

Chapter 11

The Role of Civil Society Organizations in the Pursuit of a Sustainable Development Agenda in South Africa: The Present and the Future

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the role of civil society organizations in the pursuit of sustainable development agenda in the post-apartheid South Africa. The chapter examines the factors impeding civil society groups in relation to national development prior and post-apartheid era and how this role/s will affect the future of civil society in the country. This chapter adopts secondary source and argues that the fundamental role civil society plays in society compliments the role of government agencies in terms of solutions for development and poverty reduction. There seems to be a lack of focus in these areas in the post-apartheid South Africa. The chapter concludes that civil society groups in developing countries face challenges ranging from donor dependency, material scarcity, hostile legal environment, fragmentation, public legitimacy, and accountability. It is recommended that civil society groups need to be strengthened to ensure effective service delivery.

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INTRODUCTION

It has become of utmost importance and necessary to talk about the work of civil society organizations in communities and their engagement by the government in the delivering of good governance or the so-called dividends of democracy. This discussion has become vital in the face of development demands across the globe. Government and people across the world are re-discovering, and attaching more importance to civil society. Civil society organizations (CSOs) such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), labor leaders, faith-based organizations, religious leaders and other civil society representatives play a critical and diverse set of roles in societal development (Schwab, 2013, p.3). As Schwab (2013, p.3) points out, in the last two decades, these roles have shifted as the external environment within which civil society operates has changed. Recently, a renewed focus on the essential contribution of civil society to a resilient global system alongside government and business has emerged. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the further evolution of civil society roles and the resulting implications for all sectors of society. Civil society has a significant contribution to make in both framing and implementing effective sustainable development policies. This chapter adopts secondary method of data collection to source information and argues that the fundamental role civil society plays in society compliments the role of government agencies in terms of solutions for development and poverty reduction for example. Governments and people across the world are re-discovering and attaching more importance to civil society. Studies have shown that the role of civil society groups is vital in the political, social and economic development of African countries (Diamond, 1999; Ndegwa, 1996; Yohanness, 1997; and Gyimah-Boadi, 2004).

The purpose of this paper is to put the civil society sector in perspective in terms of its definition, dimensions and factors that inhibit its development in the post-apartheid South Africa. Of particular importance in this chapter is the role of civil society prior to the era of democracy, during democracy, and predictions are made using the current status of civil society in the country. The breakdown of the proposed chapter is as follows: This chapter begins by defining civil society and brings attention to a plethora of contending definitions in the literature. In South Africa, civil society involves a wide array of organizations operating at different levels – be it individual or collective, local or international. As a consequence, various definitions complicate the task of identifying civil society. The chapter critically assesses the role of civil society groups and their contribution to sustainable development in South Africa. It also examines the factors impeding the performance of civil society groups in relation to national development. A comparison between civil society organizations and State-sponsored organizations will be undertaken, drawing mainly from the South African case study although slightly similar experiences of neighboring countries such as Lesotho and Botswana will be briefly considered. The changing role of civil society in financing sustainable development will be discussed. Finally, the chapter provides concluding remarks and suggestions on national policy matters which could be considered in addressing the challenges highlighted in the discussion relevant authorities.

Defining Civil Society

The conception of civil society has increasingly become a contested terrain. It is largely understood differently by different scholars. There is no universal agreement as to what civil society means. Defining what constitutes civil society can therefore be an empirical challenge. The scholarly literature continues to debate the meaning of civil society. The existence of a number of contending definitions complicates the task of identifying CSOs. Civil society as defined by Diamond (1999) in (Iwilade, 2010, p.136)

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