

State and Future of CSOs

...in Southern Africa - Changing Landscape

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the environment in which institutions operate and has forced them to redefine their modus operandi for them to continue with their mandate. The measures adopted by countries world-wide to curb the spread of the disease that include social distancing, banning of large gatherings (churches, weddings etc), night-time curfews, travel restrictions and closure of schools and businesses, have had major impacts on their financial health and sustainability given the uncertainty of the socio-economic environment. These lockdown measures, which have spared no country, institution or individual, have had huge socio-economic implications across the region and the continent. Civil society organisations (CSOs) in Africa and in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region have not been spared. The civil society sector has undergone significant transformation in the past year because of the changing landscape occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic. This policy brief thus analyses the environment under which CSOs are operating in the SADC region, particularly the advocacy and campaigning strategies. The “new normal” characterised by working from home and other safe spaces enabled by digital technologies has brought in different approaches to reach out different constituencies, albeit at a huge financial cost. The policy brief further analyses these approaches in terms of the sustainability of CSOs (both in financial and technical areas), the role of technology and how these enhance or otherwise the operations of CSOs. It also highlights opportunities that have emerged and the challenges that need to be addressed to support the on-going efforts for their sustainability. The brief concludes by providing policy recommendations that could be adopted by CSOs, governments and international cooperating partners for them to remain viable.

Introduction

The existential reality of the COVID-19 pandemic is that it has become more than a brutal public health catastrophe. The pandemic started as a public health emergency of international concern but metamorphosed into a socio-economic and security disaster. Before the pandemic, the world economy was already struggling, reeling from the impact of growing trade protectionism, trade disputes among major trading partners, falling commodity prices and economic uncertainties in Europe over the impact of

the UK withdrawal from the European Union (SADC, 2020). These challenges were already impacting on the global economy with reduced economic output. On the political front, the Economist Intelligence Unit observed that the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the nature of governance currently in existence within the different democracies particularly as it relates to the relationship between governments and the people. In their annual report Democracy Index 2020, The Economist Intelligence Unit notes that it did not require a “pandemic to expose the ailing health of our democracies.” Instead, the pandemic

helped to draw attention to some of the democratic deficits that have existed for a long time. For instance, the report observes that the way authorities chose to respond to the pandemic and manage the public health emergency shows “where power resides and how it is exercised in democracies today” (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020).

The observation was in reference to the imposition of lockdown measures, which happened without consultations of the people. Democratic governance espouses concepts of inclusivity and consultations. COVID-19 exposed that these concepts do not matter and that public opinion on how to address the pandemic was of secondary importance. Developments elsewhere support this assertion. The Constitutional Court in Spain has ruled in July 2021 that the lockdown implemented by the government in 2020 in response to the pandemic was unconstitutional. “In order to legally limit people's freedoms to the extent they did last year, the court said, the government would have had to declare a state of exception rather than a state of emergency” (BBC News, 15 July 2021).

Other observers have noted that Covid-19 has exposed existing fissures in most countries, not only in the region but in most of the developing world. These include the entrenched inequalities, the vulnerability of workers, heightened unemployment, and underemployment levels, further weakened Africa's already fragile health systems, and worsened domestic and foreign debt burden (Nkosi A, 2021). Nkosi (2021) posited that “the pandemic conflates all these factors in the context of long-unresolved historic and structural economic injustices that the African continent continues to face.” The regional network for equity in health in east and southern Africa (EQUINET) buttressed this observation and noted that the pandemic has highlighted “a deeper problem in the financing of health systems. Africa carries 23% of the disease burden, but only accounts for 1% of global health expenditure. Health services in the SADC region are underfunded and have been so since the macro-economic reforms associated with the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) (EQUINET, 2020).

The above-mentioned challenges are not unique to the health sector in the SADC countries. Because of the economy wide impact of SAPs, the challenges have been felt across different sectors including civil society. Even with these challenges, CSOs have held fort and continued to provide services. With the pandemic impacting on their operations, civil society have remained operational albeit with reduced activities. The environment has not been conducive for them but their services are more than needed as they play a crucial role further explained below.

Defining civil society

CSOs have played a crucial role in development,

humanitarian, and governance spheres in Southern Africa. This role has been recognised at national and regional levels by SADC Member States and has been “legalised” in several instruments, including the SADC Treaty. The Treaty has recognised the need to consult the people of the region through various consultative processes to foster development and regional integration. As a result, the changing environment occasioned by COVID-19 requires effective response by CSOs. It is therefore important to clearly define what civil society entails.

This policy brief acknowledges the diversity of non-state actors and civil society, which includes trade unions, churches, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and peoples' movements. The diversity of civil society reflects different interests, values, modes of operating and location within the SADC countries and the region. While acknowledging the different civil society formations, it is worthwhile to note that these have succeeded in raising the unique voice of the general citizenry, which gives expression to the specific role as indigenous organisations of citizens at the grassroots level advancing participatory democracy and people-centred development.

