

An overly civil society?

Mozambican activists lack the power to intervene on behalf of the most vulnerable, says a report.

Bayano Valy investigates

Civil society organisations in Mozambique are weak, concludes a report on the state of CSOs in Mozambique published earlier this year. It confirmed an open secret: "The involvement of civil society organisations in the fight against absolute poverty is mainly as observers, listeners..."

The report, titled *Index of Civil Society in Mozambique 2007*, finds that civil society's effect on society is limited. Several factors contribute to this situation: registering an organisation is complicated by excessive bureaucracy, established CSOs struggle to ensure compliance with existing laws and are ultimately marginalised in political processes and too often they do not practise the values of democracy and transparency that they extol.

Paulo Cuinica, executive secretary of G20, an umbrella body of more than 400 civil society organisations and networks established in 2003, acknowledges weaknesses in the sector, but he insists that civil society has been gaining strength recently and participating actively in the country's development.

"In 2004 we produced a poverty report which produced some contributions that government gradually took on board, such as the district consultative councils," he said.

Consultative councils are bodies comprising government and civil society organisations that take decisions on behalf of districts on planning and programme implementation within the ongoing process of decentralisation.

Building on this, the G20 also participated in the 2005 consultation and dissemination process of the country's second Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, known as PARPA II.

"The majority of inputs were taken on board," said Cuinica, but he notes that the challenge for civil society is to see that the policy is translated into practice.

And it is in the implementation stage that Mozambican CSOs lack the capacity to engage at the same level with government and donors. "We have to improve our capacity for

analysis or we risk most of the meetings becoming mere formalities."

Since 2004 the G20 has been participating in the Poverty Observatory, a forum for dialogue between government, donors and civil society which focuses on the design and direction of the country's social and economic policies.

The participation of Mozambican civil society in the observatory has been hailed as a success — to the extent that at the International Consultative Conference on Poverty and Development held in Mauritius in April, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) decided to set up a Regional Poverty Observatory. The Mauritius conference was also the first time that civil society was invited to participate in a SADC meeting.

Cuinica credits the observatory in Mozambique with helping civil society organisations become more systematic in their consultations with constituencies; civil society is now able to carry out extensive meetings throughout the country, a long and expensive process which is supported by the observatory.

One criticism levelled against the observatory is that its recommendations are not binding, which means it depends on the will of government to accept or reject whatever decision is taken.

"The challenge is for the observatory is to become part of the government and donor joint review mechanism," he said. The joint review mechanism is a forum where each party monitors and evaluates the performance of the other. This year, civil society took part in the review but was not present at crucial moments such as the signing of the Aide Memoire. Important final decisions were taken in its absence.

Still, the effects are being felt at the grassroots.

Rebeca Mabui and Eusébio Honwana are at the forefront of a fight to help peasant farmers reclaim expropriated land in Manhiça, about 70km north of Maputo. The two are among the leaders of local associations of farmers in the area — they are part of the Union of Peasant



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Farmers Associations (Unac), which is represented in the G20.

In Mozambique ownership of all land is vested in the state; individuals or companies may only apply for land-use rights spanning 50 to 100 years. Unac executive secretary Diamantino Nhampossa said that the Confederation of Business Associations proposed this law be changed to make it possible to use land as collateral for agricultural development.

"We consulted widely among ourselves, and we felt that the implication would be the death of peasant farmers," said Nhampossa. Through the G20, farmers were able to block the proposal.

Despite this, land is increasingly being sold illegally by unscrupulous and corrupt officials. Many peasant farmers have been pushed off their land around Manhiça — by wealthy people from Maputo who seek vast tracts of land for farms or resorts.

"Sometimes the peasant farmer is

transferred to another plot. At other times they are simply told by municipal authorities to move out because the land on which they earn a living is no longer theirs," said Mabui. Most peasant farmers have no title deeds with which to defend themselves against the illegal evictions.

She said that in some cases her organisation and others have gone to court to defend their right to land but, as yet, not a single case has been tried. Honwana says police stopped a march although all the necessary procedures — like informing the municipal and police authorities. The reason police gave was that the mayor of Manhiça had not sanctioned the march.

The farmers are regrouping for another public protest, but the incident highlights the limits of the very real progress civil society has made in putting forward the needs of the most vulnerable. — Inter Press Service

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