WACSI EDITORIALS
THE FUTURE OF CIVIL SOCIETY SERIES
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Without a shared vision of justice, a world without injustices is impossible. The noble ideal that we can eliminate injustices is a false hope sold to communities. This is often due to non-transformational approaches used to fight injustices. Job creation is the mechanism for social justice philanthropy to make a difference. As one considers the social determinants perpetuating injustices, the silver lining might be found in creating jobs, transforming communities’ engagement with their environment.

Thus, the pursuit of social justice should be rooted in a group’s ability to harness resources to redesign possibilities for a community. Borrowing from principles of design thinking (a methodology to solve complex problems to create a preferred future), social justice should become a roadmap for routine innovation. This will require unrestricted capital that could be sourced from philanthropy; in this case, the African middle class, through digital platforms lowering the cost of collection and investment.

Social justice philanthropy is an innovative financing leverage of transformation seeking to limit and arrest the adverse effects of inherent systemic challenges. To contribute to Africa’s transformation, it needs to reverse the social determinants of injustice by making a difference in the lives of those who are not thriving.

So, faced with daunting challenges, design thinking principles help to adapt, to resist, to challenge, to transform and to abandon the past holding too many back. Our strength is in systematically interrogating motives and purposes of our actions. Our yardstick should be whether we meet communities’ definition of progress.

Ten years ago, I had the opportunity to contribute to the design and implementation of an HIV/AIDS programme in the Democratic Republic of Congo working for the United Nations Development Programme. While I reviewed reports and data, it was the conversation with an HIV positive woman that brought it home. She had turned to prostitution to feed herself. Had she had an alternative to making a living, she may have taken a different path limiting her exposure to HIV. I was not changing the social determinants that caused her to contract the virus in the first place. She was hungry, but our programme did not include nutrition, it focused on treatment. So how else was she to feed herself? I did not have an answer that satisfied her hunger nor satisfied the purpose of my contribution to the country.

This raised a fundamental issue, for me, on the interdependency between social justice grant makers and communities. One might argue that like development aid, it helps members of some disadvantaged group on a specific issue such as access to anti-retroviral treatment, and yet fails to change the conditions that made the intervention necessary in the first place.

In other words, we need to have a clear, compassionate, and hopeful vision for the change
that jobs for more people can create. In doing so, the way we assess impact in communities will change. One could consider Fundación Paraguaya’s multidimensional approach to socio-determinants of poverty. Focusing on the family unit to determine the value and level of social injustice could be a sound basis to rethink the way we address the issues inhibiting socio-economic progress.

Trevor Noah, the South African comedian and the host of The Daily Show, wrote in his autobiography about the social determinants that shaped the person he became. His mother understood the inherent values of a family unit and a community, and from her, he received early on, the tools to keep the possibility of success through challenges as an end in mind. Too often, the worth of many individuals is not rooted in their ability to transform society as a contributor. She, like many, refused to be an inactive recipient. The skills and attitude of design thinking can transform that. They are the best tools to make social justice a force to transform the minds of many Africans and people living in a world where poverty, hunger, diseases and other factors inhibit some from seeing the possibility of success through challenges.

My take is that 33 per cent of Africa’s population can and must do more. Their investment and commitment to embrace civil society organisations across Africa with a clear focus on eliminating the root causes of social, economic and environmental injustices will be a catalyst for shared prosperity. Social justice philanthropy requires the ability of Africa’s 350 million middle class to donate USD 1 a month, reaching USD 4.2 billion a year, enabling prosperity where injustices linger.

If we, each one of us, change and put our 1 USD a month in the collective digital fund, we will go farther than we have ever been as Africans. It is possible. More of us need to co-create with fresh ideas, by listening to communities and immersing ourselves in the realities shaping our future.

Nearly 70 of the world’s top 100 global economic entities are corporations. While African corporations are not in the top 100, the private sector here still controls resources, provides jobs and builds the middle class. Thus, it should be viewed as an important partner in endeavours to build a stronger and more resilient society to address social challenges.

