Enhancing citizen participation through civic action in Zimbabwe, 1997-2010

Jephias Mapuva

Department of Geography, Faculty of Science, Bindura University of Science Education, P. O. Box 1020 Bindura, Zimbabwe.

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This role of civil society in many African countries has been viewed as seeking to create an enlightened and informed citizenry. In order to strengthen their resolve and speak with a stronger voice in their engagement with the state as well as to mobilise their membership, civil society organisations (CSOs) have developed a tendency of forging linkages and working relations among themselves culminating in the formation of coalitions. Forging linkages has been out of the realisation that merging and aligning their operations would enable the different civic groups to find common ground on which to engage the state and their membership, including the civilian population. This paper seeks to establish the extent to which different civil society organisations sought to enhance citizen participation in governance processes through civil education. Four CSOs have been used in this paper, namely: the Combined Harare Residents’ Association (CHRA), the Zimbabwe Human Rights Organisation (ZimRights), Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA), as well as the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA). A cumulative total of 300 participants were used in this paper to establish the role of the cited CSOs in enlightening citizens. A total of 104 interviews were conducted and 196 questionnaires administered in this regard.

The paper reveals a number of determinants such as age, gender, level of education, regularity of citizen engagement with civic education, access to media coverage, as well as residential location, provide a precursor for increased awareness in public affairs. The different social structures have contributed to the creation of an informed citizenry that is able to make informed political, economic and social decisions.

Key words: Zimbabwe, civil society, citizen participation, citizenry, enhanced, civic action, mobilisation, governance processes.

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written on the role of civil society in the democratisation process in African countries, such as Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Malawi and South Africa as well as Zimbabwe (Bracking, 2005; Matyszak, 2009; Sachikonye, 1997; Raftopolous and Mlambo, 2009; Makumbe, 2009). Africa seeks some form of democracy which civil society and associated institutions can use to create this alternative participatory form of democracy (Kukah, 2002:187). The challenges of building democratic blocs on the continent has been manifested...
by ‘the abysmal and sometimes worsening indicators of development, namely life expectancy decreasing; infrastructure in decay; and relentless poverty; all factors that have contributed to the crumbling of democratic institutions in most African countries’ (Kukah, 2002:192). Although in many African states ‘...pro-democracy civic groups are treated with disdain, and are often referred to as trouble makers and rabble-rousers, they have been able to capitalize on, and utilize available space to create the much needed sanity in the governance systems and contribute to positive social change’ (UNDP, 2007:24). In Kenya, Malawi, Zambia, South Africa and a host of other countries that experienced authoritarian rule, pro-democracy civil society organisations have been at the forefront of supporting media and constitutional reforms and civic participation through ‘...empowering both citizens and political parties with the necessary information in addition to facilitating dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders on designing programmes that reflect national priorities’ (Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2010:4).

In countries like Kenya, popular mobilisation has been celebrated as a manifestation of the strength of ‘civil society’ as CSOs sought to confront the state for a return to democracy (Brown, 2001:735). In Malawi, civil society has intensified its civic education programmes as a way of engaging citizens towards citizen enlightenment (Glasgow et al, 1993:83). In the South African context, just as in many countries, the labour movement has provided a rallying point for various civic groups and citizens towards politicising the citizenry into forcing the state to account (Noyoo, 2005:45).

The political and economic meltdown in Zimbabwe during the decade from the mid-1990s, which was the culmination of years of bad governance (Bracking, 2005; Matyszak, 2009), led to increased civil society activity (Raftopolous and Mlambo, 2009; Makumbe, 2009) as various CSOs sought to engage the increasingly authoritarian state on the need for inclusiveness in the governance of the state, for free and fair elections and for political pluralism, as well as tolerance of voices of dissent (Sachikonye, 1997; Masunungure, 2010; Makumbe, 2009; Raftopolous, 2000). The polarised political and economic situations culminated in a general deterioration of democratic spaces, further precipitating the emergence of a strong pro-democracy civil society movement demanding the restoration of democratic institutions. In response to these demands, the state became more authoritarian, treating pro-democracy civil society organisations, opposition political parties, the civilian population and any voices of dissent with disdain. Aided by the selective application of restrictive legislation, many citizens and civil society activists became victims of trumped-up charges of trying to topple a legitimate government. Successive flawed electoral processes worsened the political crisis, giving credence to civil society claims of the illegitimacy of the political establishment.

Four selected civil society organisations (the Zimbabwe Human Rights Organisation (ZimRights), the Combined Harare Residents Association (CHRA), Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) and the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA)) were studied to establish how, through their activities they have been able to create a critical mass that is able to make informed political decisions. Auxiliary factors such as donor funding of civic groups, civil society structures and access to information were interwoven into these factors as these were viewed as pertinent and relevant to the operation of civic groups.

However, critics of pro-democracy CSOs have portrayed them as being ‘... in a state of chronic underdevelopment as a result of historical factors related to pre- and post-independence politics’ (Moyo, 1993:1); ‘groups at risk’ (Amnesty International, 2009); and ‘stooges of the West attempting to force regime change’ (Booysen and Toulo, 2009:642). This is the situation in which pro-democracy CSOs in Zimbabwe found themselves and helps to explain the Zimbabwean state’s hostile attitude towards them.

