Social Movement: A Vital Instrument for Social Accountability in Africa

By Christian Elongué and Daniel Nwaeze

WACSI
WEST AFRICA CIVIL SOCIETY INSTITUTE

AUTHORS

Elongué is an Afropolitan and bilingual professional who serves as Knowledge Management Programme Officer at WACSI. He has over 7 years' experience as a debate trainer, instructional designer and communications professional with leadership experience in both the public, private and civil society sectors. He is a 2013 Certified World Debate Institute' Trainer (USA), an Ashoka Changemaker Fellow and 2018 Alumni of Aileen Getty School of Citizen Journalism from the European Union Peacebuilding Initiative. He is a member of the Alliance for Nonprofit Management (USA) with research interests in cyber-security, women leadership, African philanthropy, civil society sustainability and social movement.

Daniel is an international facilitator/trainer who is always seeking avenues to foster development, growth, and sustainability through youth engagement, peacebuilding, and media strategies. This led to founding Diplomacy Opportunities; a youth-run initiative aimed at promoting issues around diplomacy, peace, youth, education and development; and serves on the UNESCO Global Alliance on Media Literacy (GAPMIL) Youth Steering Committee and Chair of the Media and Communications Committee at Afrika Youth Movement (AYM).

Editorial Team
Jimm Chick Fomunjong - Head, Knowledge Management Unit, WACSI
Omolara Balogun – Head, Policy Influencing and Advocacy, WACSI

About WACSI
The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) was created by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) to reinforce the institutional and operational capacities of civil society in the region. WACSI also serves as a resource centre for training, research and documentation, experience sharing and political dialogue for CSOs in West Africa.

About WACSeries
WACSeries are analytical periodic write-ups on topical themes and issues relevant to West Africa. These write-ups provide experts, researchers and practitioners a space to reflect, analyse and posit views and recommendations on emerging issues and debates.
The WACSeries Op-Eds are thought provoking and intellectually engaging write-ups that provide critical reflections and analysis of issues relevant to civil society and development in West Africa.

Objectives of WACSeries
• To raise awareness on key issues in West Africa;
• To generate debates and discussions on these issues;
• To proffer recommendations on civil society involvement in advocacy;
• To provide recommendations to policy makers.

Social Movement: A Vital Instrument for Social Accountability in Africa

Introduction

Social accountability is an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement in which citizens participate directly or indirectly in demanding accountability from service providers and public officials[1]. It usually combines information on rights and service delivery with collective action for change. It has become a tool for direct engagement with service providers to ensure that citizens get adequate services or adequate explanation when those services are not available. When social accountability mecanisms are weak, the context becomes more challenging for communities or individual citizens to play a powerful role. Also, social accountability is fundamentally and ultimately a question of power as it require both social and political pressure to ensure that duty bearers are kept on their toes.

In many African countries, individuals or groups use the state apparatus or perceived access to state apparatus to gain and maintain unimaginable privileges that wouldn't have been accessible to them if there were more accountable systems in place. This piece will therefore explore the tools and approaches that some African social movements used to effectively drive the social accountability agenda. The tools we are exploring here are respectively social media and creative arts, while the approaches will be based on their ways of mobilising and organising. We conclude by making some recommendations for donors, government, citizens and other stakeholders.

---

1   Udo Jude Ilo, "Scaling Up Social Accountability In West Africa: Opportunities And Challenges", in Social Accountability Guidebook, WACSI, 2018, p. 7

I- Social Media Tools and Approaches on Social Accountability

Social media is "a dynamic online medium that has changed the way we work similar to traditional media, social media offers opportunities to collect and share news, communicate with audiences and advocate for change. However, unlike traditional media, social media allows for this to happen on the Web in real-time through highly interactive global or regional social networks[2]". It provides a platform for citizens interaction in the public sphere and allowed higher levels of participation for people who have not been very active and vocal with a voice to demand for accountability.

