

NEPAD AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Buying in without selling out

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Introduction

The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) is widely regarded in South Africa as the signature tune of Thabo Mbeki's presidency. As such, it has been criticised and lauded from various quarters of civil society. But it has seldom been interrogated outside of the overheated context of national politics. This paper argues that NEPAD offers, if nothing else, at least the opportunity for South African civil society organisations to collaborate with like-minded groups across borders in Africa, thereby increasing their political leverage as a democratic counterweight to African governments. It is this process – rather than uncritical selling or outright dismissal of the NEPAD brandname – which will contribute towards better governance in Africa, with all its benefits for human security and development.

Who is civil society?

To ask: 'What does civil society think of NEPAD?', one first has to ask: 'Who do we mean by civil society?'. There are numerous press statements, articles, conference papers and books claiming to present civil society's view of NEPAD, inevitably drafted by a few academics or NGO activists.

Most vociferous of these have been the press statements and speeches of the Congress

of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and a loose alliance of 'anti-globalisation' non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These have focused on the 'neo-liberal' assumptions of NEPAD, that foreign direct investment and export-led growth are routes to development and poverty reduction. Such policy has been described as 'GEAR writ large' and 'shining the chains of global apartheid'. COSATU's concern with "the emphasis on privatisation in the section on infrastructure" (incidentally, the word 'privatisation' does not appear anywhere in the NEPAD document) reflects the interests of its large constituency of parastatal and public sector workers.

The views of big business in South Africa are represented by the NEPAD Business Group. The group comprises 150 multinational, international and local companies who signed a declaration in support of NEPAD at the World Economic Forum in Durban in June 2002. This support for NEPAD is driven by what Nigerian academic Jimi Adesina cynically calls, "an opportunity to drape themselves in the South African flag and take over markets across the continent". South Africa has become the largest investor in Africa, with Eskom linked to over 32 countries, Shoprite Holdings as the largest retailer on the continent, MTN's extensive subscriber base in Uganda, Rwanda, Cameroon, Swaziland and Nigeria, Telkom and Spornet interests, etc. It

is a case of 'Africa for the South Africans'.

These, however, are just the most organised and loudest sectors. A more complete picture may be found in the results of two opinion surveys on perceptions about NEPAD, by Markinor and the Centre for International and Comparative Politics at the University of Stellenbosch. The Markinor survey conducted during April and May 2002 found that knowledge of NEPAD is very low among the general South African public. Of the 3,500 adults surveyed in urban and rural areas, 80% knew nothing at all about NEPAD. The majority of people polled were unsure of whether NEPAD could or would benefit them.

These findings confirm the most commonly heard criticism that NEPAD is an 'elite', 'top-down' initiative. Critics point out that "the policy document itself has only been made available to African civil society via the internet – and then very obscurely". But the finding also reflects on the plan itself: that a grand, continental blueprint for Africa is of little relevance or interest to ordinary citizens. Opposition parties have tapped into this perception with statements such as 'charity begins at home', and 'President Mbeki should spend more time in his own backyard'.

The Centre for International and Comparative Politics took a different approach, interviewing 'opinion leaders' working in NGOs, universities, trade unions, political parties, churches, the media, and public and private sectors in seven African countries, including South Africa. Apart from 17% of the sample who belonged to the public sector, the survey represented the 'decision-making elite' of key elements of civil society. As is to be expected, South African elites knew more about NEPAD than the general public and had a higher awareness of the initiative than their counterparts in Senegal, Nigeria, Kenya, Algeria, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

To test the perception of NEPAD as an elitist project, the survey asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statement that 'only the ruling elite is actively engaged in promoting NEPAD'. Of the total number of South African respondents, 59.4% agreed with the statement and only 26.5% disagreed. Civil society elites dis-

played stronger support for the statement than the politicians and civil servants.

Consultation or co-optation?

This criticism has been met with the launch of NEPAD 'outreach' programmes in South Africa, Nigeria, Senegal and Algeria. These in turn have "merely conveyed the general outlines of the plan and have not actively engaged civil society input". The explanation posted on the South African Department of Foreign Affairs website says it all:

The AU[African Union]/NEPAD Outreach Programme was initiated by President Thabo Mbeki to popularise NEPAD ... participants include representatives from the Presidency, Foreign Affairs, GCIS (Government Communication and Information Service), AISA (Africa Institute of South Africa) and the South African Chapter of the African Renaissance.

