

Nishara Naidoo of the Festival of Powerful Ideas (PowerFest) on
'What is Civil Society?'

CCS Activist Brief August 2018

There are many confusions around the term 'civil society' and for me, these are brilliantly explained by Koketso Moeti in an article entitled '*Understanding the differences between civil society and civil society organizations*' published in *Sangonet Pulse* in August 2012.

I cannot articulate the issues as brilliantly or as presciently as Koketso, so I have drawn excerpts from her article and included my considerations alongside.

KM: Within the South African context there seems to be a lot of confusion about what and who civil society is and what it means.

The term is often used loosely, which just deepens the confusion.

KM: In my opinion though, all of us are civil society. There is a view that business people and politicians are not civil society, but they are. None of us are defined by our work and so within our personal capacity, we all make up the society of South Africa. Where civil society is organised though, it becomes a civil society organisation (CSO).

Despite the terms 'civil society' and 'CSOs' often being used synonymously, there is a fundamental difference between the two, which many of us fail to understand.

KM: CSOs are defined as organised civil society and can come in many forms, some informal and some as formal entities such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), faith-based organisations (FBOs), among many others. This is when a group of individuals come together for a common purpose, as in to fulfill a particular mandate driven by need. CSOs have a constituency, as they have a clientele/beneficiaries whom they serve and ideally should represent that clientele.

As such, it is very disturbing to see how many purport to be representing the views of civil society when in fact civil society has no idea what their mandate is. This is because no matter how well-intended the effort is, if people do not know or understand the mandate being served when 'civil society' is represented - then we in the sector are guilty of what we often accuse government of doing - imposing plans on people rather than facilitating a space in which people can make their own informed decisions.

A member of civil society represents their own views. It is very presumptuous of anyone to claim to represent the view of another as we often see. This does nothing but delegitimise the work done by CSOs and should be guarded against. Purporting to

represent the view of all South Africans when failing to give people an understanding of what it is being referred to is very demeaning and can be dangerous as it further strips away the voice and dignity that represents civil society.

Many are skeptical of the work being done by CSOs, believing the sector to be self-serving and even at times, perpetuating the cycle of social exclusion under the guise of 'making a difference'. This is a direct result of not differentiating between representing 'civil society' and a CSO representing a particular constituency of civil society. By virtue of seeking accountability from government and business, CSOs should hold themselves to the highest standards and this includes ensuring that no error is made about who and what CSOs represent.

Although these issues were raised by Koketso 6 years ago they remain pertinent, in my experience with CSOs and civil society over too many years to acknowledge in public, these issues have not been candidly and widely addressed by CSOs or in civil society although many people in civil society – also simply known as people - regularly raise them.

Consequently, in my opinion and experience nothing much has changed:

The confusion between and conflation of civil society and civil society organisations still persists and is often deliberately perpetuated and used synonymously by civil society organisations who deliberately and erroneously “purport to represent the views of civil society when in fact civil society has no idea” who they are, what their mandate is; has never mandated, elected or appointed them.

These self-formed and self-appointed organisations in turn often do not consult and communicate with or report back and account to “the” civil society they purport to represent, but rather to their self-appointed boards and more importantly their funders.

And too often, it is the funders' mandate and interests which the CSOs represent and fulfill and not that of the people/community which they claim to represent, so that they can get more funding to fund themselves and their programmes defined by funders. So CSOs agendas and programmes are often determined by what funders are funding, rather than the needs and interests of the people they claim to represent.

Additionally by falsely claiming to represent civil society, also commonly referred to in South Africa as “the community” or “the people” as if civil society is one homogenous mass which they represent – also falsely creates the impression that CSOs represent more people than their much smaller constituencies, giving CSOs more credibility and relevance than they deserve, which helps in the ever more competitive and never ending quest for more funding.

Claiming to represent more people than they actually do also results in more invitations to the highly coveted national and international travelling opportunities on

the never ending CSO circuit of workshops, conferences, seminars at which they then speak for and represent civil society - all of South Africa and sometimes Africa!