Thus, civil society represent the self-organisation and self-expression of the people and communities of the region in response to the myriad needs and rights that are necessary for the full enjoyment of their citizenship and human rights. In this regard, and unique in their various formations, civil society are united in the efforts to combat ill-health, poor quality education, landlessness, misrule, unaccountable governance, violence against women and children, corruption, growing poverty, rising inequalities and the denial of basic freedoms to vulnerable communities. This unity is an expression of the will of the people demanding social, economic and political transformation.

Challenges facing civil society in the face of the pandemic

Notwithstanding the public interest represented by CSOs as noted in the definition above, these organisations before the COVID-19 pandemic were already facing challenges which manifested in the following:

- limited support especially for regionally based CSOs by host governments (e.g. work permits for staff from neighbouring countries) and limited government financial support for local and regional NGOs.
- Hostile and restrictive operating environments and increasing reduction of operating space for civil society, often led by governments and/or ruling parties;
- Limited engagement between CSOs and Regional Economic Commissions such as SADC
- Donor funds shifting away from advocacy to humanitarian crises; preference for funding a few large (mostly northern based) intermediaries;
- shrinking funds for middle income countries where regional organisations are often based (e.g South Africa, Kenya and Ghana) and limited funding windows for RNGOs.
- Competition for scarce resources from International NGOs (some decentralising and moving their head offices to African countries) as well as from UN agencies and governments, with only a tiny fraction of Overseas Development Assistance targeted at civil society.
- Unequal resourcing and support between African indigenous/home-grown civil society and International Civil Society/international NGOs (Civil Society in Africa – CSiA);
- Prioritisation of state funding by the International Cooperating Partners (ICPs), with limited or no meaningful programme resources for civil society
- Consortium funding requirements that require time and resources to access.
- Pressure to diversify into income generation ventures in which the sector lacks experience and personnel.
- High staff turn-over and capacity constraints as a result of funding uncertainties.
- Limited resourcing of national coordination mechanisms of civil society and fragmentation amongst civil society negatively impacting the ability of the sector to interface with partners and stakeholders;
- Widening digital divide between African Civil Society, enabling only those already operating within the digital space to be heard over the voices of communities at grassroots level. (SADC-CNGO, 2020)

The above challenges, whilst they have been in existence before the COVID-19 pandemic, became more apparent

during the lockdown periods. As EQUINET has noted; from the lockdowns, evidence emerged on the challenges and social and economic harm of these for “communities and countries, particularly for poorest households, the large number of workers in precarious employment, the smaller enterprises without cash savings and economies and sectors that were already underfunded relative to need with high debt outflows, widening inequality.” (EQUINET, 2020a). Civil society organisations in the region have had to content with these challenges for a long time.

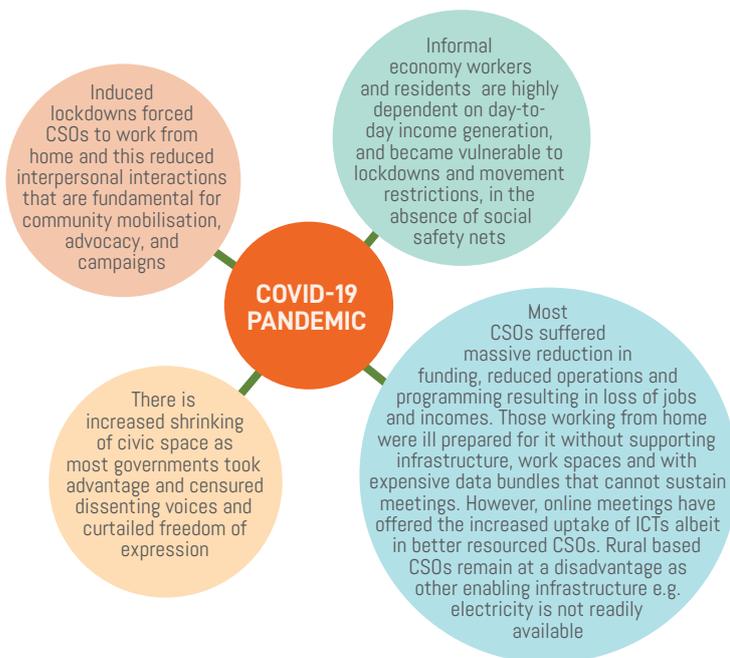
Impact of COVID 19 on CSOs

It is common knowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic has spared no organisation or institution. A survey carried out between April and May 2020 by @AfricanNGOs and EPIC-Africa on the impact of COVID-19 on African CSOs, including those in all the 15 countries in the SADC region revealed that the majority of CSOs were “overwhelmingly unprepared to cope with the disruption” caused by the pandemic (@AfricanNGOs, EPIC-Africa, 2020:10). In the survey, the CSOs who responded showed that they were affected by the pandemic in several ways including reduced face-to-face community interactions, restricted movement of staff, reduced or cancelled operations, forced staff to work from home, introduced new ways of conducting work, and loss of funding. A few of the respondents (less than 35%) noted that they suffered increased costs, increased demand for services and experienced broken supply chains (@AfricanNGOs, EPIC-Africa, 2020).

