



# Citizenship in Africa: Do We Understand What We Are Reading?

Tendai Murisa



# 1. Introduction

The democracy project is under threat across Africa. The convulsions to do with claims about rigged elections, increased incidences of coups and the ongoing citizen led challenges against authoritarianism in places like Eswatini and Ethiopia serve to suggest deep seated problems of power and its use. Even countries like Tunisia and Sudan that had been at the centre of the Arab Spring are in a new round of convulsions. Ethiopia, a country that was doing so well in terms of economic prosperity to an extent that its leader was awarded a Nobel Peace prize is also going through turmoil which threatens its existence. Coups have returned in Mali, Guinea (2021) and Zimbabwe (2017). Could it be that we celebrated the ‘silencing of the guns’ prematurely?

On the other hand, development is in retreat across many African countries. - after having been totally dismantled by the neoliberal experiments around structural adjustments. Instead, the majority of sub-Saharan Africa has acquiesced to a commodity-driven development project under the guidance of a resource-hungry China. However, as China’s development has slowed down, commodity prices have tumbled, and many African countries face a debilitating debt crisis. Elected African governments on the other hand have not invested in areas that could potentially contribute towards inclusive and sustainable growth. African economies remain dominated by smallholder agriculture, informal spaces which also include micro, small to medium scale enterprises and weak social policy (especially around education and health). These are mostly underfunded or not even recognized by policy and relevant government strategies. Governments have devoted significant attention towards policy frameworks focused on investment in big mining and infrastructure projects that are inclined towards the interest of external investors. Industrialization is literally off the radar of many national development programs. This points to the need for an important reflective question; “how are African citizens cohering their livelihoods and related political questions away from the state”?



Citizenship is understood as the depth and breadth of activities that citizens enter either individually or collectively. These are indeed the lifeblood of any community. If one goes to Bulawayo in Zimbabwe they will learn of a tradition of 'zibutheni' where in the event of a funeral citizens collect mealie-meal from each household or cash equivalent to help the bereaved family. Other terms used to describe citizens actions include solidarity, social capital, support for one another. In Africa these norms of mutuality are codified around ubuntu. Furthermore, citizens are at the centre of social struggles across the globe and these range from the Solidarity movement of Poland, #blacklivesmatter and other variations of social struggles such as the social forum running under the theme 'another world is possible', #feesmustfall, #thisflag, #yellowcard and the more radical Arab Spring. These indeed encapsulate the energy and aspiration for a new social order. Bratton (2013) notes that whilst political elites and dominant institutions retain the upper hand in African politics, ordinary people are not powerless. Their political attitudes and behaviors should not be overlooked—they hold within their purview the power to bestow political legitimacy on—or withhold it from leaders, institutions, and regimes. However, whilst we can list a few of these there are very few platforms that systematically track what citizens are doing. Yet they are the engine of democracy or perhaps the missing component to the envisaged reinvigoration of democracy.

Is there another way? So far, there is no agreement on the missing ingredient. We believe there is. A renewed focus and investment into what citizens do and the public space (agora). No doubt elections are necessary. But is that enough to achieve democracy? We hold to the thought that 'free and fair elections are a necessary but not sufficient condition to achieve democracy'. What needs to be done? Perhaps we have been looking at the question of democracy in parts. We have not devoted significant attention to the other components of democracy - citizens and their agency. There is an urgent need to pay greater attention to civic associations, the informal economy, street protest and also the emergence of new forms of civic engagement. Democracy should not be limited to what takes place during elections, but it is also about what citizens do. What if citizens hold the key to complete democratisation? There are always the assumptions that citizens need to be mobilized into voting which explains the



investments into voter mobilisation campaigns. But what if they are already mobilized and are engaged in a variety of problem-solving initiatives in the public space on a day-to-day basis?



## 2. Background and Context

The revolutions that toppled dictatorships in Eastern Europe were a result of ‘massive citizens’ protests (Badescu 2010:7). Could it be that we have limited citizenship and the potential of democracy as a system of governance not only through the alleged rigging of elections but also through the failure to acknowledge and promote the role of citizens within the polity? The current conceptualization of democracy has mostly dwelt on the rules of taking power, legitimation, or rule, and the arrangement of governance systems and rarely does it talk about citizen politics. Instead, national legislation has devoted attention to qualifying what citizens can do by focusing on voting rights, the right of assembly, and freedoms of expression and speech in a prescriptive manner. These official processes do not have the capacity to understand in a more detailed manner the issues in which citizens are engaged or what citizenship really entails.

