

Civil society organisations can have a pivotal role in #Zimbabwe's transition towards building a democratic nation

As Zimbabwe continues to adjust to the country's new leader, Ringisai Chikohomero argues that the change of regime has opened an opportunity for civil society organisations to engage with the government.

For decades, Zimbabwe has been dominated by personality politics and patronage networks which have curtailed the country's progress. The 'military-assisted transition', as it is called, of November 2017 which led to the departure of Robert Mugabe after 37 years as leader presents a unique window of opportunity for change. At this critical juncture for Zimbabwe, new thinking, programming and thorough analysis is vital to get a clearer understanding of the opportunities and challenges in building worthwhile reforms.

Although the euphoria over Zimbabwe's changing of guard is beginning to dissipate, there is reason to be hopeful. This is because there is much more political freedom and the government is showing signs of being more open to other actors and voices. However, it is worth remembering that although the leadership of Zimbabwe has changed, the system over which Mugabe presided remains. While the government is focussed on luring foreign investors (with slogans like *Zimbabwe is open for business*), there are no current efforts to redefine state-society relations and revitalising the public sector. Following the [recent alleged assassination of President Mnangagwa](#), there are fears that there could be renewed repression of opposition voices.



Thousands of Zimbabweans gathered on the streets of Harare on 18 November 2017 celebrating the expected fall of the erstwhile President
Image Credit: [Zimbabwean-eyes](#) via Flickr (CC BY-NC 2.0)

For Zimbabwe to evolve into a fully democratic state, it is of utmost importance that the relationship between the state and society is fully reconfigured. Much needs to be done to build new working relationships between non-state actors (NSAs) and the government, mending relationships of accountability and trust between the citizens and government and building strong and independent institutions that can form a necessary reinforcement against individuals using the political system for personal benefit.

To build new relationships of value-based partnering, the NSAs (civil society and private sector) need to develop new skills of working and become more savvy about how government functions, the political context and where partnerships would add the most value. They need to be strategic about entry points through identifying government departments or bureaucrats who are open or inclined towards reform. CSOs would need to go beyond being critics to being critical partners who infuse fresh perspectives, critical thinking and sound alternatives to policies and public-sector reform.

To aid in this thinking CSOs and donors need to reflect on a few questions,

1. How can civil society, government and donors creatively work together forging new forms of partnering and reinforcing capabilities to plough through the complexity of this transition?
2. How can they engage in processes of co-producing new ways of operating that are geared towards enhancing citizen participation, building inclusive institutions and improving government capability and responsiveness?

There are several ways that CSOs can partner with the government without abdicating their [watchdog role](#). [Andrew Boraine](#) of the Economic Development Partnership argues that 'structured partnerships (as opposed to symbolic encounters) are necessary to create sustainable platforms for dialogue, trust building and joint action'. Partnerships should be informed by an understanding that to move forward we need to utilise collective skills, creative capacities, resources and commitment to a shared vision. The process must be steered intelligently, identifying non-threatening entry points, building around issues of common interest and incrementally working towards transforming institutions.

This process requires thinking with a transformational approach, understanding the nuances of institutional building and participating intelligently in policy processes. It calls for strategic leadership that can build coalitions and networks and facilitate the forging of partnerships that are guided by a long-term vision but starting at low-key entry points.

This approach would not fit in the traditional way of doing development. It requires adopting a radical approach that allows for flexibility. Flexibility is key for experimentation and iteration with various strategies, learning and adapting to context. This frees CSOs to respond to situations as they unfold.

CSOs will need to secure significant buy-in from the funding partners to remodel their programming. Although funding partners are aware that CSOs are in an unrivalled position to have impact, their response has been somewhat insufficient so far. Funding partners will need to review and realign strategy and budgets to maximise this opportunity, be more flexible and create space conducive for their implementing partners to try out new ideas. This can be done through:

- Helping the CSOs revisit their whole theory of change towards a more flexible adaptive approach
- foster adaptive capacities mediated by iteration, learning and reflection as a core practice
- focus current and new programs on collaborative partnering and space creation between CSOs and state institutions through identifying key change agents and bureaucratic entrepreneurs and working adaptively and incrementally.

In conclusion, working collaboratively focuses on mutual interest rather than division. Both CSOs and government are far more likely to deliver in an atmosphere of partnership than antagonism. Building a relationship creates space for critical conversations to take place increasing the chances of CSOs to influence government policies and reform process. It also diffuses the polarised antagonistic political atmosphere. CSOs can act as intermediaries to make government departments such as the Treasury more accessible to the citizens. In turn, this is likely increase citizen voices in policy formulation through access to policy makers.

Ringisai Chikohomero is a development practitioner and researcher with a keen interest in the development puzzle in Sub Saharan Africa.

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog, the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa or the London School of Economics and Political Science.