

Chapter I »

Citizen action and the democratic deficit

In the convergence of multiple crises we face globally today, we find ourselves in a perfect storm. This situation is not an accident. It is a direct result of misguided human action, compounded by a lack of thoughtful leadership, deepening inequality and the widening chasm that is the divide between the global North and the global South. Many decent men and women are trying to respond to each of the crises globally, nationally and locally. They are trying to help victims on the ground in places where they are needed, challenging policies and how these policies are made. The purpose of this volume is to examine why, with all this citizen energy, there is not the level of success needed to adequately address the problems we face globally.

Demystifying where we are both as a planet, and as the human race, is a good starting point. The reality is that all the constructs we currently accept as fact – governments, non-governmental and other non-profit social organisations, businesses large and small, global and regional supranational organisations like the UN and the EU, even financial markets – are all man-made and therefore vulnerable to change. Now that every single one of the accepted constructs has shown itself to be flawed at a very fundamental level, new constructs must and will emerge. I don't purport to know what the new world order will look like. It might take many shapes and forms and I'm certainly no fortune teller. But what I do know is that wholesale change is now inevitable. Rather than attempting to predict the new end-game, today's challenge is to declare ourselves part of the emergence of these new social, political, economic and business constructs. I hope to provide some thought leadership on optimistic solutions – for civil society to work towards the creation of new and better spaces in which to operate, and for political leadership to enable this process, not for political gain, but because they can do better if their citizenry is more engaged.

All too frequently, when the problems are on a large scale, people look to governments to propose solutions. More often than not, they are disappointed, finding the solutions proposed to be inadequate and based on political compromise. When governments do propose change on the massive scale we now need, they end up being voted out before their strategies are enacted, irrespective of whether their strategies are

good or bad, purely as a result of the cycles of election politics. Governments in democracies are forced by time-bound political systems to be tactical, looking no more than four or five years ahead. Businesses, on the other hand, may look 20 or 30 years ahead but are held back by shareholders who want to see a quick and extremely high return on their investments. Citizens have a longer-term perspective. We look generations into the future. So it is citizens, most of all, who have a vested interest in the nature of change that takes place and how this change should shape the world we live in.

It is time for ordinary men and women to rise to the challenges represented by the crises of financial systems, food prices, climate change and the frightening overall environmental crisis, poverty and inequality, paying particular attention to gender issues, and also being sensitive to issues of disability, age, sexual orientation and so on. The questions include: How do individuals, groups and communities respond? Where do we ordinary people fit in? Where is our power base and how do we activate it? The answers to these questions are complex and simple at the same time. After three decades of activism, fighting for justice in many spheres, and after many months of reflection, I honestly believe there is much that can be achieved. Ordinary people from all walks of life must use their immense collective weight to speak truth to those in power. This will be true democracy at work.

The current globalised context: Unleashing the power of people

The forced exodus of 10-12 million African people during the 300-year period when the slave trade flourished is one of the ugliest and least understood facts in global history. Initially, the voices of dissent against the slave trade were few and disparate. Gradually the movement grew and the disparate voices eventually became a global movement that ended the legalised kidnapping, trading and degradation of human beings as slaves. The realisation that true democracy results in justice being served, and that it is only when ordinary people get involved on a sustained basis that true democracy exists and works, became the mantra of my personal journey and remains so today.

In one of my first leadership roles as the founding president of the Helping Hands youth movement in Durban, I learnt the importance of enabling participation and allowing people to make mistakes. Initially, I approached my role as one of stepping in if I thought something was not happening or not happening fast enough, but soon realised that my ultra results-orientated approach was harmful to shared leadership, empowerment and learning.



Where do we ordinary people fit in? Where is our power base and how do we activate it?

My concern is with change – large-scale positive, meaningful and enduring change – and how we can get there. If we energetically address our failures, I believe we will find new ways to approach and combat the urgent problems we face. I also firmly believe that human energy and ingenuity employed on a large scale can bring about the human security and human development we need to make our world a better place for everyone. It is my hope that this volume will inspire activists, citizens, young people, voters from all over the world, to embrace the fact that we need to change and to engage with the development of new and better constructs that will create a sustainable future for generations ahead. Therefore it is necessary that we set out early on what the ‘democratic deficit’ means and how it can be overcome with considered responses.