1.1 Amplifying local voices through social media

Social media has been a keen enabler and force used by social movements in driving their social justice initiatives. It's mainly used to amplify local voices and quickly mobilise action in response to an issue. Social media enabled ordinary Africans to creatively engage in the

discussion of issues of wide public significance although, these virtual organising are a less confrontational tactic[3]. They used it to mobilise citizens, amplify their voice, shape the national discourse and hold the government accountable.

In Nigeria for example, the #OccupyNigeria protests, which were viewed as successful in terms of organisation and participation, were largely organised and mobilised through the social media, namely Facebook, Twitter, SMS text-messaging and specialised political blogs[4]. The activists engaged in civil disobedience, civil resistance, demonstrations and strike actions. Another example is Afrika Youth Movement (AYM) which launched campaigns such as #ShapeNarratives to rebrand social movement stories on the continent from a top-bottom approach to bottom-top approach giving Africans a sense of identity and ownership of their struggles in shaping the future of Africa and exporting these solutions to the global north. AYM also maximised the first-hand report from members on the ground. They provide real-time coverage of offline political events which AYM publicises the findings on their social media platforms. Support of the movement from high profile individuals (influencers) at national and international levels often draws the attention of international media which then brings the issue to the limelight through in-depth investigation.

This was also evident during the #TogoDebout Campaign where WhatsApp was used as a communication tool to disseminate information by activists in Togo in protest against the internet shutdown. Social media users used the hashtag #TogoDebout (Stand up Togo) to express their dissatisfaction with the government's action to shut down the internet. Prior to Togo, internet shutdown or WhatsApp blockage also occurred in Uganda, Zimbabwe, Cameroon and in DR Congo ostensibly for security concerns ahead of protests or elections. In Zimbabwe – as in many other African countries, citizen-led movements rallied on the hashtags #ShutDownZim and #SwitchBackOnZW to strongly condemned the internet shut down as well as the brutalisation and

---

2   What is Social Media (2014) in Social Networking: A Guide to Strengthening Civil Society through Social Media, Counterpart International.

3   Bruce Mutsvairo, Digital Activism in the Social Media Era: Critical Reflections on Emerging Trends in Sub-Saharan Africa (Springer, 2016).

4   Giugni, Marco. 2008. "Political, Biographical, and Cultural Consequences of Social Movements." Sociology Compass 2: 1582-1600.

killing of citizens demonstrating against the increase of fuel prices in January 2019.

In 2010, two citizen-led initiatives in Côte d'Ivoire were launched via the hashtags #CIV2010 and #CIVSOCIAL to meet the challenges of the electoral period and cope with the post-election crisis. In 2012, Senegalese bloggers e-observed and covered the entire electoral process with a new digital tracking and observation system, #SUNU2012. Their work prevented fraud, and thus to some extent helped avoid a potential post-election crisis.

Also in 2012, young Ghanaians launched #GhanaDecides, a response to citizen participation in electoral processes. On 1 July 2014, thousands of Ghanaians were mobilised through social media by #OccupyGhana, to demonstrate at the Efua Sutherland Children's Park in Accra and they subsequently moved to Flagstaff House, Ghana's presidential palace, to present their petition to the president on issues of corruption, infrastructure decay, the deteriorating economic conditions in the country, among other things. In 16 May 2015, several thousands of Ghanaians in Accra, participated in the vigil to protest about the persistent electricity supply blackouts (often referred to as dumsor) in many parts of the country. The hashtag #dumsormuststop, initiated by the actress Yvonne Nelson, was used to amplify their concerns on the energy crisis which remains unsolved. The hashtag went viral and became a default platform for citizens to express their frustration and demand government's responsiveness in solving the nationwide energy crisis.