Scale, efficiency, innovation and incubation are entry points for civil society and the private sector to design, with communities, interventions creating new opportunities. For the engagement to be meaningful, it should focus on co-creating. For instance, jointly producing a mutually valued outcome like jobs as is expected through the ‘One District, One Factory’ initiative in Ghana. Creative means are needed to spur economic growth, lower unemployment rates and to address challenges inhibiting human progress.

From my early years in Abidjan to now Accra, I am still fascinated by the innovation, finding solutions to change the status quo, demonstrated by street vendors. At many intersec-
tions in African cities or in traffic jams, street vendors take advantage of the captive audience and sell food, clothes, art, etc. As they work to make a living, policymakers should work to harness their skills, imagining with them what the future of their work could be. How might we foster employment for street vendors while also redesigning our cities to be more efficient? Civil society should facilitate this dialogue to co-create opportunities for street vendors to harness marketing, sales, distribution, logistics and other skills that they display every day in the streets of African cities but not acknowledged beyond the transactional nature of their work. “Creativity is the new money, we should not devalue it further.”

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Education is vital to expand innovation, especially when complemented by health care and savings. Crucial to our ability to innovate is creating a sustainable savings culture. Digital Financial Services are expanding opportunities to transact and save. How might civil society foster a greater savings culture in communities? Stokvels, a saving and investment group has 8.6 million individuals in South Africa spread across 421,000 units accounting for R 25 billion (USD2 billion). Civil society can play a vital role, translating this knowledge into norms that address the social challenge, helping more Africans cultivate the habit of saving early in their lives. Demystifying the savings culture is an important step to enable individuals, families, and communities to influence the direction of their future. One of the most meaningful ways to achieve a greater contribution to society is through the ability to take on new kinds of knowledge and rely on basic skills. Thus, with stronger health, increasing savings and better skills, civil society could make the case to the private sector about incubation.

Africans need to move away from a spending culture to a savings one. Structured and documented resources are pivotal to create incubation, the process of nurturing, protecting, helping innovative ideas survive and grow through the difficult and vulnerable early stages of development, an enabling factor to transform lives with jobs that we need and plan for those that we don’t yet have.

Social transformation should happen with African resources, rather than an over-reliance on foreign contributions. The independence that comes with controlling one’s own resources is transformational. But more young people, as in South Africa, rely on credit to pay for necessities and therein lies a growing culture of people living beyond their means. As a community, we need to ensure that we take the necessary steps to be prudent in our spending while building a war chest to turn the Africa we have into the Africa we want.

Thus, our ability to innovate and incubate becomes a mechanism through which we address the social realities limiting social transformation. We must consider the continuum of people’s lives – the conditions under which they are born, grow, live, work, and age - when we address health, education and savings issues. In ensuring that we keep the end in mind, increasing opportunities for more, we ought to look at innovation and incubation as the foundation of the new social contract that takes civil society from the shores of transformation to the heart of it.

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As Africans seek to create the Africa we want, we must strengthen the Africa we have. Innovation is inherent to human nature. The key difference between the continent and the so-called developed world has been the latter’s ability to incubate domestically and project it beyond the safety of their borders. Collaborating to change the relationship between the public and private sectors will empower civil society to address social challenges that will allow us to embrace the skills of Africans from all walks of life, such as street vendors.

We need to see beyond the transactional nature of our daily engagements, extract the unique innovation inherent within them and incubate them to build the Africa we want.
Innovation does not equate complex technology. Every day, communities across Africa find creative ways to contribute meaningfully to their lives with or without technology. Their challenges become a source of creativity that pushes them to try different approaches with common tools, limited resources and the will to live, and fashion opportunities to transform their lives. The world is a connection of value chains where one needs to carve out a niche.

In Agbobloshie, Ghana, for instance, a circular economy — a continuous process of creating value while limiting impact on the planet — is defying the critics. “The most toxic place on earth”, Agbobloshie, is an urban-scale open-air manufactory. Youthful creativity is turning scraps of metal found in rubbish piles into key components of a manufacturing hub. About 10,000-20,000 youth re-introduce copper wires and still-functional parts of discarded electronic equipment into the economy. From refurbished electronic goods to pots and pans, to name a few.

