Social Movements and Social Change in Africa

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• 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.

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Summary: The last decade saw an apparent resurgence of social movements in Africa, especially in the aftermath of the 2011 “Arab Spring” in North Africa. This article presents key characteristics, challenges and limits of some contemporary social movements in Africa.

Introduction

Social movements in Africa comprise diverse actors, including individuals and informal groups that congregate through either joint social actions or causes. The two dimensions of social movements in the region are a collective identity, a vision and a belief in a common social cause. In recent times, social movements are being perceived as an important factor in eliminating social exclusion and helping the poor to obtain their rights of access to basic needs. They challenge state policies that result in increasing poverty and the marginalisation of groups of people.

However, there is an evolving argument\(^1\) that social movements do not address poverty issues directly, and that, they usually tackle public policy processes that have implications on the quality of life of citizens. Also, social movements have altered the cultural politics and identification of poverty. For instance, some social movements have helped to highlight the association between poverty and ethnicity, and has proven that engagements between movements and governments can produce social benefits and engender more transparency and accountability.

From the mobilisation against apartheid in South Africa (1912-1992), to the campaign against blood diamonds in Sierra Leone, the women’s movement in Liberia (2003-2004), the 2008 ‘food riots’ in Burkina Faso and Cameroon, the 2011 Arab spring in Egypt, Morocco, Lybia and Tunisia, the 2018 #TaxePasMesMo\(^2\) in Benin are just some examples of social movements that have had a major effect on social contracts and state accountability in Africa’s recent history. According to a recent ODI report on ‘political voice’, 37 protests between 2006 and 2013 involved over 1 million people across the globe; some of those may well be the largest protests in history (e.g. 100 million in India in 2013, 17 million in Egypt in 2013). The West Africa Civil Society Institutes’ (WACSI) Civil Society Situation Reports (STIREP) have shown that West African citizens are protesting government on a nearly daily basis. Visible examples of collective citizen action can be seen splashed across news headlines on an increasingly regular basis. The Institute’s aim is to explore the current trends, challenges and opportunities of social movements in West Africa. What are the strategies they use to define social agenda? intervene in social debates, shape public perceptions and discourse and influence policies? What logical actions do they follow? How do they mobilise and participate in global alliances? What challenges do they bring about? These are the questions that informed this opinion piece.

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I- Characteristics of Social Movements in Africa

1. Representativeness

Social movements are usually considered as a representative democracy as they are more representative of the public’s desires than mainstream human rights groups. According to Guy Aho Tete Benissan, the Regional Coordinator of REPAOC (Network of West African Non-Governmental Organisations), social movements easily win over massive support because of their increased tendency of advocating for the needs and interests of citizens. For example, most social movements are open and include diverse demographics, including youth, into their campaigns and protests.

2. From responsiveness to proactiveness

Due to their unstructured manner, social movements can act more spontaneously. They are more responsive than organised civil society groups. The movement that ousted the former President of Burkina Faso, Mr. Blaise Compaoré took most local human rights organisations completely by surprise. In Senegal, the youth movement Y’en a Marre (“Enough-is-Enough”) and Mouvement 23 ("June 23 Movement") seized the limelight during a turbulent political moment in 2011, and played a critical role in preventing former President Abdoulaye Wade’s attempt to hang on to power. In the process, long-established and extremely important Senegalese human rights organisations, such as Rencontre Africaine pour la Défense des Droits de l’Homme (RADDHO), appeared not to be visibly active in countering Wade’s intent to hang on to the presidency. They were not always present on the streets and were not consistently able to use the moment to showcase their influence. This created the impression that they were reactive instead of being proactive.

3. Technologically-based or internet-enhanced activism

Internet is now an additional tool to other forms of mobilisation. Due to the evolution of technology, there are new forms of protest and activism that have emerged such as tweet-activism, hacktivism, among others. Technology is providing social movements spaces to develop counter-discourses that challenge and resist dominant ideologies. Thus, internet and social media platforms are the new “amplifiers” that citizens now use to raise their voices and enlighten others including government, academics and other relevant institutions on topical issues. Afrika Youth Movement (AYM), has been a key player, through digital activism, in the global campaign3 that led to the cancellation of the death sentence over

3 More than 1,781,044 have signed the petition for her liberation. https://www.change
Noura Hussein, a Sudanese teenager who had been condemned because she stabbed her husband as he tried to rape her. The movement mobilised the support of its members using WhatsApp and Facebook to disseminate messages and updates concerning her case in Sudan, where one of the local members Badr Eldin Salah was actively following the case.