This paper presents the results of fieldwork on civil society engagement with citizens and indicators of enhanced political awareness. It also presents findings from a survey involving 300 participants representing four selected civic groups which have worked together to create a critical mass, enhance citizen participation and strengthen democratic space in the country. Both qualitative and quantitative data are thereafter presented.

The main objective of this paper is to establish the extent to which the activities of selected civil society organisations contributed to the creation of a critical mass that is able to make informed political decisions.

**METHODOLOGY**

This paper makes use of methodological triangulation involving qualitative and quantitative research designs. Random, purposive and snowball sampling procedures were employed to gather data for this research. Qualitative and quantitative research methods were found to feed into and draw from each other as they complement each other’s efforts (Yin, 2009:24). Qualitative methods were found to be multi-method in focus, involving an interactive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter (Newman and Benz, 1998:23). On the other hand, quantitative research can be used to make measurements and provide objective results with a higher degree of valid results (Anderson, 2006:4) and reliable data that can usually be extrapolated to relate to some larger population (Steckler et al., 2002:6). Interviews and questionnaires formed the basic research instruments.

Random and purposive sampling involved selecting a subset of participants from a larger sample. Snowball sampling was also used to find and recruit ‘hidden populations’; that is, groups who are not
Participants’ perceptions of patterns of civil society engagement

Participants’ perceptions of civic society engagement were captured through the interview process, during which qualitative data was drawn. Of the cumulative total of 300 participants, 104 of these were interviewed in locations ranging from the conference venue to the offices of the selected CSOs. Such environments are appropriate for interviewing because they ‘open up an opportunity for the collection of a variety of empirical materials, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, interactions and visual texts’ (Newman and Benz, 1998:23). The AGM environment gave the researcher the opportunity to interact with respondents and be able to probe further.

FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND MOBILISATION IN ZIMBABWE

Drawing from debates on factors influencing citizen participation, Bratton, Mattes and Gyimah-Boadi have noted that elements of social structures – notably, age, gender, residential location and level of education – have an influence in shaping the political behaviour and perceptions of citizens (Bratton et al., 2005:163-169). It is generally assumed that these demographic effects ‘shape the way in which individuals reason and behave, providing an explanation of why people think and act the way they do’ (Bratton et al., 2005:36). In the case of age, the younger generation is more open to change than the older generation, which is cautious or more likely to resist change. The younger generation is thus seen as being reformist and more likely to support social change while the older generation as regarded as conservative. People living in urban areas have been perceived as being more modern and more likely to be pro-reformist through undertaking various acts of political and economic participation. A combination of residential location and gender presents men living in urban areas as pro-active and more likely to express support for reform and/or democracy. The educated possess the urge to inquire and seek enlightenment, are dynamic and seek political and social change (World Bank, 2007:471).

DISCUSSION OF PARTICIPANTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF PARTICIPATION

Based on the above debates, the narrative testimonies below were drawn from a total of 104 participants. Themes were drawn from the frequency of respondents’ statements and include:

(i) identification of key drivers of participation;
(ii) civil society structures;
(iii) civil society as a training ground for activists;
(iv) the impact of restrictive legislation on citizen participation;
(v) access to information and citizen empowerment;
(vi) women’s participation in public life;
(vii) perceptions of donor community activities; and
(viii) protest action and participation.

Key drivers of participation

From the literature, interviews and discussions, the researcher identified key elements of social structures such as respondents’ age, education levels and residential location.

Responding to the question: ‘What are some of the key drivers of participation?’ most participants cited level of education and age, as well as residential location. One respondent expressed the view that:

‘Enlightening and educating citizens are the most viable prerequisites for participation because it is mostly from informed and confident citizens knowledgeable about events on the ground that one would expect a meaningful contribution to the democratic discourse’ (Academic respondent 3, 25 March, 2010).

A political/social commentator merged literacy, access to information and mobilisation as factors that promote effective participation by noting that:

‘...moderate to high literacy levels, coupled with access to appropriate information and effective mobilisation culminates in higher levels of participation and vice versa because without each of these factors, meaningful participation would be hard to come by’ (Political commentator 1, 21 April, 2010).

The study established that a harsh environment is a stimulus for mobilisation. This is confirmed by a respondent who noted that:

‘Citizens react differently during times of crises and are forced out of passivity to face the reality of the situation at hand and to seek lasting solutions to crises facing them’ (CSO respondent 21, 22 April, 2010).

The literature pinpointed residential location as a factor that promotes participation. Most respondents concurred that ordinarily, residential location does influence participation. However, in the
Zimbabwean context this has been reversed because of the government policies on land redistribution and informal settlements, which resulted in the displacement of millions of people, therefore disrupting the urban/rural divide. One participant noted that:

‘The rural/urban divide has been deliberately destroyed by the state through its skewed policies on land redistribution and informal settlements where many people were displaced and forced into rural areas and vice versa’ (ZimRights activist, 21 March 2010).

