

CONNECTIONS

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A Question of Culture

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Experiments in **ORGANIZATIONAL INNOVATION**



The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.

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People-Centered and People-Driven: A New Kind of Organization for Zimbabwe

By Tendai Murisa

My home is Zimbabwe, where I work for an organization called the SIVIO Institute. The institute was established in November 2017 partly as a response to the change of government, which replaced the president who had been in power since 1980. There is a new excitement in the country focused on nurturing democracy and good governance. The organization's work is organized around the idea that there are initiatives citizens are already engaged in that influence democracy. These include initiatives of solidarity, community-based

coping mechanisms to economic shocks, and the various—but unnoticed—ways of engaging with officeholders. SIVIO's approach is to map these initiatives and find ways of strengthening them without necessarily altering them. Since January 2018, I have also been in residence at the Kettering Foundation as a visiting scholar. I am learning and working to improve my understanding of how a new organization can act as a kind of learning center nurturing democratic practices that are citizen driven and citizen focused. This distinct focus on



citizenship differs fundamentally from current work on political participation in Zimbabwe, which focuses mostly on tracking membership within political parties and participation in elections. The design of our organization is based on an alternative hypothesis: In order to succeed, democracy needs active citizens in engaged communities that hold their government accountable.

TRENDS IN ELECTORAL POLITICS IN AFRICA

Since the turn of the 20th century, we have seen fewer military dictatorships in Africa. Coups are no longer the norm. More countries have tran-

sitioned from one political party to another through peaceful elections. We are also seeing the successful introduction of multiparty democracy and routine elections. We have moved away from de jure one-party rule.

We still have challenges around the manipulation of constitutions by existing leaders in order to extend their terms, yet there are multiparty elections across the continent. It is a mixed picture, but we can say that Africa has chosen a trajectory of democratic representation. The consensus centers around democracy.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

The problem in Africa is the quality and depth of the understanding of what a democracy requires of its people. We are importing institutions, and we are importing formal norms of participation, such as voting in routine elections. The multilateral agents of development are pushing an agenda of programs focused primarily on the state or formal NGOs. In essence, democracy has been equated with elections. We have invested heavily in the process of elections themselves. In Zimbabwe, for instance, elections were held in July 2018 at an estimated cost of \$150 million, in a country with an 87 percent unemployment rate. We are spending a lot of money

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and attention on one event, and not focusing on the everyday challenges of democracy.

The elections are yielding a limited kind of output. In countries that went through the liberation struggles, only the faces of those in power have changed—the ANC in South Africa, Frelimo in Mozambique, MPLA in Angola. Even in Botswana, the most democratic country in Africa, there has been no change in political party since independence in 1964. CCM in Tanzania has been in power since 1963, and ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe has been in power since 1980. We have created a kind of aristocracy that has self-organized itself for succession, but we're not opening up the process of democracy beyond the party in power.

We are also experiencing increasing levels of inequality. Poverty remains the common condition, with huge levels of unemployment and a great disparity between a ruling elite and citizens. A related factor is a demographic challenge. Africa is young, bulging in the middle, with few jobs for youth. One result of these conditions has been protests like what we saw during the Arab Spring. The first food riots were in central Africa, beginning in Cameroon, then they moved to Chad and Mozambique. We saw them later in

isolated pockets in South Africa. It tells you something about the quality of the democracy we have that the initial attempt by the states was to suppress these riots, not to engage with the issues. In response, some of these protests became violent and eventually toppled governments.

HOW CAN WE REFRAME DEMOCRACY? WHAT ARE CITIZENS DOING?

There are very few Zimbabwean studies of what citizens do as citizens, with each other, for each other, and with institutions. It is important to note this absence because the current status quo creates an environment ripe for manipulation of citizens by elites within society through patron-client relationships. It creates a culture of dependency on expert interventions and solutions. The resulting practices disengage citizens from the work of their communities.

We know that Zimbabwe's countryside has historically been made up of a mosaic of associational forms. If Alexis de Tocqueville were to reincarnate and find himself in Africa, he would find associations everywhere. They include loose, unstructured, mutual networks such as faith-based groups, credit associations, women's groups, and labor-sharing groups, as well as the more structured peasant organizations, which are both

localized and national. Their origins vary. Labor and asset-pooling formations tend to emerge out of the traditional institutional framework of cooperation, while those entailing the introduction of a new innovation, such as joint marketing or mobilization of savings, are founded by charismatic leaders.