Other immediate effects felt by the CSOs that the survey reported include a reduced number of staff members, increased workloads, increased uncertainty about the future and dealing with compounding issues such as increased domestic violence, depression related illnesses due to the heavy workloads, uncertainty with funding and keeping jobs. In addition, the aspect of cancellations of programmes due to limited internet connectivity as well as limited face to face engagements shifting to webinars where there is no real active participation - people just logging on and not being active in the meetings have been observed.

Figure 1 above summarises some of the impacts felt by CSOs as they grappled with the COVID 19 pandemic.

A closer look at the impact experienced and reported by the different CSOs shows that most of these, as indicated earlier, were already being experienced before the pandemic (viz loss of funding, reduced/cancelled operations, reduced number of staff members, increased workloads and increased uncertainty about the future). The new impacts such as the widening digital divide between African civil society, and thus enabling only those already operating within the digital space to be heard over the



voices of communities at grassroots level, will not only alter advocacy and engagement dynamics, but will silence important community voices.

Therefore, diminishing support and capacities on the ground require significant adjustment to the models of civil society work and functioning. This includes the need for more CSOs to build local capacities in terms of staff requirements from within their communities. However, this can only work well with locally based CSOs. National and regional based CSOs require more than that. There are a lot of issues to consider including the relevant skills needed for particular positions, ability to work remotely without supervision, among others.

Protesters livestreaming their demonstration from a bush outside Lusaka. Photo credit Mail & Guardian, 26 June 2020

The following sections expand on the impact of the pandemic on the operations of CSOs to build a discussion for policy recommendations in the concluding section.

Democratic backsliding and shrinking of civic space

An important aspect of the impact of the pandemic is on democracy in the region. It has been noted above that CSOs have suffered from hostile and restrictive operating environments and increasing reduction of operating space for civil society, often led by governments and/or ruling parties. Nothing can be further from the truth. The 2020 Democracy Index published by the Economist Intelligence Unit confirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity to some governments to “persecute and crackdown on dissenters and political opponents (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020:27).

Across the world the pandemic led governments to take away their citizens’ freedoms and suspend civil liberties. Freedom of movement was taken away as a result of border closures, international travel bans, and restrictions on domestic travel and the use of public transport. Governments invoked emergency powers or imposed states of emergency; dispensed with parliamentary oversight, checks and balances; introduced compulsory social distancing, lockdowns, curfews and mask wearing; confined people to their homes, except for limited activities; closed educational and cultural establishments; cancelled or postponed elections; prohibited public protests; censored dissenting voices and curtailed freedom of expression; and used the full force of the law to punish those who disobeyed

THE ECONOMIST INTELLIGENCE UNIT, 2020:27

Table 1 overleaf shows the democracy scores for SADC countries as reported by the Democracy Index report for the year 2020. The scores and rankings indicate that most of the countries in the region are classified as either hybrid

or authoritarian regimes. Only Mauritius is in the category of a full democracy whilst Botswana, South Africa, Namibia and Lesotho are classified as having flawed democracies. The report indicates that the decline in Africa's low overall democracy score in 2020 was mostly driven by coronavirus-related lockdowns, which had a negative bearing on the civil liberties category (the region's score dropped from 4.46 in 2019 to 4.23 in 2020). The law enforcement agencies in Africa were mostly ruthless in enforcing lockdowns

thus contributing to the hostile and restrictive operating environment.

For comparison purposes, the number one ranked country (Norway), which is performing well across all the indicators measured has the following scores: overall score (9.81), electoral process and pluralism (10.00), functioning of government (9.64), political participation (10.00), political culture (10.00) and civil liberties (9.41).