Sadly, all over the world voter levels are declining; yet at the same time, there is an encouraging increase in the numbers of citizens involved in social movements. It would be naïve to ascribe the decline in voter participation to apathy. It is a direct result of a lack of faith in political institutions, leadership and processes, a trend which is evidently bad for democracy. The involvement of individuals in social movements is necessary and positive, but it does not replace the need to exercise one’s democratic right to vote. A just and healthy society needs both good government and a strong, vibrant civil society.

It is not a matter of one or the other. Today civil society is put under huge pressure to make strategic choices about how to use its resources at the local, provincial, national and global level, as well as through the increasingly important regional institutions. Whether it be the European Union, Mercosur in Latin America or the African Union, what is clear, especially for developing countries, is that if we do not think very seriously about political and economic integration, we do not stand a chance in this increasingly competitive world. For a decade now, I have joked that if Europe can have the ‘Euro’ I do not see why Africa cannot have an ‘Afro’, not the hair style but a common African currency. The drive towards European Union integration was fuelled by the realisation of the European political elite that their member states do not stand a chance of prospering as individual states in light of the emergence of economic power of what we now call the BRIC countries: Brazil, Russia, India and China. They had to organise themselves to ensure their future strength as a collective of states.

Rethinking civil society in the globalised world requires careful consideration of how we use our energies to create the kind of changes that we actually need. Most of the global institutions that we have to

engage with are rooted in the geopolitics of 1945, particularly the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the United Nations. The United Nations, considered to be both the most democratic and accessible of these organisations, is, on closer examination, culpable of a deeply disturbing democratic deficit. Five nations have a permanent seat and power of veto on the UN Security Council, two of which are France and the UK. Given the population size of these two countries, comparatively speaking there is no contemporary justification for them to have this elevated status. Perhaps there was a logic in awarding France and the UK this enormous power in 1945 since at that time they ruled over many subjects in their various colonies, but today the only justification of their veto rights is the fact that they possess weapons of mass destruction in the form of nuclear weapons. However, if ownership of potential destruction is the new criterion (which I'm certainly not advocating), then why aren't India, Pakistan, Israel and even North Korea there?

All of these accepted global institutions set up in the aftermath of the Holocaust and World War II now suffer from a legitimacy deficit, a democratic deficit, a coherence deficit and compliance deficit. To illustrate compliance deficit, I would refer to their huge, expensive, global summits on various issues, which require some level of global political consensus to be reached. As fast as the ink dries after heads of states sign up to the various Declarations, they forget their commitments, or they strategise as to how to diminish their commitments. This may appear to be a cynical view. But take a look at the outcomes of recent inter-governmental meetings – the G8 summits, the Kyoto Protocol, various UN summits on gender equality – one would be extremely lucky to subsequently find even a 25 per cent compliance rate.

Societies are served best when a diversity of opinions is allowed to flourish. Even if conventional mainstream opinions turn out to be right, having opposition views ensures necessary checks and balances are applied. In September 2001, when George W. Bush told US citizens and the world, 'You're either with us or against us', he used an old fascist call to action, used by both Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, which had succeeded in the past in quelling dissent. To make every subject a matter of black or white is the antithesis of justice, strangling true democracy. Voices of dissent may begin as a minority, but they quickly grow if the cause is just. The abolition of transatlantic slavery is a good case in point.

There is a real urgency to the project of incorporating civil society within a meaningful decision-making process. The danger is that if



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the manifold injustices the world faces are not addressed, the consequences could be extreme. The propensity to violence by desperate people is a huge challenge for citizen activism. I believe passionately that violence as a means of advancing progressive causes, whilst sometimes justifiable in the face of state- or corporate-sponsored aggression, is not ultimately viable. My experience in South Africa during the apartheid years showed that state violence led to popular violence which in turn led to the crime levels that are so damaging to that beautiful country today. The way to prosecute for justice is through just means so as not to dehumanise ourselves in the process.