How might we re-imagine communities so they engage with a purpose to learn? Ultimately, the ability to re-imagine the “Africa we want” through our own culture and vision is a critical step in ensuring that socio-economic transformation does not leave more people behind. To jumpstart this shift, we need to embark on a joint project; connecting doers and thinkers of our formal and informal economies to the benefit of the communities in which they and extend the value chain. Street traders have skills that students in marketing, logistics, entrepreneurship, and economics, to name a few, need to learn to design and implement policies for the Africa we have. I have always been fascinated by the ability of a group of people to offer different goods and services according to weather, location and events. We have a responsibility to harness their skills to educate, to transform and to thrive through a transformed education system that creates doers, solvers and active participants.

For instance, architect Diébédo Francis Kéré creating new opportunities to re-imagining African design and architecture with regional materials and Pierre Thiam’s revival of a five-thousand-year-old grain, fonio, to re-engineer life in the Sahara.

Through this project, doers, traders, manufacturers, and thinkers expand their knowledge of each other while creating a mechanism to design with the “Africa we have”. In a circular economy, we continue to embrace opportunities to transform communities along existing value chains while re-thinking a product’s end life. It is about expanding creative opportunities for youth and women with homegrown
solutions. Homegrown solutions to spark our socio-economic transformation are present on the continent. For instance, architect Diébédo Francis Kéré creating new opportunities to re-imagining African design and architecture with regional materials and Pierre Thiam’s revival of a five-thousand-year-old grain, fonio, to re-engineer life in the Sahara. Yet we have been lured to believe that imported technology and external constructs will resolve all our ills. We need to wake up to the smell of scrap metal turned into a pot, plastic bottles into containers for sobolo (bissap), Johnny Walker bottles for peanut containers, and so on.

Trash sifters in Argentina and South Africa play a critical role in the formal economy by connecting thier informal activities into the recycling value chain. Out of necessity, they create job opportunities for their communities thereby alleviating pressure on the formal economy. This is not unusual. The majority of Africans have participated in the informal economy and those jobs account for 93 per cent of new jobs created. It is big business with limited incentives to formalise. We have informal structures shaping our economies. This is the reality. The challenge is to capture the informality in its essence, then redefine formal economies for the purpose that we have at hand: transforming Africa’s 55 countries.

It is incumbent on many more of us to re-imagine our economies, designing participatory approaches that look beyond the “toxic” label. Innovators in communities are making a real difference in the everyday lives of millions striving to make do with the minimal resources of their communities. We should all be doing the same.

The Africa we have provides the basis for a full-scale implementation of a circular economy. Agbobloshie when fully harnessed will become the centre of the circular economy for electronics and manufacturing. It is possible beyond our current imagination. It is happening. Let’s pool our resources to make it happen for us. We can do it. Let’s make it happen now.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND GOVERNMENT: COMPLEMENTARY, NOT COMPETING FORCES

Civil societies and governments are complementary forces when a society defines a path towards human progress. In the early nineties, as a teenager, I observed the political transition in many African countries. A dialogue that could have chartered a pathway for homegrown ingredients for democracy, erupted into colourful protests. With violence, demands, marches and eventually, constitutional changes, there were gains which also created losses. The model of winner takes all that we have been so accustomed to continues to be pervasive in our societies.

Civil society’s voice became audible in the context of challenges to governments. Austerity measures squeezed that voice, as the challenges of unfunded constitutional reforms
and structural adjustments became the foremost consideration. Politics became a gateway for many with or without ideas. As such, we missed the opportunity to re-imagine the mechanics of how we could reaffirm our commitment to transformation through better jobs, improved agriculture, industrialisation and creative spaces for dialogue. As such civil society helped to create better conditions of employment through trade unions and access to anti-retroviral treatment to name a few. These represent isolated important victories which need to be connected to a broader outcome.