Table 1: Democracy Index for SADC countries 2020

	Overall score	Global Rank	Electoral process and pluralism	Functioning of government	Political participation	Political culture	Civil liberties
Mauritius	8.14	20	9.17	7.86	6.11	8.75	8.82
Botswana	7.62	33	9.17	6.79	6.11	7.5	8.53
South Africa	7.05	45	7.42	7.14	8.33	5	7.35
Namibia	6.52	58	7	5.36	6.67	5.63	7.94
Lesotho	6.3	64=	9.17	4.14	6.11	5.63	6.47
Malawi	5.74	82	7	4.29	5	6.25	6.18
Madagascar	5.7	85	7.92	3.57	6.67	5.63	4.71
Tanzania	5.1	93	4.83	5	5	6.25	4.41
Zambia	4.86	99=	4.75	2.93	3.89	6.88	5.88
Angola	3.66	117	2.25	2.86	5.56	5	2.65
Mozambique	3.51	122	2.58	1.43	5	5	3.53
Zimbabwe	3.16	127	0	2.5	4.44	5.63	3.24
Comoros	3.09	132	2.08	2.21	3.89	3.75	3.53
eSwatini	3.08	133=	0.92	2.86	2.78	5.63	3.24
Democratic Republic of Congo	1.13	166	0	0	1.67	3.13	0.88

Source: *The Economist Intelligence Unit*. Key=denotes a tie in that position

With elections looming in some countries in the region like Zambia, the operating environment for civil society has not been conducive. Even in other countries who are preparing for elections in 2023, like Zimbabwe, have experienced threats of total closure of CSOs by the government hiding behind the mask of COVID-19 restrictions.

Citizens in many other countries have also been condemning governments for heightened measures that have limited the supply of goods and services, thus increasing poverty levels among the people. Of particular

importance to note is the impact the pandemic-induced environment has had on the informal economy where most people in the region irk out their living from. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) observed that many adults in most countries (both developed and developing) work in the informal economy, and in most cases without savings to rely on in times of need. They are often vulnerable to lockdowns and movement restrictions in the absence of social protection (UNCTAD, 2021).

Furthermore, the economic pressures enforced on the majority poor, coupled with corruption and misappropriation of funds have in some countries led to demonstrations mostly by citizens led by organised civil society groups. Hence the authorities have responded and, in some cases, have used excessive force, deploying not only heavily armed police but also the army. In some countries, NGOs and other civil society organisations have been directed to go through stringent registration processes thereby stifling citizen participation in matters that affect them.

The shrinking of civic space is not only happening at the national level. At regional level, civil society has had to endure years of waiting for formal recognition in order to input effectively into regional programmes. Despite the SADC Treaty recognising the need to engage the people of the region, as observed earlier on, the development of a formal engagement mechanism has thus far suffered still birth. Years of consultations on this important mechanism have not yielded any positive result and the COVID-19 pandemic has weakened the process. It seems there is largely a poor response by member states to embrace civil society even at regional level. Questions have been raised as to why this is the case. There seems to be limited political will to meet the obligations of international instruments like the SADC Treaty. Therefore, civil society remain weakened to engage at that level.

The digital divide, the “new normal” and the 4 industrial revolution

The 2020 16th Southern Africa Civil Society Forum convened online raised an important issue that in future will determine the viability or otherwise of CSOs. It is the issue of organising communities and how this can be achieved online given the limited connectivity to digital platforms that most CSOs have. There is no doubt that the greatest strength of civil society is its capacity to connect, organise and facilitate self-organisation for the communities they serve. COVID-19 and its attendant response measures has significantly reduced this ability of CSOs to physically connect and organise for the development of the communities they serve. Instead, the pandemic facilitated the rise in the value of information communication technologies (ICTs) in enabling CSOs to continue engaging in advocacy, networking, and dialogue activities. Most of the CSO staff in the region and indeed worldwide have been required, encouraged, or preferred to work from home, using the various services available including Internet, messaging, and videoconferencing platforms. In most cases this work was previously performed in offices and in the field, and while international travel has been largely banned for meetings and workshops, videoconferencing took over (UNCTAD 2021). Digitalization has therefore mitigated the negative impact that has been caused by the pandemic, a situation which may lead to lasting changes in work patterns with continued reliance on digital technologies for those who work in offices when COVID-19 eventually is contained. However, the following issues remain barriers that will require attention from different stakeholders

Toward a People's Vaccine

The role of the World Bank in ensuring universal and equitable COVID-19 vaccines for all

Nine out of 10 people living in the poorest countries may not access a COVID-19 vaccine this year. While wealthy countries rush to buy up doses, developing countries are unable to secure sufficient vaccines for their populations and are being shut out of the technology that would allow them to produce their own. This event will explore the role of the World Bank and its \$12 billion COVID-19 vaccines program; and look at how it can promote technology transfer, overcome barriers to free and universal vaccine access, ensure marginalized groups are prioritized, and build health systems to deliver on vaccines for all.