Ironically and interestingly “the people” and “the communities” the CSOs purport to represent seldom if ever get on the “gravy plane” to attend the workshops/conferences/seminars to speak for ourselves. This is the privilege of the self-nominated and self-appointed CSOs.

Additionally, if the CSOs purport to falsely represent all of “civil society” “the people”, “the community”, “everyone” then they represent no-one in particular and cannot really consult, communicate, report back to or account to any one in particular. So they often then do not account, report, consult or communicate with any one, making them an unaccountable layer of power over people or civil society.

Worse still I have experienced CSOs who are not appointed or elected or mandated by anyone but suffer from an unjustifiable, unwarranted, unearned, inflated sense of self-righteousness because of their “selfless” work for this nameless, faceless, nebulous mass of “the people”/“the community”.

And self-appointed and self-anointed and self-righteous representatives close ranks, ostracise, silence, belittle, exclude, resort to elitism, racism, sexist, misogynistic, threatening behaviour, patronise, condescend, abuse, exploit, lie, steal, misuse and abuse funding and even attack people and communities who choose to speak, represent or participate for themselves or, heaven forbid, disagree or challenge the self-appointed an self-anointed “community/people’s representatives.”

There is a word for unrepresentative, unnominated, unmandated, unelected, unaccountable, self-appointed leaders who hold positions of power/office indefinitely, who claim to represent “the people” or “the country” when in fact they represent their own self-interests and that of their cronies and their financial supporters. Hmm... what could that word be?

The self-appointed, self-serving, unelected, unaccountable, unmandated, unaccountable civil society organisations, however will be the first to oppose organizing a march, starting a petition, undertaking research, running a workshop, making a speech, writing a letter, toyi toying and the other things that CSOs do to oppose/expose this type of behaviour elsewhere. Hmm...There is word for that as well.

Now I am not saying that all CSOs are bad/wrong/dictatorships.

I am saying that unelected, unaccountable power by anyone over people is oppressive and must be opposed and exposed everywhere equally. We must be vigilant about, challenge, expose, oppose and hold accountable any form of unelected, unaccountable power that claims to represent the people when it does not.

The power of civil society- the people is usurped when civil society is misrepresented as civil society organisations.

The power of civil society-the people is usurped further when self- appointed, unelected, unaccountable CSOs erroneously misrepresent themselves as the representatives of civil society.

We must be clear about the understanding and use of the terms civil society as opposed to civil society organisations and reclaim the term civil society as well as our power from those who conflate civil society with civil society organisations and then falsely claim to represent all of us.

We must oppose, expose hold accountable the CSOs that claim to represent civil society, all of us, when in fact they represent their own-self-interest or their CSO and their funders.

As Koketso put it much more eloquently and diplomatically than I: A member of civil society represents their own views. It is very presumptuous of anyone to claim to represent the view of another as we often see. This does nothing but delegitimise the work done by CSOs and should be guarded against...as it further strips away the voice and dignity that represents civil society”

And “If we want to hold government and business accountable, then CSOs should hold themselves to the highest standards and this includes ensuring that no error is made about who and what CSOs represent.”

But CSOs are not as good a holding themselves accountable as they are at demanding accountability from others.

So 6 years after Koketso’s article we are still in the same place, if not worse given the multiple allegations of sexual abuse and cover ups that rocked major INGOs this year. And that we are told is the tip of the iceberg. We have not addressed the racism, the neo-imperial power relations, the cronyism, the financial mismanagement, the lack of delivery and impact...and the list goes on.

These are some hard, inconvenient but necessary truths that we need to acknowledge and address if we are to deal with the surmounting challenges that we face as civil society and as CSOs

Like all hard truths, these will “upset the apple cart”, “ruffle some feathers”, “rock the boat” and all the other euphemisms we use for challenging power.

But CSOs are a layer of unaccountable, “invisible” power, the most difficult type of power to challenge that we need to acknowledge, make visible and hold accountable. Speak truth to and about power, especially unaccountable power.

And that is what we try to do at PowerFest. We speak truth about power, so that we/the people/civil society can know better, do better and choose better.

**Author Note: These are my own opinions based on my observations, experiences and research. I have included Koketso's article in full so that I do not inadvertently misrepresent her views and opinions.*