What if the framework rested upon the ability to define human progress. The Sustainable Development Goals provide a global framework. The process of translating them into local goals should be a point of convergence between civil societies and governments. How might this convergence direct resources to address challenges that appear invisible to the majority of citizens?

In Kenya, African Prisons Project (APP) found a way to collaborate with government without bending to it. APP has worked closely with the Government of Kenya since February 2012, mainly through the Kenya Prisons Service but also through relationships with other players in the judicial system. Providing a framework for government and civil society to agree on the end goal was a joint responsibility for two parties. Peter Ouko, APP Ambassador, refers to the investment made in infrastructure development in Kenyan prisons, including construction of the state of the art library at Lang’ata Women Prison, refurbishment and stocking of the Kamiti Prison library and the construction of a legal aid clinic in Lang’ata Prison and Naivasha Prisons. Inmates and wardens learn about the legal profession as students in an environment designed to park away those that bend or break the law. APP, by working with the government, has taken a unique holistic approach in its prison work, incorporating both the officers and inmates in its programs, an approach that aims at securing access to justice for all.

What if the solution was to define end goals between government and civil society? While some might argue that these goals have been defined, I would argue that they are not until the resources to achieve them are. Civil society organisations and governments seek funding from similar sources. They have an opportunity to work together to convince more of Africa’s middle class that we have a responsibility to invest in the communities that shape us.

In the absence of a common definition, people build their names and reputations off relentlessly pushing for the resolution of certain issues. The resulting victory becomes too closely associated with an individual, ignoring other contributors and effectively preventing the codification of pathways to addressing the issue.

A case in point were the successful 2016 elections in Ghana. A peaceful transition with limited civil society’s acknowledgment. There is a post-election billboard that might capture the issue. A large print of two hands shaking with the caption “Ghana won”. Although true, it failed to recognise that the victory would have been impossible without a vibrant and non-partisan civil society, working with government partners, to ensure a peaceful transfer of power. While the victory is important, the focus should be on institutionalising the partnership. This idea may fly in the face of our ingrained beliefs about the nature of competition. If we conceive of government and civil society as competing forces, it impedes the kinds of partnerships that can transform society.

The solution then is to establish a common goal that moves us beyond the old paradigm of winners and losers. To move forward towards human progress, governments and civil society working together is the alternative that lays criticisms to rest while charting an inclusive pathway along the value chain of the defined end goal.
Over the past five years, I have had the opportunity to experience the responsibility of a parent and the leadership of my children. With guidance from us, as parents, they develop capabilities shaping their own lives, indicating their preferences and asserting their personalities. Overtime, as parents, we adjust to their growth, their strength, until they take their first wobbly step, a sign of greater independence and shared responsibility. In sharing the design of our lives, being attentive to their early steps while reprioritising, parents need to respond to cues, signs and other elements that we discover. This mutual exchange is often about preserving and safeguarding without restricting them from opportunities to learn, fall, recover, and most importantly allow them to be comfortable in their own new world.

When children are born, they are fragile. Thus, patience is a key ingredient in developing the premise of our shared vision. Until they reach a certain level, they remain vulnerable but are sponges that absorb the emotions, knowledge and guidance of the children and adults around them. Parents and children share responsibility for leading and following, and trade roles often. Their ongoing engagement and interaction determines when each has a responsibility to lead or to follow. As adults and parents, we can shape our own lives, but we must recognize and embrace the fact that our children have the same capabilities.

These leadership lessons gleaned from the home can be applied to the public sphere to develop the inter-generational leadership model required to move Africa forward. We need to create pathways that take home-grown leadership to solve inter-generational challenges. Compassion, honesty, curiosity, commitment and confidence must guide our leadership to foster the same characteristics in those we lead. Early years matter in providing a framework to understand the world we live in and how to re-imagine it. A leader’s greatest achievement is remaining steady during the predicted turbulence in the relationship with those they lead. Life or leadership transitions go through turbulences which serve as the mechanism to reinforce or redefine the early years.