The continent remains highly unstable characterized by threats of armed conflict and increasingly civil protests led especially by the youths. Others (see, for instance, Moyo and Yeros, 2005) see the resurgence of social movements around land and broader economic grievances as potentially suggesting the inadequacies of the existing frameworks of governance. Indeed, citizens, globally, have begun to make demands on power outside of the political party based parliamentary system either through public protests (for instance, the global Occupy Movement), the hashtag-based challenges to power and in some instances formation of post-modern utopias of self-governed territories.

Since the turn of the century, citizen-led protests have been the order of the day across the continent. These riots have mostly been about (but not limited to) the failure of the economic development project, electoral process, and broader governance concerns. Food prices focused riots spread like a veld fire across the continent beginning earnestly in 2007. In September of 2007 in Morocco people took to the streets to protest about the price of food which



had been deemed too excessive. On February 20, 2008, rioters protested a 65% rise in the price of some foodstuffs in Burkina Faso. The rioters burnt government buildings and looted stores. Literally, a couple of days later similar riots erupted in Cameroon, a taxi drivers' strike over fuel prices became a massive protest soaring food prices leaving around 20 people dead and hundreds were arrested (Sasson 2012:5). A month later police in Senegal had to use tear gas and beat people protesting high food prices.

In Egypt in April 2008, workers in Mahalla launched an expanded strike that encompassed larger concerns about inflation and low salaries. Protestors burned two schools, and over 150 demonstrators were hurt. Protestors in Cairo and other cities joined the call for a general strike. In Cairo, stores were closed, and students protested at three universities. These events converged with the long lines and shortages especially throughout Egypt. Fights at bakeries left at least seven dead during this period. In his annual May Day speech a few weeks later, Mubarak announced wage increases of 30% to help Egyptians cope with increased prices. To calm public anger, the state-owned Al Ahram announced the arrests of 12,000 people for selling flour on the black market (Sachs 2012).

A couple of years later in 2010 people took to the streets in Mozambique (Maputo) after the government had announced a 25% to 30% increase in the price of bread. Shops and banks were looted, and roads barricaded with rocks and burning tires during three days of rioting that paralyzed the capital. The urban-based food riots were dramatic and helped to bring to the fore the need for a pro-poor development compact undergirded by equitable agricultural development.

In the second decade of the 21st century, we also saw an emergence of hashtag-based forms of mobilisation and protest. The region witnessed the emergence of bold citizen-led loosely established hashtag-based formations around the need for improved accountability, social and economic justice, effectively dealing with corruption, improved service delivery and transparent electoral systems. These mostly worked alongside NGO based activism for the respect of the rule of law, human rights, and free and fair elections. They mostly operate outside



of organized civil society-based organizations but are not necessarily in contradiction with the demands and aspirations of civil society. They are not constrained by the rigidities within formal organisation and tend to be spontaneous in how they operate. Hashtag based forms of mobilisation and protest are common across most of the African region. Some of the early hashtags were #bringbackourgirls and #blacklivesmatter.

The #bringbackourgirls, focused on the return of schoolgirls who had been abducted by the Islamist terrorist organisation Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria quickly evolved into a global campaign—thanks largely to leveraging technology. There is also a demographic aspect to these new forms of organising. Most of the technology leveraging campaigns are run by millennials and GenZers. Chika Oduah (a blogger) argues that the organizers want the world's attention, but they aren't asking for the West to come in and solve their problems.

In 2020 alone hashtags fueled campaigns in Namibia, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria. In Namibia citizens organized #ShutItAllDownNamibia in response to the ongoing challenge of femicide<sup>1</sup>. The police had reported on the murder of Gwashiti Ndahambela Tomas (27) killed by her husband when she tried to break up with him. The campaign that ensued took off dramatically, it galvanized street protests across the country, made demands for the Minister of Gender to resign and drew unprecedented social media attention to femicide in Namibia. In Nigeria the #EndSars campaign emerged in response to the violence of a special unit (Special Anti-Robbery Squad-SARS) within the Nigeria police. The #EndSars morphed into a decentralized social movement with tens of thousands marching in the major cities of Nigeria. Other popular hashtag movements included #thisflag (Zimbabwe), #feesmustfall (South Africa), #Zumamustfall (South Africa), #Tajamuka/Ses'jikile (Zimbabwe). Countries such as Malawi, Zambia, Kenya and Ghana also experienced youth-led convulsions. In Zambia, a mostly youth-led movement under the banner of #YellowCard emerged as a protest to 'widespread official corruption'. The organizers received support from ordinary Zambians and civil society groups. In 2019 and 2020 Malawi was characterized by unprecedented levels of protests. The protest focused on a variety of issues ranging

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1. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 1 in 4 Namibian women are survivor of intimate partner violence. Between 2016 and 2019, the Namibian police received more than 3,000 reports of rape and 209 of domestic violence related murders.



from conditions of services for teachers, sanitation workers, truck drivers and airline staff. The protests also focused on rural grievances- students protested land grabs. Most of the protests were however related to the disputed May 2019 elections.