[h3] Civil society structures

Many CSOs have used their structures to disseminate information and to keep citizens informed. These structures can therefore either promote or inhibit participation. Most CSOs’ highly decentralised structures have enabled them to reach out to different places and people.

The question was asked: ‘How have structures within your CSO enabled the group to realise their objective of enhancing participation?’ Respondents concurred that structures are a vital tool for communication and information dissemination. One respondent that:

‘Organisational structures facilitate in information dissemination to our members as well as to members of the public. Additionally, our structures provided a communication channel and links between the office and our members and vice versa’ (CSO respondent 3, 17 December, 2009).

However, a former district chairperson within one of the CSOs bemoaned the lack of transparency and accountability in some CSOs. When asked to substantiate this claim, the respondent stated that:

‘For most CSOs, structures are positions which are supposed to be rotational and contractual. However, owing to the fact that for some members of these structures it has become a source of income, any threat to this position may lead to serious infighting within the CSO. This has led to undue influence on the membership to re-elect under-performing candidates into the organisational structures and this has compromised the performance of such CSOs’ (CSO respondent 17, 23 December, 2009).

The same respondent cited embezzlement of funds as prevalent among some CSOs, leading to some donors withdrawing their financial support. Both respondents cited internal squabbles within CSOs as compromising the working of their structures.

Civil society as a training ground for activists

CSOs have come to represent a mobilisation agent responsiveness. The majority of respondents concurred that CSOs provide a training ground for activists and for educating citizens in mobilising for democracy. The researcher asked:

‘What has been the impact of CSOs on citizens’ capacity to participate?’

Two respondents cited CSO’s provision of training for citizens through civic education. The first respondent expressed the view that:

‘Civic groups help in shaping the mind-set, political preferences of individuals, self-understandings as well as sharpening thought processes that citizens, doubling as the electorate, would bring to the political arena’ (CSO respondent 15, 19 December 2009).

The second respondent (a chairperson of a coalition of CSOs nationally) concurred, stating that:

‘CSOs are an important vehicle for mobilisation and democratisation and have been regarded as training ground for democratic citizenship and as a conduit towards broader forms of political participation’ (CSO chairperson 2, 7 December, 2009).

Most respondents concurred that the NCA had worked hard to make the constitutional reform process acceptable to the general public by translating it into local languages and making it accessible.

Numerous respondents acknowledged that CSOs encountered many challenges in their operations as a result of an intransigent state. However, others presented CSOs as groups whose weaknesses are anchored in their inability to produce tangible results, their donor dependence and their inability to transform state perceptions of human rights and democracy. As one respondent pointed out:

‘We as civil society have distinguished ourselves by being good at reacting to state’s activity and remaining in the same position where we were 10 years ago. We continue to address the same issues by using the same methods, but expecting different results’ (CSO respondent academic 4, 23 December 2009).

The respondent concluded by saying that CSOs should re-strategise if they are to make any impact on democracy.

Impact of restrictive legislation on state-civil society relations

It would be difficult to talk about state-civil society relations without making reference to existing key legislation. Members of CSO national and regional council structures expressed the view that their operations have been derailed by repressive legal requirements that require police clearance for any gathering, including report-back meetings.

In response to the question: ‘How has existing legislation affected mobilisation of your members?’, one respondent stated that:

‘One cannot seek police clearance to meet with people in your constituency or to embark on demonstrations and protests against deteriorating democratic institutions. You cannot expect an authoritarian state to allow you to expose its misdeeds in the streets. And I do not know if proceeding to protest would be regarded as taking the law in our hands. (NCA respondent 4, 22 December 2009)’

The above perceptions were reinforced by a WOZA activist, who pointed out that:

‘Fighting for democracy calls for sacrifice and for there to be democracy in the country, citizens have got to sacrifice their lives in the face of a brutal regime that is not prepared to share and widen political space’ (WOZA activist 5, 22 December, 2009).

The overall picture portrayed by different respondents revealed that restrictive legislation has had a debilitating effect on CSO activities and operations.

Access to information and citizen empowerment

Information as a citizen empowerment tool featured prominently
among various respondents. Responding to the question: ‘To what extent does information empower citizens?’ a member of the NCA information department asserted that:

‘Information is a powerful empowerment tool that enables citizens to exert greater demands on the state to establish good governance structures and strong democratic institutions’ (ZimRights activist 3, 19 December 2009).

In response to the question: ‘How does ignorance affect citizens’ decision-making capacity and how do CSOs alleviate the situation?’, a civic leader pointed out that:

‘Political parties usually thrive on the ignorance of the electorate about their right to vote for any political party of their choice and civil society groups have come into the fray to increase citizens’ civic awareness through civic education programmes’ (CSO respondent, 18 December, 2009).

The same informant further elaborated that by distributing free radio sets to rural people, CSOs have sought to empower citizens through providing sources of information. Media practices have been cited in this study as exerting influence on people’s access to information. Responding to the question: ‘What has been the impact of state media control on citizens?’, a respondent noted that:

‘Controlling the media entails controlling how citizens get access to information, in what form and when they should get this information. Look at the current state of affairs in the country where the state broadcaster monopolises the airwaves. People want a wide choice of print and electronic media to choose from. That is what I call democracy’ (Political commentator respondent 1, 12 February, 2010).