Some social movements in Africa use the internet beyond its mobilising capacity. They also use it to connect, network, fundraise and build global alliances. For instance, Africtivists used internet to network with social movements in other parts of the world and support local cyber-activists in their advocacy campaigns such as in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Gambia, Senegal among others. Since 19 January 2019, they collaborated with Internet Without Borders to launch a social media campaign and crowdfunding to raise funds that will enable Chadian activists to pay for Virtual Private Network (VPN) and internet data at a highly expensive rate since the government censored access to internet and social network on 28 March 2018.

Even though this virtual-based organising, mobilises more people, it usually mobilises them to participate in less confrontational tactics. Cyber-activism will never replace traditional forms of protest (petition, rallies, mass mobilisation), but may complement them in terms of reinforcing solidarity and building collective identity. Genuine cyber-activism only succeeds through real participation and online deliberations by ordinary people. African social movements must find a balance between the virtual space and physical engagement with policy makers to drive their activism agendas.

4. Hybrid, flat and flexible

Most of the social movements in Africa are hybrid in nature, sometimes utilising and adapting Western ideas, funding and methods of activism. With the support of technology, individuals are now able to self-organise and put in place ad-hoc structures in response to perceived needs of the protests. Indeed, social movements are more flexible, flat, diverse, shifting, and informal in participation and membership, often preferring to adopt nonhierarchical modes of organisation and unconventional means of political engagement. They are generally composed of diverse strata of society (sometimes including actors from traditional civil society) as it was the case with the Tahrir Square protest in Egypt on 25 January 2011.

Another example of a citizen-led movement with a nimble, hybrid and flexible mode of operations is the continental movement, Africans Rising. This is a Pan-African movement of people and organisations, working for justice, peace and dignity that fosters an Africa-wide solidarity and unity of purpose of the peoples of Africa to build the future that reflects peace, social inclusion and shared prosperity. The movement is driven by a core team of activists in different locations. The movement has two co-coordinators and a team of programme staff that steers its affairs. The movement also has a coordinating mechanism (elected governance board) that provides strategic guidance and represents the collective interests of its members. Its financial operations are supported by a fiscal agency that facilitates administrative payments and provides logistical support.
II - Challenges Faced by Social Movements in Africa

1. Their autonomy is threatened by political and economic factors

Generally, autonomy in social movements can refer to self-determination, organisational self-management and independent social and economic practices vis-à-vis the state and capital. With African social movements, the lack of autonomy is more at the economic and political level. Political actors always seek to structure civil society following their own logic and interests.

There is a need to understand the complexity, and potentially conflicting incentives that influence citizens and public authorities. It goes beyond a matter of citizens holding government accountable, rather a more complex set of interlinkages between diverse actors in which mutual trust is key to facilitating shared expectations and collective action. Thus, social movements in Africa must work harder to tackle the governance structures and system that perpetuate perverse outcomes.

Finanically, African social movements are increasingly getting financial and tech support from external donors, directly or indirectly via non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who act as fiscal agents. However, a disproportionate support to professional NGOs, which are perceived to be excellent at “accounts-ability” rather than bringing social change, is leading to an unbalanced and unrepresentative civil society monoculture.

The argument is not that foreign aid should stop but sector players should also think about the role of NGOs vis-à-vis citizens’ organisations and movements.

In this article, the writers emphasise that NGOs can also become more financially sustainable8 by being relevant to their constituencies.

2. Under-researched and under-theorised

There are few studies9 in the field of research in African Studies and Social Sciences on social movements in Africa. Much of the debates over social movements and mobilisation is confined to studies of Latin America, Europe or North America. Many of the events pertaining to collective action in Sub-Saharan Africa has not been sufficiently documented. Hence, little is known of the context, nature, mode of organising, strengths, weakness, etc., of social movements in the region. This may partly justify why writers have deliberately avoided to begin with a definition of social movement as it risks excluding movements in Africa that might take a different form.

3. The other side of “structurelessness”

Though, the authors of this article have previously argued that the flexible and flat structure of social movements bears advantages for social movements, it is also a challenge. Why? This often emerges when a social movement morphs into a social movement organisation10 (SMO) – such as Y’en A Marre (Enough is Enough in Senegal). How will the organisational authority be sustained, especially when there is a leadership turnover? How will a SMO organise across large geographical and geopolitical boundaries? How will they evolve over time? In addition, power relations within social movements are an enormous source of dispute. It is often difficult to continuously and consistently seek input from constituents11. Yet it is the only way to ensure that the aims of ‘mobilisee’ and ‘mobiliser’ are always synchronised.