This is connected with the violence of poverty, something we will talk about in more depth later on. Hunger is effectively a weapon of mass destruction. There is enough food and enough water in the world today. Their distribution is unjust, with abundance in some countries and a devastating lack in others. Part of this is simply the luck of geography, but still we have the ability and technologies to address the problem. We simply need the will and resources to do so.

The dangers to civil society in our current context

It has become something of a truism that the attacks of 11 September 2001 changed the face of the world as we know it. I would argue that the 24 months that followed those attacks were more consequential. In a remarkably short period of time, we witnessed a clear shift towards unilateral action and militarisation, and the undermining of human rights and civil liberties. Taken collectively, these threaten the ability of citizen voices to be heard in decision-making processes, and erode global stability and human security.

For me, the war in Iraq highlights three main threats to civil society. The first is to civil society's agenda. War has diverted both attention and resources away from the key issues that civil society organisations (CSOs) worldwide are working to address. Long-term campaigns and efforts aimed at gender equality, social and economic justice, poverty reduction, environmental protection and the defence of human rights have been overshadowed by the Iraq crisis.

The second threat is to democracy and civic participation in a broader sense. Even in the United States, where attitudes to the war are arguably more ambivalent, citizen voices organising in opposition to the war far exceeded those urging an invasion of Iraq. But in Iraq, where citizen participation in decision-making has been severely curtailed for decades, Iraqi civilians have had little or no opportunity to shape

their own lives and destinies. Now we need to ensure that the will of the Iraqi people can prevail. It is vitally important that a post-war Iraq is built on sound foundations of social, economic and political justice and democracy. This can only be achieved multilaterally and with the full involvement of the UN and civil society.

The notion that democracy can be imposed upon a country is clearly questionable. Surely, democracy in Iraq can only be sustained through the active involvement and support of citizens who are engaged in their communities and helping to determine their own futures? In an age where many societies in transition are struggling to sustain viable democracies, it is disturbing in the extreme to witness such a high-profile global conflict premised on a flawed notion of democracy.

The third threat is to global multilateralism – a framework for addressing and resolving conflicts that is supported by many in civil society. Military action against Iraq without the endorsement of the United Nations set a dangerous precedent that may well undermine this long-standing cornerstone of global security. In the months leading up to war, citizen voices from around the world called for a strengthening of the UN's role in moderating conflicts. Unfortunately, the decision to invade Iraq, despite the opposition of most members on the Security Council, effectively opened the door to an era of greater instability. This is especially troubling given recent precedents of the emergence of unilateralism at major UN conferences (for example, the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the World Conference against Racism) and trade talks. Now, more than ever, there is a need for unity and respect among nations, and the democratisation and strengthening of global governance institutions.

There are also strong grounds for hope. Never before has there been such widespread, sustained and truly *global* citizen mobilisation around issues such as poverty, where over 150 million stood up to tell our leaders enough was enough in October 2009, and climate change, where millions and millions of people demanded a fair, ambitious and binding (FAB) global deal at the summit in Copenhagen in December 2009. Yet, notwithstanding all the mobilisation efforts of climate campaigners, we did not secure a FAB deal. Instead we got a FLAB deal – full of loopholes and bullshit – as one campaigner has put it.

In the face of these challenges, global civil society has proved itself to be robust, diverse, responsive and highly creative. The physical and electronic networks of civil society activists – and ordinary citizens who may not consider themselves activists – that have been

built over the past decade have sprung to life in dramatic form. One of the greatest challenges civil society faces is to remain responsive to the events around us while working towards a long-term vision of a world where people and their voices are at the centre of public life.

Citizen action and current democratic practice

Those of us who live in the so-called democracies of both the global North and the global South labour under the assumption that democracy fundamentally exists and that our notion of democracy, more or less, works. Those who live and labour in authoritarian and politically broken states broadly believe the others are lucky to live in democracies where they are entitled to vote, to be heard and to form citizen led organisations. I'd like to challenge both of these assumptions with a view to making us better at democracy, better at opening spaces for civil society to flourish, better at making informed decisions about who should govern and lead and how they should do so.