One respondent queried the monopolisation of the media by one political party and limits on information available to citizens, and noted:

How can people make informed choices at the ballot box when the only voice heard on public media and across the land is that of President Mugabe?’ (ZimRights respondent 5, 29 December, 2009).

Most respondents concurred that access to information is vital to the education and empowerment of citizens so that they are able to make informed decisions.

Women’s participation in public life

The researcher sought to explore opportunities for women to participate. It has been argued that women have been denied access to decision-making because societies define women’s space as being private rather than public (Morna et al., 2006:31), with the political sphere having been the most hostile about granting access to women (Morna et al., 2006:31). Respondents from various CSOs, mostly women from WOZA, cited fear and intimidation against women as some of the factors that discourage women from participating in public life, with one respondent noting that:

‘Most women are overcome by fear and become victims of rape, torture and intimidation, usually perpetrated as a punitive measure for taking part in protests or being married to civil society activists or active politicians belonging to different political organisations. This has impacted negatively on women’s capacity to participate in politics, but most have endured’ (CSO respondent 24, 25 April, 2010).

With regards to restrictive legislation, the majority of WOZA respondents accused female politicians of being insensitive to the plight of their women counterparts as some women parliamentarians have supported the enactment of repressive laws like POSA and AIPPA, which:

‘...has shown the magnitude of insensitivity of government officials to the plight of the general public, especially the deterioration of the economy, shortage of basic commodities, the collapse of education and health delivery systems in the country and the failure by government to repeal restrictive legislation (WOZA respondent 2, 19 December, 2009)].

The general picture presented by various women respondents is that women bear the brunt of the political and economic crises and have resolved to join the broader fight for democracy in the country.

Perceptions of donor community activities

The role of foreign donors drew different responses from CSOs, the state and donors themselves with most respondents supporting the provision of financial support to CSOs by donors. Responding to the question: ‘To what extent have donors influenced activities and operations CSOs?’ one respondent pointed out that:

‘...donors are our lifeline and without them we cannot operate efficiently and our overall existence depends on them’ (CSO respondent 37, 29 April, 2010).

Another participant and representative of one of the donor agencies present at one of the AGMs argued that:

‘...donors seek to help in building capacity and strong democratic institutions through citizen empowerment’ (Donor respondent 1, 21 February, 2010).

Other respondents justified the direct involvement of diplomatic missions based in Zimbabwe in the funding of some CSOs. Responding to the question: ‘Can donor funding of pro-democracy CSOs be perceived as meddling in local politics or internal affairs of local CSOs?’ a senior CSO member responded that:

‘It is us who have problems of seeking to build our capacity and democratic structures and donors come in to finance our programmes. You cannot expect donors to pour out their money without getting involved to determine how and for what purpose their money is used. Here and there they might want this to be done in a slightly different way and if we agree, then they can provide funds. That cannot be said to meddling, at least according to us. Therefore, donors through their host countries come in to bail out people under authoritarian rule’ (CSO respondent 26, 27 April, 2010).

Some respondents felt differently:

‘It becomes suspicious if embassies and diplomatic missions openly seek to meddle and participate in the political processes of a sovereign state. This means the host countries of such embassies are behind these machinations, notably around regime change’ (Political commentator respondent 2, 30 April, 2010).
Table 1. Level of participation in civics by age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Level of participation in civics (n=196)</th>
<th>Cumulative participants in the age range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18–25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1. Very active</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26–35</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2. Active</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36–45</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3. Non-committal</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46–55</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4. Not active</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56–69</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ 70</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The various responses in this section presented protest action as an effective way of engaging government although it has serious consequences for participants and activists.

The general picture that was portrayed by the different respondents was that CSOs have provided a conduit through which citizens can demand accountability, transparency, observance of human rights and unhindered participation in all public affairs that affect their lives. Additionally all the elements of social structures concurred that pro-democracy CSOs have played an instrumental role in the creation of a critical mass that is not only able to confront the state, but also to make informed political decisions.

**ANALYSIS OF DEMOGRAPHIC DETERMINANTS OF PARTICIPATION**

The analysis of demographic determinants of participation was drawn from quantitative data derived from 196 questionnaires responses. The determinants that were analysed involved the elements of social structure mentioned above.

**Age and its impact on citizen participation**

Responses from different age groups showed differences in the level of participation in civil society activities. Below are responses per age group in response to the question: 'How active have you been in civil society activities since becoming a member?'

The Table 1 shows that participants in the 18 to 45 age range appear to be more actively involved in CSO activities. Those aged 46 to 69 and over 70 years exhibit correspondingly less commitment to participating in civic society and political activities.

All 196 respondents agreed there is need for political reforms in the country. On whether civil society should be involved in campaigning for political reforms, 193 felt they should while three participants expressed the view that campaigning for political reforms should be done by citizens through the ballot box.