4. The struggle of sustaining citizen driven campaigns

Some traditional social justice campaigns in Africa remain fragmented and therefore powerless to leverage holistic transformation. Therefore, the rise of citizens movements is to provoke and trigger new methods of organising citizen driven campaigns with the explicit aim of overcoming fragmentation and ad hoc actions. For instance, Africans Rising movement is currently responding to this challenge by organising various citizen led campaigns. For example, the movement coordinates and supports annual continental wide campaigns on social justice issues on the 25th of May which is designated as African Liberation Day.
However, the movement faces the challenge of ensuring that the momentum that is created on this day is sustained and becomes a policy agenda for policy makers and leaders on the continent.

5. Social movements may not necessarily lead to social transformation

This may sound a bit contradictory and may not align with the prior position on the representativeness of social movements. However, not all social movements have the same potential in terms of social transformation, and they are not necessarily popular movements. Moreover, and despite clear evidence of the efficacy of social movements in Africa, their potential impact should not be idealised. These movements are very difficult to grow and sustain and are not the ‘magic bullet’ for accountable governance. They often have inadequate internal mechanisms for democratic decision-making, and can be dominated by a few leaders, capturing benefits and creating new inequalities. It is therefore important to keep in mind that collective mobilisation and activism does not always lead to more state accountability.

III- Way Forward

1. Building partnerships

Social movements should recognise the importance of working with other stakeholders to sustain the impact of their advocacy efforts. In order for social movements to contribute to the transformation of the continent, they must foster cross sectoral partnerships based on trust, and leverage on the strength of these partnerships to secure social benefits for citizens.

2. Diversifying collective action and tactics

There is a need to look beyond specific collective action tactics to the kinds of organisations and coalitions that can sustain and deploy diverse approaches over the long term. It is imperative that assessments must be made of how citizens are organising themselves and mobilising to create forms of engagement with the state, rather than for external actors to be creating new spaces and mechanisms that ignore existing efforts. For example, in Cape Town, the Social Justice Coalition, (“the SJC”) has worked to advance the rights to dignity, equality, freedom and Justice for those living in informal settlements across South Africa. They are mixing protests with research, advocacy, community organising, leadership development and collaborative policy design with local authorities to address public services in marginalised urban communities.

3. Innovating or changing funding models

There is a need to re-think, change or improve the way funding works so that funding institutions can support social movements. Halima Mohamed, an expert on African philanthropy, suggested that there was the need for a philanthropic revolution to improve the funding ecosystem for movements in Africa:

“The lack of engagement with social movements is arguably one of the biggest blindspots in African philanthropy. Alternative sites of protest, politics and activism are gaining traction as front runners in the fight for a more open, free and just society”.

Therefore, there is a real need for funding institutions to be much more deliberate in contextually understanding the role of movements in progressive social change. They should be more cognisant of the ways in which their funding practice needs to change by considering the discussions, debates and practices of social movements in Africa. Without this change and many others, movements in Africa will be forced to become more bureaucratic in order to benefit from donors’ support, hence, losing the flexibility and popular participation that make them effective.

Borrowing from the experience of the Afrika Youth Movement, as well as many other social movements – Le Balai Citoyen (Burkina Faso), Lucha (Congo), Enough is Enough-Y'en a Marre (Senegal) – we know that most have run on their own steam, with financial contributions and time from their members who played the biggest resourcing role. Also, informal conversations13 with Ace Anan Ankomah of Occupy Ghana revealed that the movement is resourced through contributions of its membership and is wary of external interference and loss of independence.

Conclusion

The hope for impactful social change in Africa lies partly in effective social movements. Practical beneficial change in the sub region is emerging from the efforts of social movements. However, there is a need to understudy social movements in Africa with their historical and contextual specificities. Although they have greater potential in terms of social transformation and have often led to short-term significant gains, the proletarian struggles will continue to have limited effects if they are not articulated to a long-term social transformation project, and the diversification of strategies and tactics. Social movement activism is not all about mobilising against an unjust system, but it is about transforming structures, practices, cultures and systems that promote poverty, inequality and injustice.

Keywords: Social movement, collective action, funding, Africa, social change, accountability.

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13 These conversations took place after a conference on Social accountability at the University of Ghana.