Thus, from 2007 to 2019, Africa witnessed several other citizen-led initiatives amplified by social media: #Vote229 in Benin, #GuinéeVote in Guinea, the Mackymeter in Senegal, the Buharimeter in Nigeria, the Presimeter in Burkina Faso, the Talonmeter in Benin and the Liberia's President Meter Report project assessing citizens perception on the quality of governance. WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook like many other social media platforms enabled by the internet and mobile technologies provided citizens with easy and often, real-time means of interaction and collaboration. It is a more convenient tool for African activists that increased their responsiveness to hold the government accountable whenever there is a social injustice. More recently, social movements are using creative arts as a tool to raise civic consciousness

and involvement, making civic issues more appealing to citizens and facilitating a deeper engagement and ownership of the accountability process.

"Social media enabled ordinary Africans to creatively engage in the discussion of issues of wide public significance although, these virtual organising are a less confrontational tactics"

1.2 Creative arts: a novel approach for social mobilisation in Africa

In addition to social media platforms, some social movements used creative arts such as poetry, literature, dance, murals, slogans, songs in the process of mobilisation and many founding members of West African social movements are artists. As examples, Balai Citoyen (Citizen's Broom) in Burkina Faso, was founded by two reggae artists Sams'K Le Jah and rapper Serge Bambara "smockey". Y'en a Marre (Enough is enough) in Senegal was founded by rap artists who used hip-hop rap as a means to voice their discontent about the unconstitutional third term bid of President Abdoulade Wade in March 2012. By using their genre of music, they aroused civic consciousness of Senegalese youths and mobilised youth to massively protest against Wade's candidacy. Although Y'en a Marre did not succeed in preventing Wade from participating in the elections, their activism played a role in Wade's defeat by Macky Sall, the current president. However, in February 2019, Y'en a Marre took to the streets again to advocate against Macky Sall's re-election, arguing that he had not been an effective leader as expected, having done little to improve the lives of ordinary citizens.

The common ground of the aforementioned social accountability initiatives is that they amplified local voices using creative tools. This influenced political leaders to respond to a broad array of civic pressures which contributed to their improved performance. These activists cum social movement activists used music, slam and dancing as approaches where the majority of citizens could partake in and air their grievances.

"Many founding members of West African social movements are artists"

1.3 Mobilisation tactics to push for social accountability

Across Africa there are varying degrees of citizens mobilising and pushing for accountability and better services. It could be a group of local Botswanaian women coming together to address maternal care issues in their community, an association of Cameroonian parents advocating to improve school conditions or Sierra Leonean students organising petitions to check poor feeding in school. However, facilitating a timely access to quality information, organising and educating citizen on their rights are the prerequisite for an effective mobilisation. When mobilising, grassroots support and massive participation is essential to make a social accountability effort effective. This is so because African governments generally respond when the issues get attraction from a large number of citizens or from the international community.

This was the case during the #JusticeForNoura Campaign in Sudan in 2018. Noura Hussein, a teenager had been sentenced to death under the Shariah law for having stabbed her "husband" who raped her on a regular basis. Afrika Youth Movement, thanks to a local representative, was very fast and highly responsive than mainstream media by communicating and advocating for her release. They launched a massive online petition and a direct appeal to the Sudanese government. They further targeted more African leaders and institutions (African Union), to influence President Omar Al Bashir to annul the death sentence. This mobilisation tactic was effective and successful. In Senegal, the social movement Y'en A Marre (Enough is Enough) understood that changing the mentality of an entire nation will take time. They therefore resorted to tactics and efforts focused on Senegalese youth, hence, using a bottom-up approach to inspire citizens to be involved in local politics. "Change is

going to come from the population when they are ready" declared Cheikh Oumar Toure aka "Thiat", a cofounder of Y'en A Marre. Using a people-based approach to politics, Y'en A Marre decentralised the political power by giving agency to citizens to contribute to local development, the allocation of resources and access to public services. Y'en A Marre allowed individual activists to drive forward specific initiatives within the framework of the broader movement. Dox ak sa Gox, is one of such internal projects focusing on connecting the residents of Senegalese communities to their local officials through forums.