### 3. Problem Statement: Who are the Citizens; What Do They Do?

For the purpose of this discussion, we consider a citizen as 'one who shares in governing and being governed...in the best state he/she is the one who is best able and chooses to be governed and to govern with a view to the life of excellence' (Aristotle-edited by Everson 1988). In his treatise on the Social Contract, French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1754) observed that individuals surrender their ungoverned individual liberty for collective political power, and this in order to realise individual freedom-that lies at the heart of democracy. There is a need to find a way of re-connecting with this thinking especially when we are re-imagining governance frameworks that are inclusive and democratic.

According to Bratton (2013:4), democratic citizenship involves (i) participation in popular collective action and (ii) engagement with political leaders and institutions, including between elections and within a rule of law. The recasting of what citizens do with each other as part of democracy entails a new and urgent agenda to revisit where and how citizens cooperate with each other. The literature on associations, social movements, loose civic networks, trade unions is vast, but few of those studies focus on or create a relationship between what citizens do in these voluntary platforms with democracy. The focus has mostly been on what political parties and formal institutions (either the state or Non-Governmental Organisations-NGOs) do for citizens. However, when an analysis is made of how livelihoods are created and sustained, we realize that the core actors or agents of change are not necessarily political parties, NGOs, the state or related institutions, but ordinary people working mostly with other like-minded colleagues within networks of varying sizes and purposes and undertaking common purposes. Furthermore, the collective actions of citizens are broader than the concerns of democracy. Citizens' actions contribute towards:

- › Creation of/forging conditions for socio-economic wellbeing



- › Providing solidarity for one another
- › Production/creation of public goods
- › Resolving social conflicts
- › Improving governance
- › Holding power in check
- › Taking care of the natural environment for the greater good
- › Worshipping together
- › Promoting and preserving culture

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**There is need for a political understanding of citizenship based on civic engagement and participation.**

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There is a need to broaden the notion of citizenship beyond the formal attributes of legal citizenship such as birth, marriage or naturalization- that entitle an individual to hold a passport or national identity card (Bratton 2013:4). We also need to delve a bit more into what citizens do outside of voting once every five years or so. In this instance, there is need for a political understanding of citizenship based on civic engagement and participation. We need to know what citizens think and do when they inhabit political, social and economic spaces. From the literature, we have learnt that citizens engage in a variety of activities from protesting, creating collective platforms for the improvement of the economic circumstances, providing each other with welfare support, establishing paths of solidarity and worshipping together. Perhaps it is important at this stage to discuss three common ways in which citizens come together. First, as per the preceding discussion, citizens come together to establish social movements which focus on or seek to address various grievances. “Networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities”, (Diani 1992). Social movements can be about any kind of issue or set of issues – health, housing, land, education, environment, human rights, good governance etc. A distinction is often found in the literature between ‘service delivery’ versus ‘rights-based’ Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and social movements.

Scholars of civil society theory argue that most social movements reflect the radical and uncaptured part of society. In many instances what passes for NGOs are entities that began as social movements



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but due to resource needs, they had to re-organize (corporatize) themselves with structures and eventually changed their accountability to be focused on reporting to donors. Africa has gone through phases/types of social movements; initially, the liberation movements, co-opted by the discipline framework of capital into political parties with structures, alliances and at times into a government. Southern Africa's second biggest movement was the labour movement - however its role and potential to influence the post-colonial discourse of resolving the national question (labour vs. capital) has been neutralized by the disciplining forces within capital - currently the labour movement is either in alliance with a political party - ruling or opposition (e.g. Confederation of South African Trade Unions - COSATU in South Africa and Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions - ZCTU in Zimbabwe) or in some cases has captured political power (e.g. Zambia). Furthermore, whereas traditionally the labour movement was dependent on membership fees it has now - like the NGO formations - managed to source for funding from external agencies- the issue of autonomy becomes much more complex. Most Unions now spend more energy reporting to their principals - who in most cases have an association with capital - and therefore the labour unions tend to tone down their demands against capital but rather focus on reforming the state.

There are the new rural social movements, which are emerging all over the global South in response to unfair land ownership patterns, weak land tenure regimes and these are independent of electoral parties and urban politicians, use largely 'uncivil' tactics to address their grievances. However, their potential to influence power relations at a broader level has not been systematically analysed.