All these agencies are part of government or are government-funded. This approach has tended to polarise the debate on NEPAD within South African civil society around loyalties for or against the African National Congress (ANC) leadership and issues of national politics. For example, parallel to the Continental Civil Society Representatives Meeting organised by the AU/NEPAD Outreach Programme on the fringes of the AU Summit in Durban in July 2002, another civil society conference on NEPAD held in Port Shepstone proclaimed that 'Africa is not for sale' – expressing the views of the anti-privatisation, anti-GEAR lobby. The content of NEPAD tends to get lost in this debate. Defensive reactions to all criticism as 'ultra-leftist' or 'counter-revolutionary' have not helped to mend this rift.

The problem goes to the heart of President Mbeki's thinking about the vanguard role of the ANC leadership. In a book recently published by the Institute for Democratic Alternatives in South Africa (IDASA), *Thabo Mbeki's World*, Krista Johnson analyses the ANC Discussion Document 'The State and Social Transformation' penned by the then-deputy president. She concludes that:

Mbeki ascribes to the state the role of knowledge producer, able to develop policy and set the agenda for social transformation. He restricts civil society organisations' role to that of mobilisation and implementing directives from above.

These observations are borne out by the text of the NEPAD document itself. NEPAD is "a pledge by African leaders" to place their countries on a path of sustainable growth and development. Article 47 states: "We believe that while African leaders derive their mandates from their people, it is their role to ... lead the processes of implementation", while the "Appeal to African peoples" is that, "we are asking the African peoples to support the implementation of this initiative by setting up structures for organisation, mobilisation and action."

The role of civil society

Clearly, civil society organisations are not invited to sit down with African leaders and shape the agenda of this policy initiative. Independent thinkers and interest groups will have to prise open that space for themselves. The various components of civil society at all levels – from grassroots organisations to policy think-tanks, from churches to the private sector – have vital contributions to make in the priority areas of NEPAD. They should do so as a matter of course, with or without repackaging every project as a 'NEPAD project'. These areas include:

- strengthening mechanisms for conflict prevention, management and resolution;
- promoting and protecting democracy and human rights;
- extending education and healthcare;
- promoting the role of women in social and economic development;
- building state capacity to maintain law and order; and
- infrastructure and agricultural programmes.

At the same time, the formulation of the plan as a "pledge by African leaders" offers a position of critical distance for civil society to play the role of judge and jury over NEPAD.

Perhaps the most important admission of the NEPAD document is the statement that: "Post-colonial Africa inherited weak states and dysfunctional economies that were further aggravated by poor leadership, corruption and bad governance in many countries." The promise to change this style of leadership is one that civil society should monitor with enthusiasm, on our own terms, of course.

The African Peer Review Mechanism is the most concrete and innovative development of NEPAD to date. Sixteen countries have already signed up to be reviewed, a process has been decided upon and a panel of eminent persons appointed. While civil society should participate in the consultations by the country review teams, they should have realistic expectations of what will come out of this government-to-government exercise in 'peer learning'.

Conclusion

Much of the criticism levelled against NEPAD in South Africa consists either of national concerns projected onto a blank canvas of Africa, or international anti-globalisation rhetoric looking for a local angle. What is missing is a sense of shared interests across borders among different components of a disaggregated civil society. Civil society in South Africa could use the NEPAD concept to build contacts, allegiances and common projects across national boundaries.

This would not entail South African organisations helping their government to sell Thabo Mbeki's statesmanship to Africa and the world. This would be, for example, South African journalists comparing notes on press freedom with journalists in the neighbourhood, as proposed in a recent newspaper editorial. This would be about trade unions building regional solidarity, women's organisations in one part of Africa speaking out against abusive cultural practices against women in another, and NGOs forming networks to do alternative reviews of governance in the NEPAD countries. These are all constructive ways for South African civil society organisations to buy into NEPAD without selling out their hard-won independence.