Social movements have organically developed innovative ways to mobilise and adapt to the current challenges affecting citizen's participation in issues of national interest. They are combining traditional mobilisation methods with the use of new media technologies to mobilise, create networks and lobby for social justice. They are also using the media to increase the legitimacy and public validation of their demands. We will further explore collaboration amongst social movements and how their organic structure enables them to demand more efficiently for social accountability.

"Change is going to come from the population when they are ready"

1.4 Structuredness of social movements as an asset for social accountability actions

Social movements are not subjected to the usual scrutiny and state-imposed regulations as organised civil society groups prior to commencing operations. Their 'independence' from government regulations is a factor that informs and favours their existence. They are rather dependent on the citizen's trust in their ideologies and agenda, and citizens' zest to follow or drive the agenda. The high dependence of most organised civil society groups (such as civil society organisations - CSOs) on government or some Western traditional donors often compel the groups to ultimately resort to upward accountability, and not downwards which in turn widens the disconnection with their primary constituents - citizens. A critical finding from the Civil Society Index: Rapid Assessment (CSI-RA3), a study conducted by West

Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) in 2014, revealed that "Ghanaian CSOs are mostly accountable upwards, to their donors. There is a lack of downward accountability to citizens". This normally influences CSOs' neutrality and autonomy as priorities are placed on meeting funders' demands as a means to access more funding.

However, the non-legal existential basis of some social movements also limits their ability to receive funds from donors or access vital information that would have enabled them to effectively question major government spending, contracts and projects. This has created the urgent need to encourage, support and strengthen evolving forms of citizen-driven movements to champion accountability and transparency at local and national levels. Despite this, the fluid existence of social movements constitutes a force they leverage. With this asset, they are able to spontaneously initiate action, sporadically arouse attention and interest in citizens. This quality also gives them the ability to massively mobilise key stakeholders who suffer the most from the social injustices perpetrated by duty bearers.

"Social movements are not subjected to the usual scrutiny and state-imposed regulations as organised civil society groups prior to commencing operations."

II- **Challenges, Opportunities and Recommendations**

Social movements do not have the magic wand to solve all the problems of social accountability. It is however important to support and strengthen them as actors of the accountability ecosystem. Supporting movements should not be limited to funding, it requires a network and holistic mindset that considers the comparative advantages of different types of organisations.

2.1 **Donors should be more educated on social movements and more flexible in funding**

The lack of engagement with social movements is one of the biggest blindspots in philanthropy[5]. Most donors are not providing flexible modalities of funding for social movements, as most of them are not legally registered or do not have key administrative requirements to receive grants. As a result, many African social movements are facing financial challenges to sustain their advocacy and accountability initiatives.

Donors need to get a better understanding and proactively adapt to social movements' mechanisms for funding by becoming more flexible and fluid in their grant's awards and donation[6]. Long term funding commitment with

5   Elongué Christian et Vandyck Charles, « Social Movements and Social Change in Africa », WACSI, 26 avril 2019, https://www.wacsi.org/resources/oped_detail.php?id=5.
6   Gioel Gioacchino, « Youth movements and funders need to learn to understand each other better », Alliance magazine (blog), 1 juillet 2019, https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/youth-movements-and-funders-need-to-learn-to-understand-each-other-better

flexible mechanisms in supporting social accountability efforts engineered by social movements must be a priority. Donors should invest in long term support[7] necessary for social movements' efforts to take root and contribute to lasting social change. The work of social accountability is not a sprint but marathon. As a long-term process, social accountability needs to be implemented with patience, resources, and commitment. It is therefore important to look beyond the activities that are easiest to organise and fund to the activities that are most likely to bring about change. Building a social movement is a long term investment and donors need to develop a deeper understanding on their ways of organising and mobilising to strategically support them to be more durable and impactful.