As already mentioned there has emerged bold citizen-led loosely established hashtag-based formations around the need for improved economic performance, creation of jobs, addressing corruption and improved service delivery. These mostly worked alongside NGO based activism for the respect of the rule of law, human rights and free and fair elections. They mostly operate outside of organized civil society-based organizations but are not necessarily in contradiction with the demands and aspirations of civil society. They are not constrained by the rigidities within formal organisation and tend to be spontaneous in how they operate. But they do not necessarily fit the social movement tag easily;



they have no defined membership but are mostly identified by the cause that they are attempting to address. For the purpose of this discussion, we define them as ‘new social movements’.

Others (Moyo and Yeros, 2005, Moyo, 2001) have argued that NGOs have served to depoliticize and co-opt rural grievance into welfarist projects, maintain their own selves in means of external funding and indeed serve as the new vehicles of ‘indirect rule’.

**Table 1: Differences between Social Movements and NGOs**

Analytic Construct	Social Movement	NGO
Social Base	Rural-urban mix of smallholders and working-class including urban retrenched and unemployed.	Mostly urban-based intellectuals and activists
Leadership	Composed of ‘local/organic/dynamic/charismatic’ leaders and operates on the principles of ‘every member an organizer’	Composed of the ‘university/middle-class intellectual’ and is run through a bureaucracy/ clear hierarchy which includes a board of directors, executive directors, senior managers- with clear communication lines and roles for each staffer.
Tactics	Based on mass mobilisation and direct action such as occupation of land, public spaces, public protests	Mostly ‘civil’ within the confines of the ‘rule of law’. Engage in advocacy and lobbying
Strategy	Anti-political - autonomy from political parties and the state	Alliance building with political parties, related network, policy advocacy
Ideologies	Tend to fuse Marxian thinking and ethnic/religious radical political languages	Not well developed - localized in different organisations - professes anti-neoliberalism but rarely positive of an ideology as a set of values
Financing	Based on member contributions	Mostly dependent on donor funds

Secondly, citizens establish associations. The associations under discussion respond to or seek to address grievances ranging from economic wellbeing, need for social welfare, solidarity, creation of political agency. The associations under discussion can be very localised whilst others cover an entire region or country. They mostly have recognisable structures, constitutions and at times assets owned in common. The tradition is not new. There is a school of thought which recognises civil society as the space occupied by associations and not for profit corporations (McKnight, 2013:1). In his seminal work, Tocqueville (1835) put the bases of an entire stream of thought on civil society around the importance of voluntary associations and the potential of associate behaviour to encourage citizenship skills (Angi, 2010:49). Tocqueville identified small local citizen-led organisations as central to the newly forming democracy in America. Tocqueville provided an exhaustive description of American associational life thus:



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**Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations. They have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds of religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive. The Americans make associations to give entertainment, to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes, in this manner they found hospitals, prisons and schools...**

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In this tradition, citizenship is closely aligned to associative behaviour which is the bedrock of civil society. These associations vary in nature. Some go on to create institutions like hospitals, schools, and universities. One may ask is the phenomenon of associationalism limited only to America? According to Tocqueville (1835) the associations were not just numerous and variegated, they embodied what he saw as a unique and distinct American understanding of democracy. However, the phenomenon of an associations based civil society<sup>2</sup> is not unique to America. Here in Africa, Rahmato (1991) has argued that the failure of the independence project to deliver on national development especially on efficiency, equity, and freedom yielding instead monopolisation of property and concentration of power in the hands of a small elite has led to the questioning of the role of the state in the development project. Communities (especially rural) responded to this failure by mobilizing organic associative activities and relationships (Rahmato 1991:3). The associative activities take the form of popular local organisations, and their proliferation is based on the real needs, interests and knowledge of the people involved.

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2. Civil society belongs to the category of concepts that developed a long and troublesome tradition of theorization. It originates from the work of Greek philosophers- it was conceived of as a sphere where individuals build social bonds and solidarities. Civil society was explicitly delimited from both state and economy, starting with Hegel's theoretical contribution on this matter. Karl Marx treated civil society as being the same as with the bourgeoisie society and stressed on the conflict driven nature of this sphere. For this discussion, we treat civil society in the Tocquevillian sense as described in the text.