In responding to the question: 'What has been the state
Table 2. State of democracy in Zimbabwe.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Democratic</th>
<th>Deteriorating democracy</th>
<th>Very undemocratic</th>
<th>Failed state</th>
<th>% of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18–25</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26–35</td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36–45</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46–55</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56–69</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ 70</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Levels of literacy among respondents.

of democracy in the country, especially from the mid-1990s?, most participants agreed that Zimbabwe does not meet the minimum prerequisites of democracy, as shown in Table 2 below.

The fact that no participants expressed the view that Zimbabwe is a ‘failed state’ could imply that all are still optimistic that through continued engagement, democracy is achievable.

Most civil society activists from all age ranges concurred that the police have become an impediment to political participation. They noted that the requirement of a police clearance to hold a meeting was a mechanism through which the police force could suppress CSOs activities. The few participants who indicated that police had not been prevented them from holding meetings with their members were welfare civic groups, and not governance CSOs. This confirms the view that governance CSOs are seen as a threat to the political establishment.

Level of literacy as a determinant of participation

Literacy intertwines with other elements of social structures, notably age, gender and to some extent residential location. The various literacy levels of participants were established to assess the influence of education attainment on citizen participation. The high number of respondents with O levels (74) is evident of Zimbabwe’s high literacy rate, which has enabled CSOs to engage with citizens. Figure 1 shows the literacy rate of participants as represented in Table 3 in this study.

It emerged that all people at all levels of literacy had exhibited an interest in civil society activities. Those within the O level category comprised mostly the youth. They exhibited an economic dimension to their interest in CSOs’ activities, with some expressing the view that they would support any political leaders who would offer them economic opportunities such as jobs, further education and a sound national economy. The youth are also most likely to make increasing demands on government. Given the 85% unemployment rate at the time the interviews were conducted (2008), this group showed the most disappointment with the government’s failed economic policies, which have nearly rendered the state dysfunctional. This was worsened by the fact that most of the participants within the ‘fair – professional’ ranges hold professional and academic qualifications that can ordinarily get them employment. However, the study
Table 3. Levels of literacy among respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of education</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic literacy (1)</td>
<td>45 =19 male and 26 female</td>
<td>0-7 yrs at school-barely literate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly Literate (2)</td>
<td>53=12 male and 41 female</td>
<td>7-10 yrs at school-can read and write</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attained ‘O’ Level(3)</td>
<td>76=35 male and 41 female</td>
<td>11 yrs at school-can deliberate issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attained ‘A’ Level(4)</td>
<td>18=11 male and 7 female</td>
<td>13 yrs at school-can deliberate issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional (5)</td>
<td>44=28 male and 16 female</td>
<td>Post ‘A’ Level qualification-able to provide a critical analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University education (6)</td>
<td>22=19 male and 3 female</td>
<td>Attended university- can critically analyze issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>298 Respondents</td>
<td>A mixture of those who can barely read to those who can provide a critical analysis of events and processes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Participation in elections from 1990 to 2008.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CSO members who voted</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSO members who did not vote</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

established that of the 196 participants, although 182 held professional qualifications only eight were employed, which justify their desperation. Most of these participants are in their economic prime and as such, form the bulk of the electorate, and are not likely to vote for any poorly performing political party that does not provide job opportunities. Consequently, the study established that those respondents whose level of education went beyond the minimum literacy level portrayed a high appreciation and comprehension of the intricacies of human rights and civil liberties. Such respondents were more likely to be active in civic and political affairs. In cases where respondents had low literacy levels, there appeared to be more fear and anxiety in response to government, leading to low levels of participation, with one respondent expressing the view that ‘fear is the worst enemy to campaigning for democracy’.

Voter [civic] education, elections and voting patterns

The researcher has noted that civic education forms part of a variable that depicts respondents’ level of literacy and is treated in this study as one of the elements of social structure. The study established that through voter/civic education workshops, CSOs have been able to inform and educate citizens about the importance of participating in elections, with a view to encouraging citizens to vote. In this context citizens were also encouraged to regard elections as both a citizen entitlement and an obligation which responsible citizens should enjoy. Table 4 below shows trends in respondents’ participation in elections over the years.

The data shows that in each election session more people from this sample of 196 are voting, while fewer are failing to vote for one reason or another. By 2008 the number of those who did not vote dropped to two, indicating an increased willingness to vote.

Additionally, the researcher established from the EISA Report that voting patterns during the various election periods had shifted incrementally, especially from the mid-1990s. Further, through voter education programmes all the selected civic groups encouraged their members to participate in elections as a way of contributing to democracy.

Most respondents from CSOs expressed the view that their engagement with CSOs had transformed their attitudes towards elections and increased their resolve to register and participate in elections. Various CSO structures indicated that they emphasise within their membership the detrimental impact of voter apathy in terms of promoting and perpetuating anarchy and authoritarianism.