2.2 Social movements should increase collaboration with other actors of the social accountability ecosystem

There are few instances of social accountability achievements gained through social movements collaboration with other civil society players. For example, in South Africa, the Treatment Action Campaign in 2002 challenged the South African government on its constitutional obligations and secured the right for people living with HIV to have access to anti-retroviral treatment. This was achieved through a combination of active mobilisation of people living with AIDS and strong alliances with key civil society groups, such as churches, trade unions and the media. However, the collaboration between social movements, civil society organisations and activists in promoting social accountability appears very feeble. A briefing paper commissioned by the West Africa Civil Society Institute revealed that: "[...] although horizontal collaboration appears to be encouraging, vertical collaboration among Activists, unorganised civil society actors, and social movements and traditional social justice organisations is weak[8]." Therefore, effective and strategic collaboration will enable these stakeholders to share resources, speak with a collective voice on social accountability issues and maximise impacts[9].

2.3 Social movements should be more creative when educating citizens on civic issues

There is extensive literature[10] on the need for improved civic education in Africa to help citizens better understand how government works and by extension informed enough to engage. Several citizen led initiatives have been developed to educated citizens on their civic rights – as the Dox ak sa Gox initiative of Y'en A Marre – but most are not innovatives nor designed without inputs from the grassroot community or beneficiaries.

Therefore, creativity and indigenous knowledge is needed to make civic issues more appealing to citizens. Folklores, music and creative arts are good ways of helping communities understand civic issues without necessarily making them feel like they are trying to understand something complicated. Every stratum of society has an interest and such interest should be utilised in helping them understand civic issues. Social accountability can only be effective if communities understand how government works. The arts needs to be used to enhance the culture of civic education in the everyday events and realities so that communities can relate to easily. Churches, mosques, football, and other popular social events that are enshrined in the cultural values of the people should be utilised.

2.4 Government needs to move from a culture of opacity to open governance

African government officials must develop genuine models of open governance by responsively providing access to reliable and understandable information to citizens. They should move from the old culture of secrecy and opacity to a more transparent information's creation, storage and sharing system where citizens will know what is going on and possibly increase their trust in the government. "There is no substitute for public scrutiny in developing effective and equitable policies[11]" declared Kofi Annan, who therefore called on African governments to set out a bold national agenda for strengthening transparency and accountability to their citizens.

7   Other kinds of support and collaboration, including support for networking, advocacy, knowledge management, capacity development , legal assistance, etc. could be employed. The major challenges are around governance and institutional strengthening, which aren't traditional areas of social movement involvement.

8   Emmanuel Kumi & Al, "Forging Stakeholder Collaboration for Effective Social Activism in West Africa: Promises, Perils and Enabling Factors", WACSI, September 2019 (Unpublished)

9   Guo, C., & Acar, M. (2005). Understanding collaboration among nonprofit organizations: Combining resource dependency, institutional, and network perspectives. Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 34(3), 340-361.

10   Carrie Antal et Peter Easton, « Indigenizing civic education in Africa: Experience in Madagascar and the Sahel », International Journal of Educational Development 29, nᵒ 6 (2009): 599–611.

11   Kofi Annan, Chair, Africa Progress Panel Meeting, Cape Town, 10 May 2013.

Conclusion

With the growing trends of social movements emergence across Africa, a social movement constitute a key driver of accountability on the part of governments, a pre-requisite for a healthy and prosperous society. Social accountability is fundamental in ensuring that citizens enjoy the dividends of democracy and are beneficiaries of the promises of governments. Citizen participation through social movements could lead to greater gains in government's responsiveness and accountability. They constitute a transformational approach to participation "for people to shape and control their own histories and destinies, not within the world as it exists, but in order to transform that world"[12]. But to become a resourceful tool to drive social accountability, social movements need to adopt a holistic approach to transform the systems that promote injustice and inequality. They should increase collaboration with other civil society players, leverage on contemporary social media tools, be more creative and accountable to the people as a means of being more owned by the masses and being possibly more successful.

12   Paulo Freire, « Pedagogy of the Oppressed. 1968 », Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Herder, 1972.

"Citizen participation through social movements could lead to greater gains in government's responsiveness and accountability"

WACSI

Strengthening Civil Society

@wacsi.org   @WACSIBA   @WACSI   @WACSI