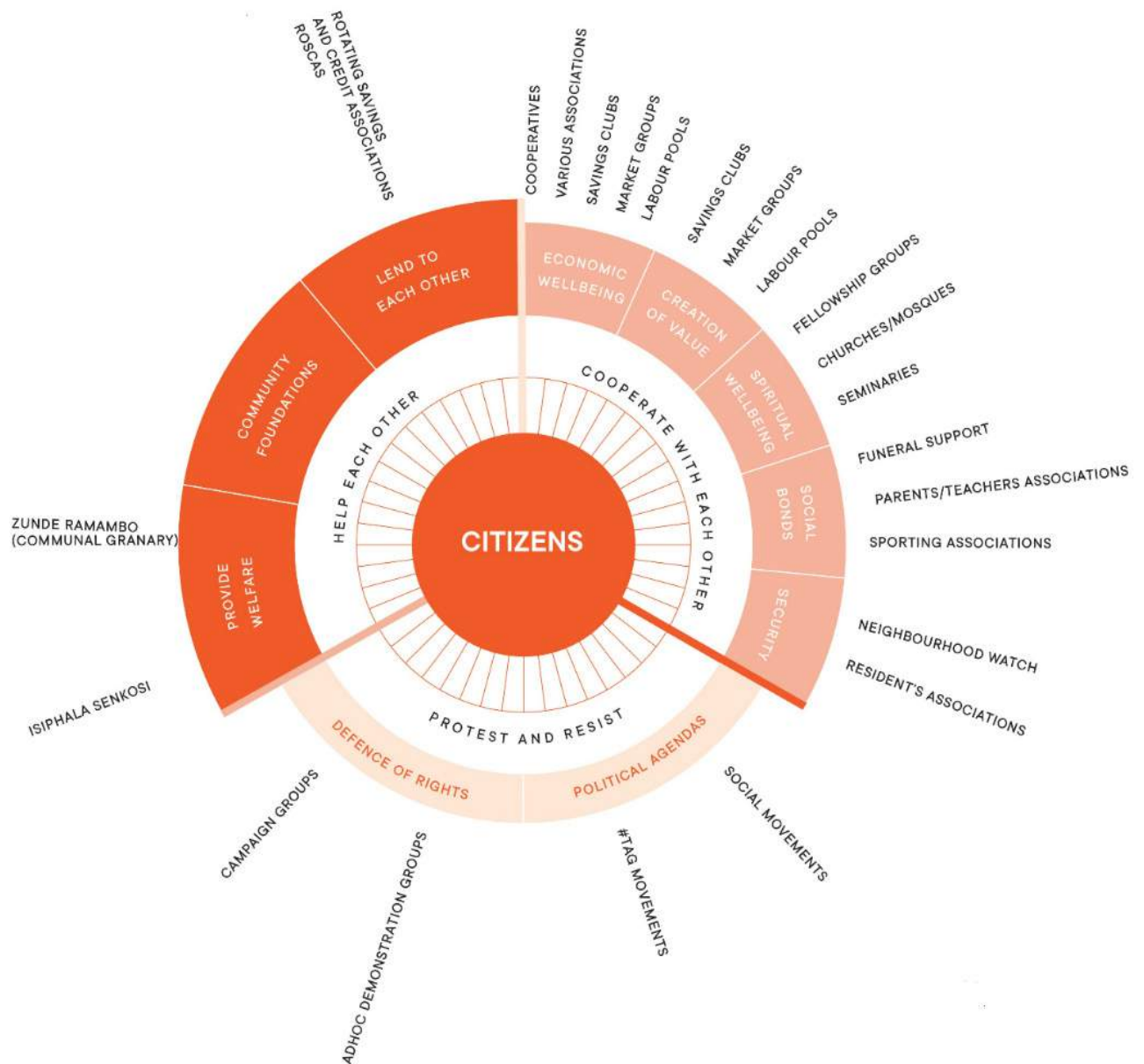
What are the benefits of belonging within an association? Badescu (2010:9) argues that 'individuals who are members of associations tend to be more interested in politics, [are] better informed and tend to be more involved in acts of political participation than people who are not members of such associations. The same author also observes that increased citizen involvement in associations



and other civil society organisation has been associated with several other conditions that are said to 'make democracy work'. Furthermore, group activity is found also to promote higher levels of generalized social trust of participants, whereas increased trust generates higher levels of social capital reflecting an extended sense of 'social connectedness within the community. Associations are also sites of social learning and nurturing democratic practices. Some of the lessons learnt within associations include leadership, mobilisation, consensus building and conflict resolution. In many instances, associations have been viewed as breeding grounds for future political leaders. In most cases associations help to give voice to ordinary citizens, improve representation and in the process strengthen the interactions with officeholders.

Third, citizens establish temporary spaces/platforms of solidarity. These are intricate relationships of solidarity/welfare which can be hidden from the outsider as they are usually seasonal and are triggered by codes that are at times embedded either in tradition or cultural practices. These include, for instance, the different forms of asset and labour pooling initiatives that emerge during the farming seasons and are non-existent during the dry seasons or community mechanisms of pooling together resources (food, transport and money) during a funeral. Furthermore, there is reason to believe that with increased urbanization these norms of solidarity have been replicated within urban settings. Religion also plays a significant role. Many of those who have engaged in ad hoc giving or the creation of ephemeral pools cite their Christian and Muslim backgrounds as reasons behind their involvement. Figure 1 provides an approximation of what citizens do.