CSO respondents were asked the open-ended question: ‘How do you seek to promote the conduct of free and fair elections in Zimbabwe?’ Secretariats of selected CSOs confirmed that they had supplemented voter education with the observation and monitoring of elections. The selected CSOs increased their election monitors from three in 1995 to 93 by 2008, which shows their increased involvement and participation in electoral processes.
Table 5. Paid-up membership of selected CSOs.

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<td>53100</td>
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<td>95000</td>
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<td>113000</td>
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<td>68790</td>
<td>68856</td>
<td>69000</td>
<td>71455</td>
<td>71599</td>
<td>72963</td>
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<tr>
<td>WOZA</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>3424</td>
<td>4873</td>
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<td>8596</td>
<td>8784</td>
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Figure 2. Representation of statistics of growing membership for the selected civic groups.

Interacting with the citizenry through workshops

Although elsewhere, each civic group has been treated as a separate entity but with working relationships with other pro-democracy CSOs, but this section focuses on activities of the NCA as a coalition of over 250 pro-democracy civic groups including the selected cases. The NCA regularly rolls out national consultative forums including workshops and voter/civic education programmes. From NCA records information was extracted on workshops and their attendance in different parts of the country. In all cases all affiliates of the NCA were represented at these workshops. The 2007 were focussed on, as this was when most CSOs had intensified their engagement with their members and members of the public. Workshops carried out in 2007 were to prepare citizens for the national election that was due in March 2008. The NCA records indicated that in various sectoral areas, from January to December 2007 35 gender workshops attracted 1346 participants, while 25 youth workshops were attended by 1018 participants. Public workshops, of which there were 48, attracted 6068 participants. Women accounted for 56% of the 6068 people who attended the public workshops. In some provinces fewer workshops were held than in others. This appears to have been largely due to intimidation. For example, the NCA coordinator cited Mashonaland as having held one workshop for the whole of 2007 because the province was a ZANU PF political stronghold and as such, ZANU PF activists in the area did not want any civil society activities.

Trends of enhanced citizen participation

From the activities of the selected CSOs and participants’ responses, Trends that are key drivers of citizen participation emerged from an analysis of the activities of the selected CSOs, participants’ responses, documentary and content analyses of EISA election reports as well as from electoral statistics. The trends of citizen participation identified include (but are not limited to) increased organisational membership, increased political awareness leading to participation in elections and ward meeting attendance, as well as diminishing voter apathy.

Increased membership as an indicator of raised awareness

Most CSOS studied here have experienced an upsurge in membership, as indicated in their respective membership registers, especially from the late 1990s. The statistics of the selected CSOs are presented in Table 5 as it reflects paid-up members from the respective CSO registers. The Figure 2 is a representation of statistics of growing membership for the selected civic groups.
The NCA membership presents the cumulative membership increase of its affiliates across the country, as shown in Figure 3. Membership of the NCA also increased, both in terms of affiliates as well as in number of individuals joining the civic group. The huge membership increases from the early 2000s corresponds with the extent of democratic decay during the same time. Figure 3 shows trends in NCA membership, 1997 to 2010. Trends in increased membership is been more prevalent and pronounced on the NCA records as depicted in Table 6.

It seems likely that civil society growth during the period after 2004 could have been a response to the deteriorating political and economic situation that began to set in at that time. It is most likely that this could imply that the instability within the political dispensation influenced an upsurge in civil society growth, as anger and frustration increased people’s resolve for political change.

**Selected indicators of political awareness**

Increased political awareness manifested itself through a cumulative increase in the number of people who joined CSOs in both rural and urban areas, especially from 1997. The study noted that more people were joining CSOs in addition to those in which they had initially held membership. Once again this trend is attributable to increased political awareness. It was also observed that, despite high attendance at civic education sessions, rural people have not been visible in other public activities that require one to exhibit one’s political affiliation. This is because of fear of victimisation. The opposite is true of those in urban areas. However, this does not imply that there is no political intimidation and politicisation of public institutions in urban areas. Rather, it seems those in urban areas are more likely to be prepared to contend with these threats and in some cases, they outnumber those seeking to intimidate them. Additionally, between 1997 and 2009 the percentage of those who became aware of and participated in the constitution reform process increased from 18% to 79%. This indicates that people became gradually aware of the pivotal role of a people-driven constitution in a democracy. The same applies to the increase in the number of people who opted for positions within pro-democracy civil society organisations, which rose from 48% in 1997 to 74% by 2009.

In response to the question: ‘What major factor has impacted on political participation by citizens in the

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*Source: NCA Annual Report, 2010.*
country?”, several respondents indicated that there were a variety of factors that militated against citizen participation, notably in rural areas, where youth militias, intimidation, harassment and politicisation of traditional leaders have become rampant. Additionally, the threat of harm by the youth militias and confiscation of land by traditional chiefs belonging to those who do not support ZANU PF have tended to discourage people from participating in CSOs’ activities and/or freely expressing their political choices. Various negative factors impacting on political participation were found to be common to both urban and rural areas, but more prevalent in the latter. These include the curtailment of freedom of expression, intimidation, physical assault and monitoring of voting. In the latter instance, villagers were forced to vote for specific political parties or risk being evicted from their rural homesteads.