Good statistics on the total number of local associations in Zimbabwe are not available. In the SIVIO Institute's ongoing study of urban areas, we found more than 100 local associations within one low-income area. The associations serve a variety of purposes, covering a broad range that includes pooling together financial savings, providing assistance during bereavement (burial societies), creating security (neighborhood watch committees), and defending the commons (environmental groups).

In terms of activism, the broader political and systemic convulsions

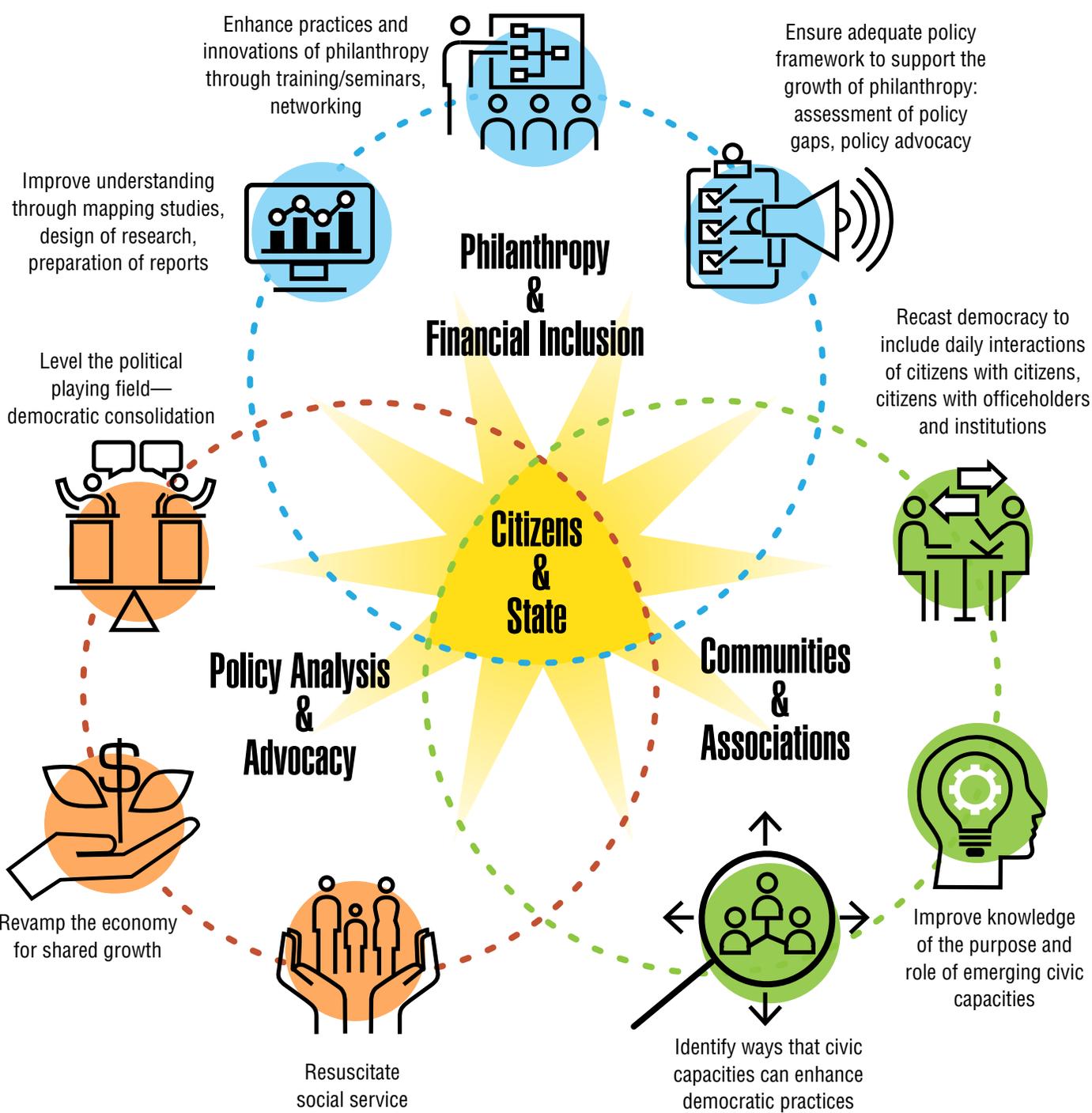
that have taken place since the Arab Spring were led by ordinary people working within and through ad hoc formations. They have literally changed the narrative around power and democracy. These movements are not limited to political issues. We have seen the emergence of #asakheni focused on economic revival of the second-largest city in Zimbabwe. The #KeepBulawayo-Clean campaign was started by brothers Tonderai, Willard, and Tinashe Shoko to ensure that the cleaning of the city's roads, squares, and parks is not the responsibility of the local authority alone. The campaign has been running for more than a year and has received widespread support. They organize clean-up campaigns that take place mostly during weekends and also encourage citizens to take photos of themselves cleaning in their neighborhoods.