**Figure 1: What Citizens Do**



The papers after this introduction provide insights on patterns of belonging, especially the varying ways that citizens have mobilized themselves within associations. The papers also look at internal dynamics within these collective platforms.



## 4. Problem Solving Citizens

The African Citizenship Index created by SIVIO Institute measures and amplifies the actions of citizens in the public space. In this instance, citizenship refers to the breadth and depth of the ways in which citizens act collectively within what one may call the public space. The public sphere is subject to many interpretations. Odugbemi (2008) provides a more succinct description. He describes it as

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**...the agora-the main political, civic, religious, and commercial centre of the ancient Greek city. It was here that citizens traded goods, information, concepts and ideas to try to better their situations and impact the powers that governed them (Odugbemi 2008:17).**

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In modern political philosophy the agora takes on many names such as the public arena, public realm, public domain or public sphere- it represents that space between the state and the household where free and equal citizens come together to share information, to debate, discuss or to deliberate on common concerns. The public space is thus the arena of interaction over the definition of public goods such as justice, values, morality and a constant thinking about the best way of allocating public goods and ensuring social reproduction. One of the central questions in this discussion is the way citizens affect the values of the public sphere. Borrowing from Alexander (2003), we observe that the premise of the public sphere is that society is not governed by power alone- feelings for others matter and how they are structured by the boundaries of solidarity. The critical issues for every social order are the way solidarity (within the public space) is structured, governed, how far it extends and what it is composed of. Such an analysis can only be carried after an exhaustive undertaking of analysing the meaning of democracy (its structures, institutions, and norms) and citizenship





The Kettering Foundation has for over three decades been preoccupied with the question 'what makes democracy work as it should?' They have mostly focused on what citizens do with each other in their communities in resolving public problems. The quest is to understand how 'a diverse body of citizens joined together in ever-changing alliances make choices about how to advance their common well-being' (Mathews 1999:1). Theirs is an attempt at developing a democracy that integrates two forces that have been in conflict ever since the emergence of electoral-based democracy;(i) power is in representative government and (ii) power comes from direct citizen action. The kind of democracy being envisaged is broader than the narrow framing around elections. It can thrive only when communities have citizens who take responsibility for what happens and who can make sound decisions about their future. In other words, there is a need for an engaged citizenry. Xavier Briggs (2008:32–35) suggest that democracy is about problem-solving.

There is another perspective. Rather than seeing democracy as comprising of competition for political office only, it should be recast as a framework for cooperation. Democracy is a social rather than a political term to refer to a society marked by equality of social conditions with no ascriptive aristocracy, and all careers are open to all citizens including the opportunities to be in government (Tocqueville, 1835). The kind of democracy under discussion is the one which assumes that there is no one of us that will make the best decision for others—we have to figure it out for ourselves. In other words, democracy is about learning together. Briggs (2008:32–35) suggests that democracy is about problem-solving, and we should focus on the arrangements that allow for vibrant governance systems.



# 5. What is Democracy Today?

It is commonly limited to a 'system of elections and representative government as developed in 17th Century England. Lipset (1981:45) defined it as 'a complex political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials, and as a social mechanism which permits the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions by choosing among candidates. Democracy is embraced not only across the globe but also across the political spectrum- even the Left (or remnants of it) hails democracy to redress Marx's abandonment of the political despite the common exclusionary form of politics that it promotes. The effectiveness of platforms for the interaction between the elected and the electorate is very limited in many ways; firstly, they are too few and secondly are structured in a way that does not promote dialogue but rather the speaking down to citizens by the elected citizens rarely have the opportunity to influence day to day allocation of resources. Thirdly democracy has eschewed substantive issues of material well-being and equity and focused on the more formal aspects of 'good' governance', that is free and fair elections and transparency" (Mkandawire; 2011:41). Fourthly, on average more than 51% of those eligible to vote do not do so. Finally, although many African countries have gone through several rounds of elections, they always yield three possibilities; a contested result, a straight win for the opposition or a consensus for a government of national unity- suggesting that elections do not resolve the question of who should govern. Perhaps democracy's current popularity depends on the openness and even vacuity of its meaning and practice, an empty signifier to which all can attach their dreams and hope (Brown 2011:44).