Civil Society Policy Forum 2021

Friday, March 26th

8-9:30am EST

(12-1:30pm GMT)

Civil society organisations have found online videoconferencing and meetings useful as new ways of engaging different stakeholders on critical issues of development



Anna Mariotti
Moderator - Oxfam GB



Dr. Muhammad Ali Pate
World Bank Global Director, Health, Nutrition and Population



Winnie Byanyima
Executive Director - UNAIDS



Allana Kembabazi
Right to Health - Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, Uganda



Ranganrai Machelmedza
Regional Network for Equity in Health in East and Southern Africa (EQUINET)

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including governments, regulatory authorities and internet service providers:

- high costs of internet connectivity
- inequitable distribution of internet connection points - the signal strengths differ partially and spatially

In this era of globalization, it cannot be overemphasized that access to internet and digital technologies are the gateway to new opportunities that enhance socio-economic development. The COVID-19 pandemic reinforces the extent of the interdependency and interconnectedness of countries, communities and individuals.

Whilst most CSOs have embraced online and videoconference meetings as part of the “new normal”, there are still a lot of barriers they are facing that need to be dealt with in order to achieve the full benefits of digital technologies. CSOs with an established online presence have been better equipped to take advantage of the technologies. But the majority of community based CSOs including informal economy associations and rural based CSOs have been clearly left behind. As mentioned earlier, most CSOs were caught unprepared and they do not have the infrastructure including fast internet connectivity to organise, campaign and engage with one voice. This challenge is likely to stifle the voice of the communities and lend more voice to elite organisations who may not have the grassroots members to articulate the community voices.

Notwithstanding this challenge, the pandemic has opened up a new chapter where most CSOs might consider blending office and homeworking. This means increased investments in digital technologies, training and upskilling of staff will be required. But that also means authorities have to step up efforts to invest in infrastructure that enhances inclusivity and full participation of communities in this digital transformation age. More importantly, the level of CSO and community participation in digital technology and the internet is a powerful indicator of the civil society's capacity to embrace ICTs. Effective advocacy, social mobilisation and engagement online will depend upon the quality of digital connectivity available to them, services, availability of reliable (and preferably broadband) communications networks, the affordability of suitable hardware and data packages, the existence of relevant online platforms and services, the presence of digital payment mechanisms, and individuals' own capabilities and digital literacy (UNCTAD, 2021). The development of cyber policies to regulate usage is an area where CSOs would need to engage so that the policies are well encompassing and enhance inclusivity as well as protecting citizens.

Relatedly, there is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the uptake of the 4th Industrial revolution (4IR). With these opportunities existing (online work,

teaching, provision of other services i.e. purchasing and delivery of goods and services etc), there is potential for CSOs to move up the technological ladder and make use of possibilities offered through these emerging technology breakthroughs. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa has noted that technology and innovation, the enablers of growth, were being increasingly embraced across the continent, with notable young Africans, who constitute more than 30% of the population, acting as early adopters of new technological platforms. This demographic dividend offered by the youth in Africa can be the driving force of the 4th industrial revolution supported by other continental initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and the implementation of Agenda 2063, among others. CSOs cannot be left behind in this revolution.

Shrinking financial resources

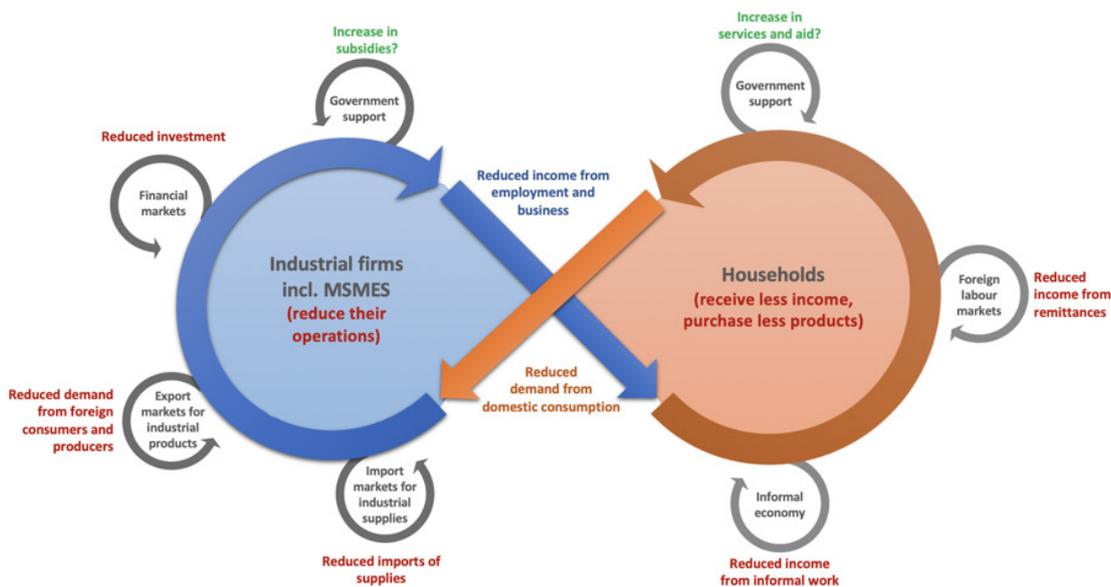
A perennial challenge for civil society organisations and the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the situation. The issue of dwindling resources has assumed different dimensions within civil society organisations which require innovative strategies to address it. Of the major challenges facing civil society in the SADC region today, a number of them have raised red flags on donor funds shifting away from advocacy to humanitarian crises; preference for funding a few large (mostly northern based) intermediaries; competition for scarce resources from International NGOs (some decentralising and moving their head offices to African countries) as well as from UN agencies and governments, with only a tiny fraction of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) targeted at civil society; prioritisation of state funding by the International Cooperating Partners (ICPs), with limited or no meaningful programme resources for civil society and requirements by donors for CSOs to apply for consortium funding that require time and resources to access.

