

# Academics and activists meet over debated terrain

As the debate on definitions and semantics developed, however, mutual respect grew between the theoreticians and the activists and the combination of theory and practice resulted in a dynamic workshop. The activists related their hands-on experience of organisations functioning in civil society, while at the same time acknowledged the importance of analysis to develop a perspective of how and where they were operating in society.

The notion of civil society is attracting world-wide attention and theories currently being expounded are diverse and confusing. There is some consensus on a shift in the identification of the driving force for change from primarily the labour movement to broader sections of society, but beyond that the workshop reached no final conclusions and new concepts were proposed and developed.

Larry Diamond and Naomi Chazan put forward fairly restricted definitions of civil society, based largely on which organisations form part of civil society. Diamond defined civil society 'as that realm of organised social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting and autonomous from the state'. It is distinct from broader society in that it involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests and ideas, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state and hold

state officials accountable. Voluntary collective action within the public sphere takes place in socio-political and ideological as well as economic markets; civil society thus implies notions of partiality, pluralism and competition. Organisations that seek to monopolise a sphere of collective life or to totally envelop the lives of their members are therefore not part of civil society.

Civil society also excludes activities of parochial groups that seek to win a formal place in the state or to displace the state. Actors in civil society recognise the principle of state authority and the rule of law and need the protection of these to prosper and be secure. Civil society therefore not only contains state power but legitimises state authority when that authority is based on the rule of law.

Prof Chazan proposed a provocative definition that led to heated but constructive debate. She proposed that 'civil society includes those institutions and individuals that are simultaneously independent from the state whilst also reinforcing state legitimacy'.

Debates about the meaning and role of civil society continue to preoccupy intellectuals and activists alike. At a workshop held in Senegal recently debates gave way to a general recognition of the urgent need to protect and develop civil society in Africa as a means of encouraging the continent's fledgeling democracies. **SHELAGH GASTROW** of Idasa's Africa Programme was there.

**A** MEETING place for African intellectuals and grassroots activists and a place to match academic theory with reality and practice on the ground was the vision behind a workshop on democracy and civil society, held in Senegal in March.

The function of the workshop, organised by the Gorée Institute, was to contribute towards democratisation in Africa by helping to strengthen the analytical, theoretical and practical capacities of civil society.

The workshop brought together prominent theorists on civil society, such as Prof Naomi Chazan of the Truman Institute in Israel and Dr Larry Diamond of the Hoover Institution, Stanford, and pro-democracy activists from various African countries including Togo, Zimbabwe, Senegal, Kenya, Ivory Coast, South Africa, Morocco, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Cameroon and Egypt.

Comparisons were made with developments in the Philippines and China, as well as between rural and urban conditions by Ethiopian political economist Prof Fantu Cheru and Dr Mohammed Halfani of the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Dar es Salaam.

Other participants included the governance co-ordinator of the Ford Foundation, Dr Kwesi Aidoo from Ghana; the co-ordinator of the African Leadership Forum/Global Coalition for Africa's Study on Transitions, Prof Boubabcar Baary, and representatives from institutions like Unesco as well as Dakar intellectuals.

Debate focused on the definition of civil society, with different schools of thought emerging. The concept was pushed to its limit by the contributions from 'civil society practitioners' – or grassroots activists – who were less concerned with definitions and more concerned with the job that had to be done and the need to find ways to do it.



*TOP: André Zaïman of the Gorée Institute with Dr Mohammed Halfani (Tanzania) and Prof Fantu Cheru (Ethiopia). ABOVE: Adigun Agbaje (Nigeria), Edu Raven (Togo), Naomi Chazan (Israel), Francis Wodie (Ivory Coast) and Gehad Auda (Egypt).*



## Academics, activists meet

From Page 11

She suggested that a distinction be drawn between the state and the regime. Civil society organisations could simultaneously confront a particular (undemocratic) regime occupying the state, while reinforcing the legitimacy of the state as an institution.