The democratisation project remains partially implemented. The Economist's Democracy Index of 2018 classifies most African countries as authoritarian regimes or flawed democracies<sup>3</sup>. According to the Index, there are no full democracies and the best we have achieved so far is hybrid regimes. In fact, democracy has generally become more adjectivized for instance in the late

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2. <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>



1990s Mkandawire and Soludo came up with the term 'choiceless democracies', Fareed Zakaria added 'illiberal democracy' and the Economist Magazine suggested 'incomplete democracy'. These qualifications suggest that there are outstanding features to our democratisation processes. More importantly, the figures of non-participation in elections suggest the need to investigate on the one hand how citizens relate with the state and supposedly the self-governance mechanisms that have emerged.

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An essential challenge to the ideal democratic governance framework is that citizens may feel powerless or do not see the need to exercise control over their communities' and national futures. An inclusive society is only enabled if there is an acceptance of a common good-justice. It is to the 'common good' that appeals to justice and equity must be made if they are to have resonance. The dominant approaches in our politics have created a schism between the rulers and the ruled. The rulers have over the years either made concessions on what citizens can do or have curtailed processes of broader citizen mobilisation. In the long run, this has created an environment of uncertainty on what is permissible. However, we have to take cognisance of the fact that citizens, regardless of class, race and gender should be at the centre of our political process in a more significant way than the five minutes of voting accorded to them by the political class after every four or five years. Policy making should no longer be purely a technocratic top-down process but rather it should entail negotiation between the experts and targeted beneficiaries through platforms of coproduction. Users must be centrally located within the decision-making matrix.

We have to start by acknowledging that most human life happens within local communities and that democracy can only be nurtured at this level of sociability. It is worth reiterating that the efforts to transform the state as well as to strengthen civil society cannot be fully accomplished in the absence of the development and fostering in the population of a culture of responsible citizenry, which feeds both civil society as well as the governmental and political process (Doubon, 2007: 3). While some citizens can respond individually to changes in economic conditions, there is need to realise that in many instances of cooperation the sum total of their collective action is greater than the sum of the different parts. The current political reforms have also missed



out on the global zeitgeist, in 2002, the World Bank published a seminal three-volume study called *Voices of the Poor*, which for the first time explicitly recognized that their ultimate clients (the poor) did not only have needs –they had voices to express them. It would no longer be the job of the experts to assess and diagnose the needs of the poor; they would now be expected to listen to what the poor had to say. Outside assistance, therefore, would now shift toward helping the poor coordinate and articulate their voices more effectively so that they could design and carry out their own initiatives (World Bank, 2002: 4).



## 6. Purpose of the Volume

We seek to influence a new agenda for both practitioners and academics in the field of democracy and development. Our study acknowledges that there are existing challenges with the development and democracy projects across Africa. We note from the outset that the nexus between democracy and development in Africa has been one of the most contested issues in recent years. However, scholars and related institutions treat these separately (see for instance Freedom House's Democracy Index focusing on democracy and the World Bank and IMF's measure of economic growth on the other hand). The siloed approaches to democracy and development at times hide the interconnectedness between the two. Furthermore, suggestions on how to address economic stagnation or decline are in some instances at odds with the democratisation project. Economic liberalisation has not necessarily led to democratic gains but rather a consolidation of the coercive instruments of the state to defend the austerity measures ostensibly aimed at stabilizing economies.

Studies focused on citizens' agency are rare and in many instances are either framed around coping mechanisms in the context of non-performing states or they focus on voting behaviours. Whilst these two tendencies are essential, they, unfortunately, do not provide a comprehensive understanding of the public work done by citizens. There is evidence of citizens' agency in resolving social, economic, and political problems. Furthermore, studies focusing on what citizens do with each other and for each other also face the same risk of compartmentalizing what citizens do. Those focused on ways in which the continent can entrench democracy tend to view citizens' agency as limited to voting or protesting. Political elites use words such as 'the masses', 'citizens' or colloquially as 'povo' (people of various opinions) to describe citizens. The descriptions used serve to expose the imaginary hierarchies at play. After elections, citizens withdraw to their day-to-day lives whilst elected officials are expected to deliver on their electoral processes. Unfortunately, this formula



has failed dismally across the continent. Instead, it has yielded an oligarchic clique not accountable to the voters and on the other hand, seemingly disempowered citizens for the next round of elections with the promise of better from those vanquished in the previous round. The process repeats itself in different electoral cycles is akin to 'waiting for godot' or a state where 'politicians promise, citizens expect, and nothing happens in between'.

On the other hand, those focused on livelihoods, solidarity and welfare focus on what citizens do within economic and social-focused associations and networks. The actions taken by citizens in the economic and social space are viewed as separate from politics or democracy. The increase or decline in membership or intensity of activities is also not seen as related to the political environment or effectiveness of the 'elected government'

Inadvertently both approaches do not adequately provide a comprehensive picture of the 'what' and 'why' of citizens actions. Can citizens' actions be understood outside of the complex political and socio-economic environment? There is need for a more holistic approach that views citizens as political actors with social and economic interests. Such an approach will perhaps illuminate the need for renewed understanding of citizenship and hopefully feed into a discourse on democracy and development.