The above challenges, coupled with shrinking civic space will likely result in the reduced operations of CSOs and even closure of others thereby creating a huge gap in checks and balances on state and government excesses. The only forms of checks and balances left would be spontaneous responses by unorganised groups that will likely be violent and damaging to property. A case in point is what happened in Eswatini when prodemocracy protesters demanded constitutional democracy and in South Africa when opportunists looted shops and businesses both in July 2021. Whilst in Eswatini the protests were led by certain disgruntled movements, in South Africa it was unorganised groups that were buoyed by the imprisonment of former President Jacob Zuma. What is clearly visible is the incapacitation of civil society to engage in these critical matters in a more systematic and organised way.

Most of the funding available has seen large CSOs based in industrialised countries taking over the space for engagement and being given platforms for dialogue and engagement by member states both at national and regional levels. The situation further consolidates the large CSOs and crowds out national based CSOs. In this regard, there have been growing calls by some CSOs for some form of NGO regulatory body that would ensure equitable distribution of funds. "Particularly within the changing funding environment, there is a need for a regulating oversight body such as intermediaries to look at how grants are disbursed and overall implementation of programmes, particularly to look at how these grants fit into the larger development picture...so that there is a better sense of where the money is going, and what its impact is expected to be" (NDA, 2008:49). Such a role, the national development agency of South Africa has noted, can be performed by some "Intermediaries" since they should have the necessary knowledge and relationship with the civil society sector.

Figure 2 below summarises the complex relationship on the impact of COVID-19 on industry and households generally including on CSOs. The figure identifies the interactions between different sectors of the economy in relation to income and financial streams of industry and households.

Figure 2: impact of COVID 19 on industries and households



Source: UNIDO, 2020

Mobilization and campaigning - Accounting for the pace and scale of newly sprouting social movements

As the COVID 19 pandemic has changed the modus operandi of many CSOs, the use of social media as a tool for social mobilisation has also increased leading to the emergency of digital social movements. These civic groups and movements have assumed an important role particularly in providing information to the general citizenry. Huge volumes of information are passed on through mostly WhatsApp services (which seems to be the most affordable), twitter as well as Facebook, among other social media. What is however a challenge has been the veracity or authenticity of information passing through these platforms. In some countries, some information exchanged amongst millions of people has turned out to be false thereby raising a major concern on fake news in circulation. In other cases, the platforms have also become a bastion of social mobilisation across different countries. For example, the #feesmustfall (South Africa); #thisflag (Zimbabwe) are offshoots of social media mobilisation that are grounded in the daily realities of the struggling masses in the region at the hands of oppressive socio-economic systems. The social mobilisation platforms have given birth to such social movements that are able to stir the anger of people and in some cases with immediate impact but without a solid base for sustained activities to ensure structural socio-economic transformation. Such movements, whilst they are necessary to bring issues to the immediate attention of authorities, are difficult to engage in sustained dialogue as part of the

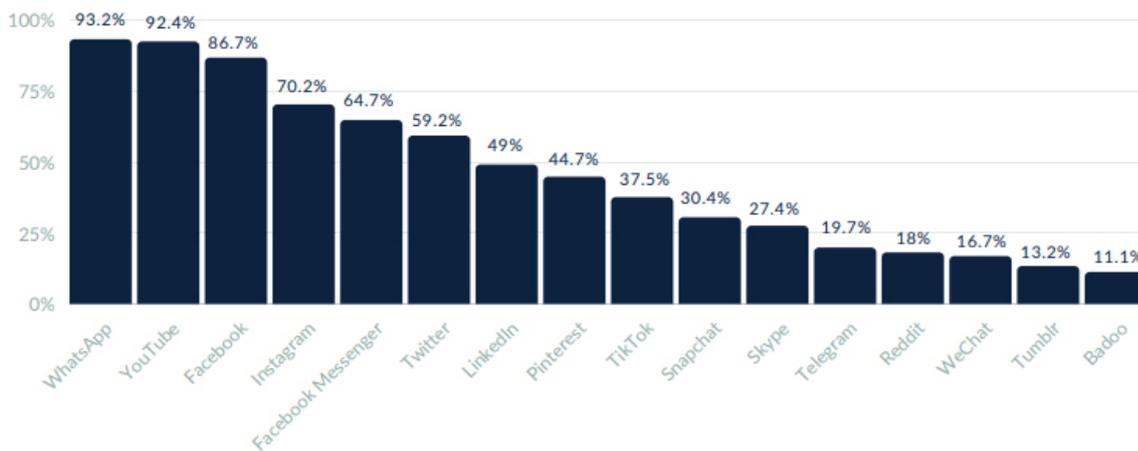
broad civic societies. Moreover, in the absence of social media, these cannot be sustained given the oppressive nature of the environments. They have been sustained, where they have raised critical issues, by the presence of many online users in the different countries. A quick comparison of two countries in the SADC region at the extreme ends of socio-economic development shows the importance of internet connectivity and its potential role in mobilisation and campaigning.

