

Mobilising South African civil society for just governance

By [Anis Karodia](#), issued by [Regent Business School](#)

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It is estimated that in South Africa, corruption and cronyism contribute about 25 percent of state procurement. Nefarious activity of this scale begins to affect almost every aspect of governance, sustainable economic development and service delivery. It is a scourge that is inextricably linked to the violation of ethical values, justice and the rule of law and undermines the very foundations of our hard-fought democracy. Corruption affects society, at large. Moreover, it is the poorest amongst us who suffer the most harmful effects of corruption, because it is they who are principally dependent on public policy outcomes, especially in terms of delivery of infrastructure, housing, food security, basic healthcare, sanitation, clean water and education.



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Despite the various governmental interventions to constrain corruption, looting of state coffers through corrupt activities continue unabated. Poverty is exacerbated and more poor children go hungry to bed, every night. Because of a poor performing economy, more people are unemployed and the negative trickledown effects of inflation are experienced by all and sundry.

The prime purpose of this submission, though, is not to dwell on the structural and contextual challenges of corruption in South Africa. My colleagues in previous op-ed pieces have dealt with the issue at length. Rather, the prime purpose of this paper is to analyse how civil society, an increasingly important actor in the global development drama, can be promoted to advocate for policy change, transparency and greater accountability in governance. Perhaps more importantly, though, the emphasis will be on dealing with the question of how we can mobilise civil society for poverty alleviation and the overall improvement of well-being and quality of life in our country.

History suggests that social and political discourse has been dominated by the 'two sector model' that acknowledges the existence of only two actors – the private sector and the state (the public sector). There is, however, a 'third sector' which lies mostly outside the private sector and the state, and it's called civil society. These three sectors are inextricably linked in a relationship of power and accountability. They interact mutually inclusively and exclusively.

The key features of a successful civil society emanates from the separation of the state and the private sector and is usually formed by people who have common needs, interests and values like tolerance, inclusion, cooperation and equality. Civil society, thus, is seen as a positive influence on the state and the private sector and seen as an increasingly important agent for promoting good governance like transparency, effectiveness, openness, responsiveness and accountability. The 'third sector' can also further good governance, by policy analysis and advocacy, by regulation and monitoring of state performance and the action and behaviour of public officials, by building social capital and enabling citizens to identify and articulate their values, beliefs, civic norms and democratic practices, by mobilising particular constituencies, specifically the vulnerable and marginalised sections of masses, to participate more fully in politics and public affairs and by development work to improve the wellbeing of their own and other communities.

Since independence in 1994, the relationship between the state and private sector in South Africa has been characterised by a persistent atmosphere of distrust. Increasingly, in response to the widespread disillusionment with the performance of the state in economic development, the private sector is using civil society to secure a socio-political environment which assists in reducing risks for capital investment. Both the public sector and private sector does very little as a way to strengthen their links with the urban poor.

Given the over-centralisation of decision-making in South Africa and high levels of corruption which diverts scarce funds from development projects and social safety nets into private pockets, lowers investment, decreases efficiency and adversely affects economic growth, civil society can play a much more meaningful and strategic role in the overall

development process. It could, for example, be used as an integral part of the institutional structure particularly for addressing the problem of rising poverty.

Efforts to sustain economic development and reduce poverty, however, are unlikely to succeed in the long run unless there is greater investment in human capital, particularly of the poor. Evidence indicates that improvements in education, health and nutrition directly attack some of the most important causes of poverty.

Civil society has to be mobilised for an involvement in the policy formulation and delivery processes. The sector can play a major role in the implementation of the policies that are formulated by the government, especially those that deal with sustainable development and poverty alleviation.

If civil society is strategically mobilised it can become instrumental in promoting national economic development, alleviating poverty, advocating policy change and contributing to good and just governance. Its contribution, however, needs to be nurtured and strengthened. More importantly, it is important to remember that movements unleashed by civil society are usually more successful when they can persuade a significant slice of the public that its cause is just and should be supported.

As much as the present government can be held accountable for poor governance and large-scale corruption, the corporate sector likewise cannot continually point fingers at government and insist on a mantra that advocates for investment selectively in a risk-free environment. A risk-free financial milieu is a pipe dream. Profit cannot be the only motive for participating in a nation that is beset with a myriad of socio-economic challenges. Social responsibility and social entrepreneurship are moral imperatives that must not be avoided if we wish to see a South Africa as envisaged by those who were responsible for our hard-fought democracy and a world-class constitution, which incidentally prescribes, amongst other things, good governance.

We have to remember that much of the gross inequities that South Africa currently experiences are due to the legacies of apartheid. They are simply and categorically unacceptable. Increasing levels of poverty as recently announced by the Department of Statistics, besides being a blotch on the national development narrative of hope, is also inexcusable.

Poverty reduction is the collective responsibility of all who live in South Africa. A just system of governance will certainly go a long way in addressing the challenges of rampant corruption and poverty. Civil society has to engage in the battle of ideas to influence public opinion and the much-needed delivery of public goods and services. We also need to include a greater proportion of South Africa's people as active participants in economic activity, polity, social well-being and poverty reduction.

Finally, we have to give a careful ear to Matshona Dhlwayo who so powerfully reminds us, "What you do for others today you have done for yourself tomorrow."

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