a social movement for change.

"Framing Processes." Ciurel (2017) suggests, Framing is the process of choosing which specific pain points, remedies, and proposed interventions to highlight in messaging that best defines the situation in ways that resonate with most actual and potential participants in a way that transmits a call to action. Social media has proven a valuable tool for disseminating this protest frame and galvanising movement online or offline. Online platforms (social networks, etc.) facilitate the dissemination of collective action messages and recruiting of supporters. Also, social media influence frame alignment processes of social movements through the deliberate, calculated actions of groups of people from African NGOs, CSOs, Media, Academia, Youth and Women Groups, etc., to mould a

shared vision, outline a rationale for and legitimise the actions contemplated (Crossman, 2021). The framing process or process of articulating narratives that impact Africa's future is an aspect of social movement mobilisation that political elites truncate when they curtail the civic space, thus limiting the ability to express views and opinions freely.

“Protest Cycles.” The time within which activists can sustain their actions with intensity is known as a protest cycle (Crossman, 2021). The protest cycle is aided by the strength of their “mobilising structures,” “protest frames,” and diversity of their “contentious repertoire.” “As such, protests serve to strengthen solidarity within the movement, to raise awareness among the public about the issues targeted by the movement and serve to help recruit new members” (Crossman, 2021). Since the “Arab Spring” and copycat protests and the “Black lives matter” and its copycat protests, African governments have grown more authoritarian and drastic in their cutting of protests to ensure protest cycles, if any, are short and painful. Following the abrupt conclusion of the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria after the massacre of protesters at Lekki tollgate in Lagos by persons dressed in Nigerian military camouflage, the government banned Twitter in 2021. It sponsored several bills to curtail the civic space. This trend is a significant hindrance to mobilisation by NGOs, CSOs, Media, Academia, Youth and Women's groups, etc., into social movements to shape narratives for the future.

“Contentious Repertoires.” These are the range of tactics at the disposal of activists to press their claims and escalate their actions to leverage their collective voices when making demands. These could include petitions, letter writing, mass marches, strikes, boycotts, and so on (Crossman, 2021). Greater creativity will be required in the future, given African political elites' levels of preparedness to thwart the known, popular forms of contentious action in Africa.

CONCLUSIONS

Africa is currently replete with political opportunity, and activist consciousness is high, especially among youth and women groups with strong mobilising structures. Political elite fearing the worst disrupt the ability of these groups to deploy their framing processes and sustain protest cycles. This is done with increasing levels of brutality and repression designed to intimidate, as was seen recently in Nigeria's #EndSARS

protests and the handling of protests after flawed elections in Uganda. African NGOs, CSOs, and their Media collaborators must deploy more significant levels of creativity to defend their fundamental rights to associate, assemble peacefully and freely express views and opinions, regain control of the narrative, and expand their contentious repertoires.

Points to Ponder

- Whose narrative of Africa’s future is setting the agenda?
- Can African youth influence narratives of their own future?
- What strategic power does Africa have compared to the rest of the world?
- How can citizens leverage their voice for accountability?

Actionable Recommendations

<i>Private leadership</i>	<i>Public leadership</i>
<p>African citizens’ groups need to seek mechanisms for sharing stories with and learning from other Africans first-hand to socially construct shared narratives of Africa’s future they can all rally behind. This will aid uniform standards and expectations setting across the continent. African NGOs, CSOs and Media need to identify ways of strengthening their current organisations, particularly around how to fund and sustain their activities independent of international donors. African NGOs, CSOs and Media need to broaden their “Contentious Repertoires” to ensure they have a range of tactics that can broaden the “Protest Cycles” when they need to or increase their leverage to escalate actions further when required to influence and shape narratives for Africa’s future.</p>	<p>African governments need to stop interfering with the fundamental rights of their citizens to associate, assemble peacefully and freely express views and opinions as it curtails Africa’s ability to evolve its narratives for development. African governments need to strengthen their ability to respond constructively to protest. Clear procedures for engagement need to be put in place and rehearsed as part of risk management strategies. African governments should develop institutional arrangements for feeling the pulse of citizens and engaging them early enough in constructive ways to minimise the need for disruptive protest actions.</p>

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