A Data Reportal Platform for Malawi, one of the Least developed countries in the SADC region, for example indicates that with a population of 19.39 million people, there were 3.45 million internet users in the country in January 2021 and internet penetration stood at 17.8%. During the same period, the social media statistics show that there were 670 thousand users, which is equivalent to 3.5% of the total population (Datareportal, 2021)

of social media platforms “being driven by a similar surge in the use of mobile apps.” This is evident in South Africa’s tally of over 100 million mobile connections – an overpenetration of 169% of the population of just under 60 million people. The report notes that Facebook is the most popular platform in the country with an estimated 27 million local users. However, the report also notes that WhatsApp and You Tube are the most used. Figure 3 below

MOST USED SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Percentage of internet users aged 16 to 64 that has used each platform in the past month



According to World Wide Worx, the Covid-19 pandemic had a profound impact on South Africans’ social media behaviour, which worked to benefit some platforms more than others.

This is an abridged version of the article that appeared on BUSINESTECH website <https://businesstech.co.za>

Source: Businesstech 1 July 2021

In comparison to South Africa, the most developed country in the region for example, a report published by Businesstech shows that there are approximately 38.2 million people online in the country with a huge usage

shows the different platforms and the percentage of users aged between 16-64 years (Businesstech, 2021).

Thus, social mobilisation and campaign can reach unassailable heights in this information age and with

Box 1: Black Lives Matter Movement

In 2013, three female Black organizers — Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi — created a Black-centered political will and movement building project called Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter began with a social media hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter, after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin back in 2012. The movement grew nationally in 2014 after the deaths of Michael Brown

in Missouri and Eric Garner in New York. Since then, it has established itself as a worldwide movement, particularly after the death of George Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis, MN. Most recently, #BlackLivesMatter has spearheaded demonstrations worldwide protesting police brutality and systematic racism that overwhelmingly affects the Black community.

According to the Black Lives Matter website they

were "founded in 2013 in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer. Black Lives Matter Foundation, Inc is a global organization in the US, UK, and Canada, whose mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state

and vigilantes. By combating and countering acts of violence, creating space for Black imagination and innovation, and centering Black joy, we are winning immediate improvements in our lives."

Source: Howard University (2018) <https://library.law.howard.edu/civilrightshistory/BLM>

COVID-19 providing the fuel, there seems to be no reverse in the rise of this form of campaigning. The fundamental questions that beg answers include, how these social movements can foster sustainable dialogue or structural transformation in the respective countries? How can these movements combine forces with the traditional civil society organisations for lasting change and solutions? How can the platforms used by these movements be transformed to prevent abuse and transmission vehicles of fake and dangerous news? Perhaps these are some of the questions that require interrogation and articulation by different stakeholders.

Box 1 overleaf highlight one of the most popular movements, #black lives matter, that has taken the world by storm. The hashtag has been used by most online users whenever issues of racial discrimination and brutality against black people have surfaced.

Conclusions and recommendations

It is too early to establish the full impact of COVID-19 on CSOs in the SADC region. However, the preliminary information established through different surveys as noted above and the experiences of different CSOs point to serious challenges in different areas mostly the operating environment, technological space, funding and financing of programmes as well as in advocacy and mobilisation strategies. CSO staff in various civic sectors have suffered loss of income, jobs and under employment. But there are opportunities that could be exploited to resuscitate CSOs as the recommendations in box 2 overleaf shows.

A number of bilateral and multilateral institutions have initiated programmes to help support countries to respond to the social, economic and political shocks of the pandemic. CSOs must tap into these initiatives and build sustainable capacities to take their work forward.

CSOs have a role to play

The development and regional integration agenda in the SADC region cannot be achieved without the full involvement of CSOs. It is not an area for the private sector (employers) and governments alone. During the implementation of COVID-19 measures, a lot of structural changes have been effected that left workers in both public and private sectors exposed. It is important that full participation of all stakeholders including the CSOs, and their representatives, is guaranteed for ensuring holistic development.

