



Do NGOs and donors undermine the state?

Tony Reeler, Senior Researcher, RAU

The Afrobarometer always provides highly interesting perspectives on what African citizens (as opposed to their governments) believe. Over the past decade the Afrobarometer has demonstrated the sophistication of African citizens' understanding of politics, governance, and democracy. The findings are often surprising.

For example, recent analyses have shown the resurgence of popular support for traditional leadership, mainly because these folk provide a buffer for failing governments¹, or that youth, right across Africa, has diminishing faith in the power of elections to bring about democracy. The latter is clearly important in the light of the North African revolutions, but recent research by Resnick and Casale suggests that, whilst African youths tend to vote less and have lower levels of partisanship, they are not more likely to protest than older citizens².

These are interesting asides however, and we want to focus on a problem common in many African countries, the frequently fraught relations between states, donors, and civil society, especially NGOs. This is particularly interesting for Zimbabwe where there are continual statements from senior government Ministers that assert that these bodies work in concert to effect "regime change" at the worst and undermine the authority of the state at the least³.

A very recent Afrobarometer report examined the views of African citizens about the role that donors and NGOs play in the political lives of their countries. As the Afrobarometer report pointed out, in admittedly a complex statistical analysis⁴:

Findings suggest that across a wide range of African countries, including fragile states like Liberia and stronger states like Botswana and South Africa, donors and non-state actors are strengthening, rather than undermining, citizens' legitimating beliefs, as measured by their willingness to defer to the tax department, the police and the courts. Citizens who

¹ Baldwin, K (2011), *When politicians cede control of resources: Land, Chiefs and coalition- building in Africa*. Working Paper No. 130. AFROBAROMETER.

² Resnick, D., & Casale, D (2013), *The Political Participation of Africa's Youth: Turnout, Partisanship, and Protest*. Working Paper No. 136. AFROBAROMETER.

³ Most recently these sentiments were repeated by Minister Chinamasa in the statement following the meeting between the various Zimbabwean political parties and the British government. See COMMUNIQUE ISSUED BY HONOURABLE PATRICK CHINAMASA, Deputy Secretary for Legal Affairs of ZANU PF And The Minister of Justice and Legal Affairs At the Conclusion of the Meeting of Representatives of the Inclusive Government of Zimbabwe and the Friends of Zimbabwe (FoZ) held in London, QEII Conference Centre from 25 to 26 March 2013.

⁴ Sacks, A (2013), *Can Donors and Non-state Actors undermine Citizens' Legitimizing Beliefs?* Working Paper No.140. AFROBAROMETER.

believe that donors and non-state actors, including domestic and international NGOs and international businesses, are doing a lot to help their country, rather than a little, are more likely to be willing to defer to the tax department. People who perceive that donors and non-state actors exert too little, rather than too much, influence over their government, are less likely to be willing to defer to the tax department, police, and courts. The opposite is true for those who perceive that donors and non-state actors exert too much influence, rather than too little influence, over their government.

Unfortunately, Zimbabwe was not included in the 19 countries from which the data was derived, but the sample of countries was sufficiently large⁵ as was the number of citizens included (26,513). So this is a fair test of what African citizens think about donors and NGOs. And the findings certainly rubbish the claims by so many African governments that these bodies have a malevolent influence over their citizens.

African citizens, rather than distrusting donors and NGOs, see these bodies, where they are very present and active in a country, as strongly complimenting the work of their governments, and, very surprisingly, results in citizens claiming that this would make them more likely to pay tax, and more willing to defer to the authority of the police and the courts. Overall, this suggests a win-win situation for states and citizens: good states will attract donors, encourage non-state actors, and be rewarded with good citizens. Bad states repel donors, suppress non-state actors, and end up with unresponsive citizens.

It is also worth pointing out that it remains surprising at the continental level that donors continue to engage with so much faith in Africa, but this is not necessarily the case at the individual country level, where there may be excellent synergies between state, donors, and NGOs. Donor countries and donors continue to provide financial support to Africa in spite of the very discouraging picture. As a 2012 report from the Political Economy Research Institute points out in respect of capital flight from Sub-Saharan Africa⁶:

A key constraint to SSA's growth and development is the shortage of financing. Indeed SSA faces large and growing financing gaps, hindering public investment and social service delivery. At the same time, the sub-region is a source of large-scale capital flight, which escalated during last decade even as the region experienced growth acceleration. The group of 33 SSA countries covered by this report has lost a total of \$814 billion dollars (constant 2010 US\$) from 1970 to 2010. This exceeds the amount of official development aid (\$659 billion) and foreign direct investment (\$306 billion) received by these countries. Oil-rich countries account for 72 percent of the total capital flight from the sub-region (\$591 billion). The escalation of capital flight over the last decade coincided with the steady increase in oil prices prior to the global economic crisis.

Assuming that flight capital has earned (or could have earned) the modest interest rate measured by the short-term United States Treasury Bill rate, the corresponding

⁵ The countries were Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia.

⁶ Boyce, J. K., & Ndikumana, L (2012), *Capital Flight from Sub-Saharan African Countries: Updated Estimates, 1970 – 2010*, October 2012. Political Economy Research Institute. University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

accumulated stock of capital flight from the 33 countries stands at \$1.06 trillion in 2010. This far exceeds the external liabilities of this group of countries of \$189 billion (in 2010), making the region a “net creditor” to the rest of the world. The stereotypical view that SSA is severely indebted and heavily aid-dependent is not fully consistent with the facts.

And the general trend has been getting worse over the past four decades: net losses in the early 1970s were about US\$28 billion, but by 2005-2010 they were estimated at US\$202 billion. It is not the purview of this short opinion piece to examine the reasons for all this capital flight, but it does seem that the knee-jerk statements by African (and increasingly Zimbabwean leaders) to blame the West for its (and our) problems is not very honest. Some honest examination of who is sending out all that money might go some way to solving some of Africa's economic problems, and could even pay off all of Sub-Saharan Africa's debts.

There are also the knee-jerk attacks on the motives of the non-state actors. This is the really sorry story, because *non-state actor* is a term that covers virtually everyone that is not a government or a donor: NGOs, CBOs, associations like churches and sports clubs, international NGOs like Oxfam and Save the Children, and so on. African citizens say that the more of these that exist and are working hard for them, the more likely the nation and key institutions are one they trust. And, of course, they have an interest in regime change: any government that the non-state actor sector sees is not serving the interests of the people will be challenged.

But it depends on what is meant by *regime change*. It can range from wanting a new political party to govern (and only by election, not coup or violence) through to wanting a particular change in policy direction. Regime change straddles wanting a new government through to trying to influence a regime to change its policies, and this latter is where the vast number of NGOs put their energies. And since NGOs and CBOs in Africa are mostly filling the gaps where government cannot deliver, it is the reason why African citizens have trust in them. It also turns out that this is the core political activity in any nation, and why civil society (and its organisations) are at the heart of the political life of the citizenry.