The civic capacities under discussion are highly fluid. In one instance they may manifest as membership-based associations, in another they could just be an ad hoc network of concerned citizens, and in another situation an NGO might be at the center of the organizing. At the SIVIO Institute, we do not have a definite model on how they are established. Through this initiative, the institute will seek to gain a more



We know that Zimbabwe's countryside has historically been made up of a mosaic of associational forms.

SIVIO'S WORK IS ORGANIZED AROUND THREE AREAS



in-depth knowledge of the different trends within these spaces.

These associations provide clues of how citizens engage with one another, mobilizing members into community formations to organize for their own production and their own security. They are leveraging community assets, pulling together productive assets for agricultural production, and mobilizing support during times of bereavement. They are also working to organize support during other important social events, such as births and marriages.

After the family, the second most important framework or platform of social organization is these associations, especially the small ones whose membership ranges from 10 to 12 people. There are many com-

munities like these, and they do a lot. Many Africans were investing more to resolve their problems than formal philanthropy was doing, particularly in agriculture and community projects. The common story, though, is that Africa is dependent on foreign aid, but when you go into communities, you find communities that are highly engaged in resolving their own problems.

AN EXPERIMENT

Tensions exist between formal processes of philanthropy working alongside NGOs and communities. In every instance where philanthropy and NGOs are at work, they are creating new structures, new processes, new accountability protocols, and even new organizations. They change the existing loosely formed associations into something different. Organizations that were voluntary and associational are encouraged to become more formal and to focus on reporting new processes, which begins to affect even the manner in which they are responsive in a society.

As we set out to establish a learning center, we want to explore how we can work as an experiment in how to align a formal organization's work with citizen-based processes. How can an organization work without causing harm to existing capacity? How can we promote growth based

“ The common story is that Africa is dependent on foreign aid, but when you go into communities, you find communities that are highly engaged in resolving their own problems.

on learning and recognition of assets within communities and also deepen democratic practices? At the same time, we are keen to contribute to the emergence of other people and organizations through networks that align their work to the interests of citizens, and in the process, promote an emphasis on citizenship in a democracy.

Some issues that we have to grapple with:

- Ambition of the proposed center is highly exploratory
- Very few successful examples or models of this kind of work
- Limited understanding of how community-based agency (civic capacity) is engaged in resolving problems like poverty (lack of jobs/economic opportunities) and the collapse in public infrastructure
- Narrow framing of democracy to make it synonymous with elections has limited the ways that citizens are actually engaged in the public space
- Inadequate knowledge of how citizens actually organize themselves and work together to address issues that affect them
- Limited academic and policy interest in the role of civic capacity
- Inadequate platforms for citizens to engage officeholders and institutions



We are hopeful that, in spite of these challenges, our experiment with an organization that places citizens at the core will make a contribution toward recasting democracy as the work of citizens in Zimbabwe and hopefully provide lessons for others across the continent.

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- Limited understanding of the internal processes within associational forms and the networks they establish

We are hopeful that, in spite of these challenges, our experiment with an organization that places citizens at the core will make a contribution toward recasting democracy as the work of citizens in Zimbabwe and hopefully provide lessons for others across the continent. ■

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