When local and national politics are so flawed that the public fail to exercise their democratic right to vote, something is very wrong.

Firstly, democracy is about much more than the freedoms of speech, association and expression. Of course democracy can't possibly exist without civil and political rights. Certainly the democratic states in our world today are better than those under authoritarian rule. Yet we have so much more ground to gain if we hope to solve the crises of civil wars, food and resource shortages, the growing challenge of poverty and wholesale change in using the earth's resources for industry and consumption.

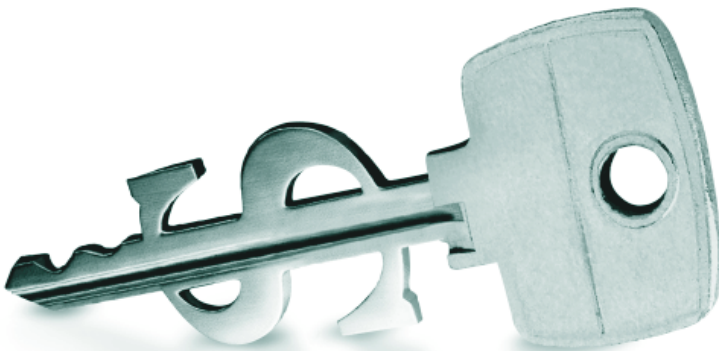
In most democratic states, by which I mean countries where local and national governments are voted for by citizens, we have generally seen a consistent decline in sheer voter numbers. In parallel, there are more and more people involved in citizen organisations. This is not democracy at work. When local and national politics are so flawed that the public fail to exercise their democratic right to vote, something is very wrong.

We need only look at the flaws in modern electoral processes to understand the contemporary loss of faith in political processes at the citizen level. In the United States, the electoral colleges system resulted in Al Gore losing an election to George W. Bush in 2000, despite the fact that the former received a larger number of individual votes. As a consequence, one could, at a cynical level, consider the US to have been a 'failed state' for the years between 2000 and 2008, during which time the country's leadership led both an illegal invasion of Iraq, on the premise of unsubstantiated claims, and initiated

a long-term war, with little regard for national boundaries, against an invisible enemy. It called this war 'War on Terror', and we are all aware of its consequences.

Many potential political leaders never even see the light of day. Political campaigning in democratic states today has a high financial cost of entry, a barrier to vast numbers, quelling the prospect of a political career for anyone without the right connections or financial backing. It's no coincidence that Italy's three-term president is also a billionaire who owns the biggest national media organisations. Running for office, even at the local level, costs a lot of money. One of President Obama's most significant campaign achievements was an incredibly well-run, groundbreaking fundraising campaign. He successfully took on the Republican Party and the Clintons, both of whom had enormous financial reserves. To enter the fray in any election-oriented society, even with a fresh and appealing voice, requires financial muscle.

The news media make and break many political leaders as well as many civil society-led arguments. Like it or not, whilst 'celebrocracy' or the use of celebrity to gain public attention is sometimes distasteful to citizen movements, the news media are important conduits of messages to the public and to political leadership. Mary Robinson, the first female president of Ireland, once told me that politicians respond to numbers, since staying in office is effectively a numbers game, and the ability to manipulate the media plays a pivotal role in this process.



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The first media was a citizen media, intended to share information and act as an early warning system to ensure others were equipped with important details so as to protect themselves or their communities, or develop strategies to deal with day-to-day events. Today's news media is largely controlled by a handful of huge corporations. Since they frame the debate, political and otherwise, information sources on the issues and events are all too often skewed. Important information goes unreported, populist information takes precedence over critical legislative change that then slips under the radar, or information is framed by the views of the editor or corporate owners. A nascent citizen journalism is growing in both scale and richness of content, driven in large part by the growth of the internet, but it has a long way to go to meet the sheer reach and impact of the heavily corporatised news media.