In reinforcing the leadership creed fostered
in early years, one needs to clear the path for independence in the context of a mature relationship. Turbulence tests this and offers an opportunity for growth and for learning. The key success in this period is fostering growth and independence in the period of transition while keeping the shared goal of progress in mind. The marriage of conservative wisdom and liberal effervescence breeds the innovation needed to reimagine the Africa we want.

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There is an inherent tension between changing and preserving while delivering on the shared goal: human progress. I would argue that trust built during turbulent times is one of the key ingredients in charting a path to transformation. In its absence, human progress takes a winner-takes-all approach to growth; bound to fail because of the contribution deficit engendered by our inability to define human progress as a shared value.

It could also be, the leadership deficit that is often referred to in Africa, stems from the inability of leaders and followers to adopt a common creed that views human progress as the shared goal while adapting to evolving contexts. Fear often grips both, in the uncertainty of the outcome of turbulent periods. The real challenge for leaders and followers, just like parents and children, is constantly redefining how to achieve human progress whilst negotiating the ever-changing dynamics of their relationship.

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Ultimately, the role of the leader is to prepare those who follow to be ready for the time when they take responsibility for the lives of a few or a nation. It is not an easy process with textbook recipes, but grounded in principles such as respect, patience and trust. These are the ingredients that build an individual’s character to believe in the reimagined future and stokes their desire to lead in its attainment.

Like being a parent, leadership is messy and frustrating. But one sees through the fog because leaders believe their children can go farther than they have ever been. A leader’s role is not to define the purpose of their followers. Their responsibility is to sketch in pencil the outline of what they could become. Their greatest gift to them is knowing when to retire from the front, allowing them the responsibility for determining how they contribute to the shared goal: human progress.

Free movement of West African citizens is a right that other African regions have started to recognize has an integral part of transforming the African continent. Moreover, with a common tariff system, 200 million citizens from Dakar, Senegal to Maiduguri, Nigeria benefit from a custom union, which is an important step towards establishing a common market. Transportation within the region remains a challenge that might create the perception that we are not yet a community where goods and services produced within national borders are made available to all people beyond those borders.

As we think about our role as African citizens in ECOWAS, we must remember that West African leaders under the leadership of Nigeria, planted seeds of transformation at a time when the Biafra war threatened the unity of young nations. Nigerian leaders had a vision to become the industrial heart of Af-
rica. As such, economic integration lay at the heart of the creation of the common project. Olatunde Ojo has demonstrated that the prevailing consensus that led to the creation of ECOWAS was that economic integration must precede political union and that economic integration itself must begin at the sub-regional level and proceed in stages beginning with functional cooperation and coordination and leading towards, perhaps, a common market.

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On 28 May 1975, 15 states signed the Treaty of the Economic Community of West African States making Nigeria the cornerstone of West African integration. More than forty years later, there is progress, not at the pace that citizens would have liked, but we have an opportunity to become more invested in the transnational community progress.

Regional trade within ECOWAS stands at 15 per cent. A dismal outcome for 200 million citizens that need to contribute to a regional value chain with links to other parts of the African continent. We have reasons to hope based on ongoing negotiations of the Continental Free Trade Agreement designed to bring 54 African countries under a single market for goods and services. Soon, more than 1 billion Africans with a combined GDP of US$ 3.4 trillion will capture the benefits of a single market such as free movement of business persons and investments. Under this arrangement, Africans will expect to see value chains for cotton and cocoa. This will create jobs by increasing the 5 per cent of cotton and 30 per cent of cocoa currently processed within ECOWAS for African and beyond.

The underlying value in agriculture will be immense as only 20 per cent of the fertile agricultural land is currently in use. It is the responsibility of citizens to educate themselves about the opportunities that we can create for 66 per cent of West Africans under the age of 25. We have to capture the demographic dividend by having a growth rate higher than the current population growth of 3.5 per cent. West Africa must roar at 7 per cent minimum continuously to turn youth apathy into the engine of growth that would direct more youth into productive activities.

How might we, as citizens, play a greater role in our integration challenge?

We have a responsibility to understand our history and how a vision for integration and industrialization prevailed in the midst of political and military transitions. Accepting that some mistakes were made is a great step forward as one searches history for patterns that need not be repeated.