The proposed combined approach could broaden the fascination with democracy beyond elections. Is it possible that 'democracy can be viewed as a process, a way of life in which citizens take responsibility for as much as possible of what happens around them' (Ostrom 1993:7)? Given the above what would a new framework of governance look like if we were to put citizens at the centre? Hainoan writes that the new model of governance happens if governments, instead of providing services to citizens, learn to achieve results with citizens. This would mean a fundamental change in how citizens are seen, a shift from consumer citizens to value-creating and problem-solving citizens. The volume should be read together with the African Citizenship Index. The volume and the index seek to accomplish the following;

- i. Address the limited ways we have understood



citizens' actions and how they relate to democracy,

- ii. Track the ways in which citizens act collectively
- iii. Develop a taxonomy of citizens initiatives
- iv. Contribute new insights on measuring progress towards democracy or lack thereof
- v. Develop a comparative base and ranking of societies(countries) based on citizenship

The papers that follow examine the extent of the work of citizens across three areas of existence: social economic and political. The papers are based on fieldwork carried out in Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi and Zimbabwe. The papers provide in-depth country analysis.

The discussion contributes towards a re-imagination of citizens agency and an identification of the factors that nurture the emergence of problem-solving citizens. Such a discussion also informs ways in which we re-imagine the agora (public space-where citizens gather and interact with each other and officeholders) and should perhaps also include a new understanding of democracy beyond the current fascination with an event-based definition rather than a culture or practice approach.



# 7. Methodology

Our methodology is built on the need to learn about what citizens are doing collectively and the aspirations they hold. The collective endeavours of citizens in various collaborative platforms such as associations, networks and even the more fluid ephemeral like formations appear as black boxes. There is limited knowledge about what goes on within the different platforms established by citizens. Very little is known about the governance codes, ways of inclusion, roles played in these associational platforms. Yet there are claims that more than 60% of citizens in African countries belong to an association. There is a recognition (albeit anecdotally) that many Africans eke out their existence in informal spaces of socio-economic reproduction and that these are sites of what Bratton (1994) has referred to as micro-democracy.

The volume is a result of a combination of desktop-based country-focused analysis of published literature and field-based surveys that were carried out in each country.

The survey sought to understand the following:

- i. What kind of formations do citizens belong to?
- ii. What benefits do they derive from belonging in it?
- iii. How do citizens and the formations they establish relate with formal processes of governance and engage with official processes (protest and cooperation)? Given the different contexts in which the studies were conducted the research paid particular attention to the relationship between governments and citizens.
- iv. Examine the extent to which citizens play a role in influencing official development processes and citizens and
- v. What is the scope for autonomous citizen-led initiatives?

## 7.1 Literature Review

The primary purpose of the literature review was to help us further refine the research questions. We expanded the literature beyond the usual academic texts to





include blog articles and newspaper articles.

## 7.2 Collection of Primary Data

The study combined the use of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Qualitative data was collected through interviews with key informants, focus group discussions and observations of ongoing citizens' led initiatives.

Quantitative data was collected using a close-ended online questionnaire that was administered using an online digital platform. These tools are described in the table below:

**Table 2: Research Tools**

Type of Research Tool	Research Tool	Brief Description
Quantitative	Close Ended Questionnaire	Representative samples that determine the extent to which citizens are part of formations (associations, loose civic coalitions, religious bodies, social movements), benefits and challenges of belonging and expectations
	Key Informant Interviews	Held with community leaders, founders of citizen-led initiatives
Qualitative	Open Ended Questionnaire	There were held to identify/discuss issues otherwise not captured within the close-ended questionnaire and subjected them to further review through key informant interviews
	Key Informant Interviews	With founders, practitioners within citizen platforms
	Participant observations	Immersion into/within citizens formations
	Focus Group Discussions	These will mostly be context specific based on the need to triangulate research findings.



## 8. Conclusion

The emergence of a strong core of citizens that are value-creating –of necessity co-operating with each other and the State in ways that constitute inclusive ways of governing life in common. What citizens do within their own organizations, unions and associations is an integral part of what democracy and governance are. This transcends the fixation with what formal institutions of state or civil society do for citizens. Inclusive governance is fundamentally about how livelihoods are created and sustained. In this regard, the key actors and agents of socio-economic and political transformation across Africa are not NGOs or external interlocutors, but rather ordinary people working in partnership with each other or acting in solidarity within local associations of varying sizes.



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