Civil society has risen to the challenges of COVID-19 and attempted to ensure effective responses from communities and various sectors under these difficult conditions. The simple and incontrovertible fact is that civil society, as representing self-organised formations of communities of interests, values and spaces, are absolutely invaluable agencies for securing positive and dynamic responses to conditions of adversity and precariousness. The absence of strong and accountable civil society reduces the capacity of governments and citizens to achieve social solidarity, public awareness and science-based interventions to reduce the spread of COVID, provide effective healthcare to those infected and mitigate the wider impacts on society.

The COVID-19 pandemic has however also exposed weaknesses of civil society itself, most notably the chronic under-investment the sector has endured for more than a decade now. Thus, this chronic underinvestment will affect the strength of civil society. As noted earlier, the greatest strength of civil society is its capacity to connect, organise and facilitate self-organisation for the communities they serve. COVID-19 and its attendant response measures, which evidently will be with us for the foreseeable future as impacted on this strength. Notwithstanding the challenges, the following recommendations are crucial, if they could be considered to ensure the continued operations of CSOs:

Box 2: Recommendations

ISSUES	CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS	GOVERNMENTS	INTERNATIONAL COOPERATING PARTNERS
<p>Democratic backsliding and shrinking civic space</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate activities with government through established platforms and engage on the operating environment. • CSOs should engage in litigation as one of the ways to stop the governments from curtailing the operations of civic organisations using national, regional and continental legal instruments such as the African Charter on Democracy Elections and Governance • Engaging the international community is also one of the ways CSOs should consider, to put pressure on governments • CSOs should consider establishing an intermediary or NGO regulatory body where funds from the donors can be challenged to with different pillars for support of NGOs at national and regional levels • CSOs must continue to popularise national, regional and continental instruments that support democracy and involve citizens in public campaigning on national obligations and commitment for domestication and implementation of these 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional commitment to establish multistakeholder SADC National Committees as dialogue platforms to embed national issues as well as regional integration at national level with strong regional-national linkages. • Legislative amendments that affect the operations of CSOs should be done in full consultation with CSOs and other non-state actors including parliamentarians • Governments should implement regional integration instruments including the protocol on the free movement of persons, which some CSOs have noted as important in curbing the shrinking of civic space with the continued attacks on foreign nationals, particularly in South Africa being a case in point • Increase legal, institutional, financial support and human capacity to key national institutions responsible for promoting democracy and good governance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider establishment of a Regional Democracy Fund which the ICPs would all contribute towards to ensure non state actors were fully supported to undertake their activities. This fund should be a sub-pillar of the broad CSO regulatory body with funding for different pillars

Widening digital divide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CSOs must invest in digital technologies and platforms as vehicles for advocacy, social mobilisation and campaigning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governments should develop strategies for e-commerce that are integrated into broader national development plans and implemented through coherent governance structures Governments should establish sector-wide approaches to planning and budgeting to ensure that all regional priorities are mainstreamed into the national plans and are adequately budgeted for. Governments should prioritise supporting data and internet service expansion to excluded areas including rural areas to ensure inclusivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ICPs could help with capacity building of CSOs through sourcing relevant technologies and providing training on relevant IT skills in partnership with the local CSOs. Community and local based CSOs could be targeted first ICPs could also consider establishing an CSO Liquidity Fund at national and regional levels which CSOs can use to cover institutional issues including supporting their overheads, ICTs and other unfunded needs
Shrinking financial resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing a Risk Framework Mechanism that underwrites the increased risks to which NGOs are exposed. We need to find a model that enables a much greater risk-sharing approach so that NGOs do not shoulder the burden of financial risk alone – but that is also acceptable to ICPs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governments should implement legislative amendments that affect the operations of CSOs in full consultation with CSOs and other non-state actors including parliamentarians 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ICPs could also consider establishing an CSO Liquidity Fund at national and regional levels which CSOs can use to cover institutional issues including supporting their overheads, ICTs and other unfunded needs
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CSOs should consider widening partnerships for support to include funding from private sector operating in the specific areas that the CSOs are engaging with 		
Mobilization and campaigning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CSOs must consider building partnerships for social accountability that takes into consideration for social movements 		

Acronyms and abbreviations

4IR	4 th Industrial Revolution
ACFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
AU	African Union
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
COVID-19	Corona Virus Disease 2020
EAC	East African Community
EQUINET	Regional Network for equity in health in east and southern Africa
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICPs	International Cooperating Partners
ICTs	Information Communication Technologies
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
R&D	Research and Development
SADC	Southern Africa Development Community
SAP	Structural Adjustment Programmes
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organisation
WEF	World Economic Forum
WHO	World Health Organisation
WTO	World Trade Organisation

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