Civil society groups have not been spared in this wave of politically-motivated violence as they have been accused of seeking to influence the electorate.

Increased political awareness and diminishing voter apathy

The study established that there was an increase in civil society membership and a corresponding increase in the number of registered voters and those who actually participated in elections. Additionally, there was a corresponding decrease in voter apathy. Table 7 shows a statistical representation of people registered to vote, those who voted at each voting session and those who did not vote from 1990 to 2008 when the last election was held.

Collective efforts by CSOs could most likely have contributed to the decrease in voter apathy as all CSOs mobilised their members to participate in elections, leading to an incremental shift in voting patterns. Given the above statistics, it appears that increased civil society membership could have influenced voting patterns. What seems to be a correlation between the increasing popularity of opposition politics, on one hand, and the growth of civil society membership, on the other, could be indicative of the fact that civil society worked in collaboration with oppositional political parties which performed well in the 2008 elections.

**SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Several major findings of this study show the role played by pro-democracy CSOs in influencing citizens’ political behaviour. The study demonstrated that state-civil society relations in Zimbabwe have been characterised by acrimony and constant clashes over political hegemony, especially from the mid-1990s, when it became evident that democratic institutions were deteriorating. Through the analysis of demographic data presented at the beginning of this paper, it has been established that key elements of social structure (such as the age of participants, gender, level of education and residential location) help in shaping the political behaviour and perceptions of citizens and eventually influence citizens’ participation in public activities. It emerged that age is a significant determinant of participation, with the elderly most unlikely to embrace reforms, whereas the youth\(^3\) are more likely to be reform-minded and progressive (Bratton et al., 2005:165, 166), and to align themselves to political parties (Makumbe, 2009:34). At the same time, the youth can be prone to manipulation by politicians who take

\(^3\) For this thesis, the youth are those up to 36 years, as has been highlighted in chapters 3,4 and 5

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**Table 6.** Trends in NCA membership, 1997 to 2010

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<td>47016</td>
<td>52300</td>
<td>56650</td>
<td>62950</td>
<td>186200</td>
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<td>383400</td>
<td>335020</td>
<td>541500</td>
<td>634400</td>
<td>760500</td>
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**Table 7.** Voting patterns 1990 to 2008.

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<tr>
<td>Registered voters</td>
<td>4 440 816</td>
<td>4 646 891</td>
<td>5 049 815</td>
<td>5 288 763</td>
<td>5 568 637</td>
<td>5 934 768</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid votes</td>
<td>1 757 859</td>
<td>1 557 558</td>
<td>2 706 973</td>
<td>3 046 891</td>
<td>3 634 645</td>
<td>4 937 240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not vote</td>
<td>2 682 957</td>
<td>3 089 333</td>
<td>2 342 842</td>
<td>2 241 872</td>
<td>1 933 992</td>
<td>1 097 528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voter apathy (%)</td>
<td>60.4</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>18.5</td>
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advantage of their desire for employment and engage them in violent political activities (Lugman, 2010:10; Raftopoulos, 2000:21). This is evidenced by the youth militia within ZANU PF, who are used to perpetrate violence against civil society activists and other potential voices of dissent (Hammar and Raftopoulos, 2003:23).

The study also confirmed that citizens have an inherent capacity to react to a crisis situation and this is dependent on the level of government oppression (Sachikonye, 2011:45). It noted that the emergence of most pro-democracy civil society organisations in the 1990s was not coincidental, but was a response to deteriorating democratic institutions that characterised much of Zimbabwe's political, economic and social landscape. It could therefore be concluded that in Zimbabwe, just like anywhere else, CSOs and citizens are reciprocal partners that join hands when there is a crisis, with civil society providing the medium and resources and citizens providing the human capacity needed to initiate the intended activities.

The study noted that CSOs are an effective tool for disseminating information and thus enlightening the public. It also confirmed that exchange and sharing of information within CSOs and among activists forms the core of their interactional activities (O'Neill, 2008:10; Diamond and Platter, 2003:7). The correlation between increased protest action and an upsurge in civil society activity could be attributed to a raised awareness among citizens, who realise the need for a confrontational approach in engagement with the state (Gaventa, 2006:14). It can therefore be concluded that the success of protest action could be attributed to its facilitation by civil society structures, and their efficient mobilisation.

While the authoritarian state in Zimbabwe has restricted the free flow of information and determines what information citizens are able to access, CSOs have embarked on promotional activities to overcome these restrictions by reaching out to grassroots communities. In addition, the study concluded that state propaganda that presents CSOs as agents of regime change has been met with disapproval by citizens, who continue to take part in civil society activities in large numbers. This is evidenced by the growth of most pro-democracy CSOs and by diminishing voter apathy.

This study also showed that one of the instruments that the state has manipulated to suppress civil liberties is through restrictive legislation, which has impacted on the relationship between the state and civil society (Makanje et al., 2004:11). POSA and AIPPA provisions have been used by the state to limit media freedoms and restrict civil liberties and activities. The cumulative effect of restrictive legislation on citizens has been increased anger and a resolve to campaign for the democratisation of the media and other public spaces, and for participation and seeking alternative ways of influencing political decisions (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2004:122).