A cursory glance at the absence of gender equality in national and local political representation raises further questions still about the validity of democracy at work. Women are still a novelty in politics, despite the fantastic example of leaders like Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, Africa's first female president. Marginalised sectors of society also struggle for recognition. The former British cabinet minister, David Blunkett, did much to advance the potential for those living with physical disabilities. He is profoundly blind, yet has had a long political life despite this. However, democratic society does not embrace diversity at the political level and these individuals remain the exceptions to the rule.

When you put all of these factors together – fewer voters, flawed elections, over-corporatisation of the news media, coupled with the lack of gender equality and diversity in political representation, the prohibitive cost of entry to run for public office and the 'War on Terror' as an excuse for undemocratic methods – it all adds up to an absence of a culture of dissent in those countries that consider themselves to be the strongest democracies. All these factors increase the injustice of the democratic deficit.

I'd go a step further and say that with many of the most pressing issues facing individuals and communities, the real power shifts are moving even further away from ordinary people. Climate change represents one of the clearest examples of an issue which cannot be solved locally or nationally. It's one of the issues that require solutions grounded in supranational governance. However, that doesn't mean local and national leadership are absolved of responsibility. We need to understand how best to use the space we have locally and nationally to

address those factors within our domain of control. For example, it was appropriate that global non-governmental organisations (NGOs) worked for a fair, ambitious and binding deal in Copenhagen in December 2009, and that they then ensure the necessary steps are taken to implement and further the UN's commitments post-Copenhagen. But it's equally important, for example, for the Mayor of London to ensure that the public is actively engaged in carbon reduction in the city, at a household level, in city-wide transport infrastructure, and so on. It is still the role of London's civil society networks to ensure local government is setting the agenda, and that this agenda is contextualised against a backdrop of citizen benefits and desires.

Think locally, act globally

During the 1980s many activists around the world embraced a simple but evocative slogan: 'Think globally, act locally'. The message was that in acting at the local level, one needed to understand how global forces impacted on local reality. In short, trying to tackle local issues without understanding the ever-increasing power of global processes was tactically inappropriate.

By the mid-1990s, activists from the global South began to question this logic. Some asked whether this did not trap civil society in solely local interventions when, in fact, many of the causes being pursued locally had reached the point where they needed to be advanced on a global scale, within the context of global forums and processes. They argued that perhaps we need to turn this slogan on its head and instead learn to 'think locally, act globally'. In reality, citizen action does not have the luxury to think only globally or locally and to act only globally or locally. They need to do both and understand how these different levels of governance interact with each other.

Maximo Kalaw, the Philippine environmentalist, noted in 1995 that the realisation of the continuum from local community citizenship to national citizenship and global citizenship is essential to the establishment of a sustainable global governance system (see Liporada 1997:6). This reality has been borne out by the experiences of civil society organisations. It is also the main rationale for their participation in global governance processes.

The experience of NGOs is that years of grassroots level work can be negated by bad national policies. Consequently, they have found it necessary to participate in national policy advocacy work. As they do, they realise that their national concerns are fundamentally con-



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nected to wider global processes. Development efforts, whether local, national or global, have become subject to conditionalities of international financial institutions, trade agreements and foreign assistance. Consequently it has become imperative for civil society to participate in global decision-making processes, provided for in the consultations on summit meetings and conventions of the UN, as well as by UN development agencies, the Bretton Woods Institutions, the Global Environment Facility and the World Trade Organization.

This rise towards global activism around a range of issues is happening at a time when many citizens of the world have, for the first time, achieved representative electoral democracy at the national level. Whilst it seems ironic that this is happening when in fact the centres of power have shifted to regional and global levels, I would be anxious not to encourage the tendency to celebrate the demise of the nation-state. True, there has been a reduction in the power and influence of sovereign states in absolute terms, but they are still the most important players in political and economic governance at a country level and cannot be replaced by supranational constructs.