Our second responsibility is to shed the artificial francophone, lusophone, and anglophone divides to embrace the ideals enshrined in the creation of the Organization of African Unity (now African Union), ECOWAS and the other regional economic commissions to build bridges between communities so that political decisions in capitals reach the most remote parts of the continent. Urban life and activism need to meet with rural life and fresh produce activism.

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Our third responsibility is to preserve our health so that less resources are devoted to fight illnesses that have been eradicated in other parts of the world. For those that can be eliminated, like Neglected Tropical Diseases, we have a responsibility to contribute in our communities to end them for good.

I believe in the possibilities that citizens coming together can achieve even when decisions made in capitals seem remote. It is our responsibility to seek clarification, and support the inter-generational project of building a union.
I recently read The Checklist Manifesto by Atul Gawande, a book about collective responsibility on “how to get things right.” A surgeon, Gawande posits it is the combination of skills and expertise while following due diligence on each of the cases presented in the surgery room that makes a difference in the patient’s life.

One of my key takeaways relates to the classification of problems into three groups: simple, complicated and complex. Thinking of problems in this way can help with the many issues to address across West Africa. In particular, we can draw lessons from the operating room when thinking about bridging the gap between academia and practice. West Africa has many development options ranging from creating opportunities for youth employment to agricultural transformation. In order to achieve these opportunities, we need to arrive at a point where the daily realities of millions of West Africans connect the dots between academia and practitioners. In many respect, they are closer to decision makers in outlining solutions to simple, complicated and complex problems.

There are many simple problems that do not require the input of either academia or practitioners, but they still have implications in terms of how complicated and complex problems to come would be addressed. An example of a simple problem that individuals need to resolve has to do with parents or guardians obtaining a birth certificate. That action provides critical data for academia and practitioners through civil registration and vital statistics. Reliable data forms the basis of the work of academia and practitioners. As Gawande demonstrates in the process leading to the establishment of the surgery checklist, data play a critical role in getting things right.

Data are the critical resource that links academia and practice and allows us to address
complicated and complex issues. For instance, there is a need for detailed and comprehensive data feeding into the narrative of change supporting real-time data collection, analysis and dissemination for decision making. A surgeon cannot act without specific data that provides options to remedy.

To remedy a simple problem, it is an individual’s responsibility to act so we collectively attain the desired outcome. Engaging on simple problems provides a recipe for how we might address complicated ones. Urbanization has become a complicated problem as states don’t have reliable data to inform the design of our urban spaces. A technical, not political, solution is required. African architects, engineers and city planners can use their expertise to create spaces that would define the kinds of societies we would like to transfer to the next generation. There is no straightforward solution; there is a combination of factors that would comprise a sequence to get things right.

“Transforming West Africa’s economy is a complex issue...........Keeping the right balance is the complex issue that all of us need to understand so that we might become active contributors.”

To address complex issues, we need to accept that outcomes remain highly uncertain. Data, skills and consensus are the factors that bring academia and practice together to design with the West Africa we have.

Every West African country is unique. Economic growth is an indicator of complex issues that converge to deliver on specific outcomes. Experience in one is not a panacea for success in another. Gawande argues that successfully raising one child with a specific set of tools may provide experience, but it does not guarantee success with the next child. How can we meld skill and expertise, academia and practice, to rethink the way we assume that highly uncertain outcomes will materialize across regions?

Each country needs to identify its vascular system that will ensure a flow of resources to support community building. Every country also needs to identify its respiratory system that would bring a breath of fresh air at critical steps. Finally, the nervous system is the link that defines our individual and collective ability to be resilient. Understanding the different systems with the right expertise allows a surgeon and his or her team to address issues that affect a patient’s life and the surgeon’s networks.

Transforming West Africa’s economy is a complex issue. Agriculture is our vascular system because it provides the fuel to keep all other organs functioning. Youth is our respiratory system because they keep us aware of the necessity of continuous innovation. Our institutions represent our nervous system. Keeping the right balance is the complex issue that all of us need to understand so that we might become active contributors.