Diamond's definition was challenged by Mahmoud Mamdani of the Centre for Basic Research in Uganda who warned that the exclusion of certain sectors from the definition could result in their marginalisation. He emphasised the incomplete nature of the concept of civil society and pointed out that an uncritical application of it to Africa could lead to the exclusion of large and important segments of societies, such as the peasantry.

It became clear that while it is relatively easy to define the state, with its constitution, institutions, bill of rights, etc and to determine its character (democratic or undemocratic), civil society is more flexible, informal, unstable and diffuse (or may not exist at all).

At the same time, various processes clearly take place in civil society, such as mobilisation, protest, engagement, negotiation, communication, opposition, partnership, division, education, culture, development, movement, co-operation, advocacy, research and religion.

Although activists tended to put forward an organisational definition of civil society, it became clear in debate that they perceived it more as a terrain of struggle and an understanding began to develop, picked up by the



*Workshop participants with the Imam of Gorée Island and village head, Bocar Dia.*

GISELE WULFSOHN, Southlight

academics, of a more inclusive concept that recognised that civil society was not always democratic and that organisations could exist within it which could be anti-democratic.

In this respect civil society could be seen as the terrain in which people strive to protect and represent their interests, whether or not this is democratic.

Participants also considered the growing dependency of civil society organisations on foreign donors and governments and the need for self-reliance where possible; the relationship between civil society institutions and the state or regime, and how that affects democracy; accountability, ethics and corruption in both civil society and the state; the need to draw South Africa into the debate about civil society on the continent and, arising out of the above, the need for greater pan-African networking among civil society organisations.

The networking which has already been done on the continent by Idasa was cemented by reinforcing existing contacts and developing new acquaintances. Given the marginalisation of Africa, and how this will affect South Africa, it is crucial that the network develops self-reliance among civil society organisations in Africa.

A booklet to be released from the workshop will form the basis for a training programme for civil society practitioners. The first training workshop will be held in June when the training modules will be designed.

The workshop on civil society and democracy was part of a three-part series exploring civil society, the economy and the state and their relationship to democracy and development in Africa. The economy workshop, entitled Democracy, Development and Growth in Africa, will be held from May 24-26 on Gorée Island.

## NGOs get tentative thumbs-up

From Page 10

between government and the NGO sector. Another option was for the NGO sector to organise itself into a collective voice in government development planning.

The new buzz word in South African NGOs, noted the visitors, was 'capacity building'. They said it was also a favourite among funders because training courses were 'neatly packaged' activities which were easily quantifiable and which donors felt comfortable funding.

However, the group asked whether capacity building was only a matter of providing more skilled personnel for NGOs or whether it was primarily a question of vision. For example, an organisation could have excellent administrative capacity but lack the

capacity to envisage the necessary steps to become a player in the national development arena.

A further question was whether capacity building referred only to NGOs or whether it extended to the communities within which NGOs worked. The delegates noted that 'community mobilisation and education - so-called civil awareness - around development seemed to be an equally important ingredient.

'Perhaps the more fundamental question is whether South African NGOs still have the time to develop the necessary capacity or whether they may be sidetracked by an over-hasty government and the domineering ethos of international aid agencies.'

Yet another consideration was whether current NGO leaders would be absorbed into

the civil service with the advent of a new democratic government, which was not necessarily seen as problematic by the visitors.

They repeatedly remarked on the number of 'incredibly impressive' women who were playing key roles within NGOs yet who seldom headed the organisations. The group noted that private US foundations could be influential in this regard by looking beyond first-tier NGO leadership in order to advance new leaders and, particularly, women.

Traditionally 'indigenous philanthropy' has come from a handful of major South African corporations. But, the report notes, 'despite the pockets of extraordinary wealth in South Africa, there is no established tradition of individual philanthropy, principally because the South African tax codes have never favoured this type of activity'.