These global multilateral organisations face a challenge of legitimacy. As they increasingly take a lead in policy and strategy, they need to undergo significant reform themselves. We need to ask questions about what kind of multilateral organisations are capable of meeting the needs of global governance. There is also the challenge of creative and rational integration. Far too often we see a lack of coordination strategies, leading to the unhelpful tendency at national levels for different line departments to fragment issues. There are some shocking examples of how sometimes a housing ministry will go ahead with a project without bringing on board the water affairs ministry. This usually has disastrous development consequences. Unfortunately, this is a tendency replicated within the NGO community specifically, and civil society more generally.

Re-framing civil society's space for the future

John Clark, the former head of the World Bank's NGO division, told the CIVICUS World Assembly in the Philippines some years ago that there was an urgent need for new paradigms about how we think about development. He noted that the saying that goes, 'Give a man a fish and he is fed for a day, but teach a man to fish and he can feed himself forever,' is in need of revision. If you teach a man to fish, does he have a line and net to be able to catch any fish? Does he have access to water? Can he get his fish to the market to earn income? If

the man fishes, do any of the fish get to other members of the family? And do the poor even like eating fish at all? Are the poor actually sitting by unpolluted and well-stocked water, just waiting to learn how to catch fish? Or is the issue really one of power and poverty? Is our job to teach the poor, or to help people identify their own needs and ensure the right questions are asked?

The challenge is to think out of the box, rather than allowing ourselves to be constrained by the limitations of current institutional reality. Can we imagine a world that can be genuinely more just and equitable; ultimately one that can be safeguarded for future generations? In the act of seeking to realise this vision, we can actively do our part as civil society to close the gap on the democratic deficit.

Many thinkers and intellectuals anticipated that with the end of the Cold War and the prevailing of free market ideology, the role and power of civil society would become more and more prominent in the running and the decision-making processes of democratic states. The German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, promoted what he called a free public sphere that would allow a 'dialogue, free from domination' about the values of a given society. Such a dialogue should be maintained by a civil society that sets its own agendas and which is only regulated by the state insofar as the state ensures that the dialogue happens in a democratic and domination-free setting. What sounded like utopia in the early 1980s was all of a sudden on the cards as a real opportunity in the mid-1990s. At the same time a growing number of political thinkers, such as Audrey Osler, Anthony Kwame Appiah and Ulrich Beck, promoted a more cosmopolitan world view that started to engage with value and belief systems of societies from all over the world.

Much of the energy and impetus of those years has now been lost. The 21st century has seen a relapse into more state control, powered by fear and a preoccupation with homeland security, and less public engagement. The conviction of the people in the North that a strong civil society can change political systems – as demonstrated by peoples' movements in former authoritarian societies – has waned, replaced by an often complacent, one-step-at-a-time mentality that promotes an individualistic mindset.

More optimistically, Michael Edwards, in his book *Civil Society* (2004), sees civil society as a public sphere between the state and the markets which, if created, maintained and defended as a free and democratic public space, can act as an enabling framework for a society, allowing people to discuss, influence and regulate processes normally control-

led by the state (Edwards, 2004). In other words it could be a space that simultaneously enables, acts out and protects active citizenship.

If created in a free and democratic way, civil society could provide a structure in which a debate on how to react to the current global challenges could take place. With the analysis of the economic crisis in full swing everybody seems to agree on the need for a more regulated global system of checks and balances. Considering the crisis of confidence in state structures and the accepted need for more regulation, it is astonishing how little thought is given to the question of how this regulation could be exercised. Some economists claim to have found a solution in a model close to that of a social market economy, a concept that has proved unworkable for many former Eastern bloc countries. Others still believe in the self-regulatory powers of the free market. Funnily enough, many claim that a concept as elusive as civil society would not be able to regulate complex systems.

So could this not be the ideal time to re-think and re-examine the role a strong and vibrant civil society could play in navigating societies through this perfect storm? Highlighting the huge potential, Edwards maintains that ‘civil society is simultaneously a goal to aim for, a means to achieve it, and a framework for engaging with each other about ends and means’ (Edwards, 2004: 110). If this is true, there is one key element of society that needs to be in place: actively engaged citizens who have the means, the empowerment and the willingness to participate in state matters, and these are the issues the next chapter will address.

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