The repressive political environment in Zimbabwe resulted in most pro-democracy movements collectively campaigning for the restoration of democracy (Raftopoulos, 2000) and to the forging of linkages, working relations, coalitions and network spaces (Bracking, 2005) to strengthen their capacity to engage the state (Makumbe, 2010). The study does not seek to give the impression of a united pro-democracy civil society movement in Zimbabwe, nor does it attempt to romanticise the role of civil society in enhancing citizen participation. However, it has established that pro-democracy CSOs have exhibited a common purpose in their campaign for the restoration of democracy. Through the establishment of coalitions such as the NCA, CSOs have been able to establish network spaces to collectively demand social and political change.

While it is clear that the pro-democracy movement has converged towards the restoration of democracy, this is not to say that they are opting for a regime change. Rather, they are strengthening their positions and demands based on their common understandings of democracy. Given that coalitions are guided by collective common purpose, the study concluded that crises act as the glue that binds CSO coalitions. This study has found that CSOs provide a training ground for human rights and civil society activists, as well as those aspiring to mainstream politics. It can therefore be concluded that CSOs in Zimbabwe have made a major contribution to the politicisation of most civil society activists and members of the public, shaping their behaviour to enable them to influence government decisions.

Participation of women in CSO activities was found to be very prevalent but not in leadership positions. It was noted that women tend to shy away from public spaces, especially those that require leadership commitments (McFadden, 1992:92). However, other than leadership positions, women’s participation in CSO activities has been greater than that of their male counterparts. Some feminist scholars (MacKinnon, 1989:48; Meena, 1992:19; Kabeer, 2001:46) have presented patriarchy as imposing a domineering effect on women’s participation in public spaces, but this study did not find evidence for this claim. What it established is that both men and women make a collective claim on democracy and seek ways of playing a role in restoring it. It can therefore be concluded that crisis situations enable societies to set aside minor differences or traditions (such as patriarchy) that tend to separate their roles as they seek to confront common problems in their midst.

The research has demonstrated that while it is common knowledge that most CSOs get donor funding, accusations have emerged of some donors using such
funding as a means of meddling in local politics. Having engaged in the debates about the role of donor funding in facilitating civil society activities and operations (Moyo, 1993:3; Bratton and Cho, 2006:16; Makumbe, 1998:99), it can be concluded that donor funding has gone a long way towards capacitating civil society groups, but the reliance on such funding tends to cripple the operations of most groups once the flow of funds ceases. Additionally, donor funding of pro-democracy CSOs has increased mistrust between the state and CSOs. It was observed here that the involvement by some diplomatic missions in Zimbabwe in funding civil society has been construed as confirmation of the support of those countries for CSOs' campaign for democracy. These accusations and counter-accusations have given credibility to the state’s allegations that both CSOs and the donor community are agents for a regime-change agenda.

**Conclusion**

This study has shown that numerous factors promote or hinder citizen participation. They range from elements of social structure, CSO internal politics, operations and activities and CSO resource mobilisation (involving donors), as well as the role of the state in seeking to influence citizens’ political decisions. However, the overarching observation has been that political crises act as the glue that binds similarly-minded CSOs, individuals, men and women, and even divergent racial groups in pursuit of a common purpose. This has been shown by the formation of coalitions by different CSOs and their engagement in regular protest marches. Protest action has also shown that it has the ability to unite citizens regardless of gender, political and traditional diversity. In addition the civil society movement has shown its usefulness as the appropriate forum to engage the state.

It can be concluded that pro-democracy CSOs' mobilisation strategies in Zimbabwe have been a success story despite the challenges of violent displays of political intolerance by the state.

It can also be concluded that the level of repression exhibited by the state towards CSOs has helped to shape citizens’ political behaviour and to encourage them to seek ways of dislodging the repressive regime (Bratton et al., 2005:167). Repression of citizens increases their resolve to campaign for a more open society. When faced with an intolerant and repressive regime, CSOs create their own spaces, especially where spaces have been closed or restricted. The case of WOZA has shown that women can take up the challenge and initiative to demand rights and privileges from the state even through protest action, contrary to the perception of women held by McFadden (1998:12) that women are not prepared to take up public spaces. Similarly, the case of the NCA has shown that different civil society sectors can establish their own network spaces to confront the state with a united voice. ZimRights, CHRA and WOZA, among other CSOs, have also shown that CSOs can reconcile their objectives and missions to align with those of the broader civil society movement by affiliating to the NCA and incorporating constitutional reform into their agendas.

In terms of the analytical framework it can be concluded that the level of repression of citizens tends to create commonalities through which citizens can identify with each other and make a collective effort to confront the state. However, CSO activities continue to be dogged by a lack of adequate financial resources, leading to the involvement of donors in funding. As long as CSOs lack adequate financial resources and have to rely on external donors, their relationship with the state will continue to be informed by suspicion of a regime-change agenda. Yet the need for CSO and civil society action in Zimbabwe cannot be questioned.

**REFERENCES**


