

The impact of Covid-19 on African civil society organisations

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Even though Africa has been relatively spared from the pandemic in terms of both infection and mortality rates, it is a different story for the continent's organisations. The author draws on a recent report to take stock of the situation and explore ways in which civil society can adapt in a beneficial way.

“To enhance philanthropic impact by filling critical data and capacity gaps in the philanthropic market infrastructure in Africa.” Such is the aim of EPIC-Africa¹, to “help propel African civil society organisations to higher standards of performance, accountability, and transparency while inspiring greater local legitimacy and support”. In early 2020, this Dakar-based organisation published a report on the landscape of African civil society organisations (CSOs)², compiled from consultations with more than a thousand of their actors. Encouraged by this initial experience – which they now plan to repeat on an annual basis – EPIC-Africa has teamed up with @AfricanNGOs³ to conduct a new study on “the impact of Covid-19 on African CSOs”⁴.

The survey gathered data from 1,015 CSOs in forty-four African countries. From a study of the profile of the actors that responded, they are mainly involved at the national (49.46%) or community (41.67%) level. Among the fifteen areas of intervention they represent, more than 30% of the actors stated that they were active in the community development, education, children, human rights and health sectors. This article looks back at the main conclusions as they appear in the published report.

A directly impacted civil society

“The overall immediate impact of the pandemic was swift, widespread and destabilising. 98% of respondents reported having been affected in one or more ways.”

Albeit with its own specific pace and characteristics, Africa has not been immune to the pandemic, which has had countless repercussions for governments, communities, and health systems since March. When considered on a continent-wide basis, these repercussions are largely unprecedented. CSOs have also been on the front line, and their actions, presence and survival are being particularly undermined by the crisis, to the point of risk of closure.

The report addressed this issue and surveyed the continent from north to south (other than Libya, Chad, Sudan, South Sudan, and Eritrea, no country was left out of the study). In a very detailed and conclusive manner, the report analyses the three main ways in which the crisis has affected CSOs: the impact on their organisation and their presence in the field; the challenges arising from a form of forced paralysis on their actions; and the response to this unexpected – and unpredictable – situation. Most respondents

¹ <https://www.epic-africa.org>

² « Le paysage des organisations de la société civile africaines, rapport 2019 », EPIC-Africa, <https://www.afecti.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Le-paysage-des-OSC-africaines-2019.pdf> (the author assisted in this study).

³ @AfricanNGOs is a Twitter account that covers news and information about Africa. It is moderated by David Barnard, a development consultant.

⁴ The impact of Covid-19 on African civil society organizations: challenges, responses and opportunities”, report, June 2020, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5638d8dbe4b087140cc9098d/t/5efabc7884a29a20185fcbaf/1593490570417/The+Impact+of+Covid-19+on+African+Civil+Society+Organizations.pdf>

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(84%) indicated that they were unprepared to cope with the disruption caused by the pandemic. Nearly 70% had to reduce or cancel their operations due to lack of funding, while 55% expect this to continue over the next three to six months. Yet, as will be demonstrated, many see this crisis as a source of new opportunity to be considered, promoted and supported.

Disorganisation

“Our field interventions stopped abruptly due to Covid-19, leaving communities without any support for the services they require. We are also anticipating a loss in revenue from donations and programme funding and, as a result, will have to introduce cost-cutting measures over the coming weeks. We were not prepared to deal with these sudden changes to our operating environment.”

Almost all the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that responded to the survey acknowledged that the sudden appearance of the pandemic had hit them hard and forced them to make immediate organisational changes. These changes affected both the work of their staff (staff movements, the widespread and sometimes difficult introduction of remote working, and the rise in domestic violence that followed), and the allocation of funds (two-thirds). These organisations, half of which have annual budgets under \$100,000, anticipate heavy or even irrecoverable funding losses.

Furthermore, 70% stated that they had had to reduce or cancel their operations, while 80% saw a decline in face-to-face interactions. Lockdown measures and travel restrictions – both land and air – have largely frozen their programmes, while at the same time nearly one-third of CSOs have seen increased demand for their services. Half the organisations that responded to the survey stated that they have had to introduce significant cost-cutting measures with respect to their activities, staff, wages, hiring freezes and so forth.

Reactions

“So far we have postponed the implementation of some activities and developed a comprehensive Covid-19 response plan for which we are seeking additional funding. Our donors are mostly happy to redirect funding to our Covid-19 response work in the short-to-medium term. If the crisis continues beyond June or July, we will need to start implementing cost-cutting measures.”

The ability of most of the organisations concerned to maintain a form of communication, both internally with their staff and externally with their funding bodies, is noted and applauded. Similarly, for those CSOs with a board of directors, consultation with these boards has proven to be beneficial: a large number of them, through their responsiveness and receptiveness, will have played a positive, helpful or, in any event, critical role.

For now, everyone is thinking about how they can contribute to the fight against the pandemic, although 70% of CSOs lament the fact that governments and institutional donors have not involved them more in the process of managing the crisis.

In other words, aid localisation has not worked as well as one might have wished. This seems to be borne out by the testimonials given by other actors from the Global South in recent webinars, or the information presented in the numerous articles published since the summer, whether they concern the actual localisation⁵ or the decolonisation of aid⁶, particularly in the context of this fight against Covid-19. The recommendations issued by the CSOs interviewed, which will be discussed later, reflect this state of affairs, as once again they are calling for specific funding mechanisms for local NGOs.

⁵ See for example Veronique Barbelet, John Bryant and Barnaby Willits-King, “All eyes are on local actors’: Covid-19 and local humanitarian action opportunities for systemic change”, *Humanitarian Policy Group*, Briefing note, July 2020, https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/Covid-19_localisation_briefing_note_web.pdf

⁶ See for example Paul Curion, “Decolonising aid, again”, *The New Humanitarian*, 13 July 2020, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2020/07/13/decolonisation-aid-humanitarian-development-racism-black-lives-matter>

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Adaptability

“78% of respondents felt that Covid-19 would have a devastating impact on the survival of many CSOs.”

The shock wave is indeed far-reaching, and is more than just a blip. It is, therefore, up to CSOs, without further ado and in the light of these first long months of the pandemic, to learn lessons for the future. These lessons are many and wide-ranging, but in these dark days they are a source of optimism.

The CSOs interviewed stressed the concepts of “robustness” and “agility” in the face of this challenge, asserting their double capacity to adapt and innovate. They believe that they have filled the sudden void created by the departure of large international organisations’ staff, and they expect to be able to reap the rewards of this improved visibility by forcing funding bodies to change their strategies in their favour and the public authorities to strengthen the environmental component of their African development policy.

Few of those interviewed believe that the situation will return to normal, and many see an uncertain world emerging, forcing a rethink on funding, operating procedures, and personnel management – in other words, new operating modes are unavoidable.

Long-term impacts

“The pandemic is still spreading, and its implications for the sector will continue to evolve. Ultimately, the impact will be long-lasting as Covid-19 has exacerbated historical and ongoing challenges that hamper the sector.”

Two types of adaptability should be highlighted: first, the ability of the overwhelming majority of the CSOs interviewed to reorient their activities in the face of *and* during the crisis, including their sources of funding (self-funding, appeals to local private donors, etc.); and secondly, their capacity for releasing new synergies either among themselves through partnerships and coalitions of interest at the national level (sharing information, services to individuals, aid for vulnerable communities) or with African organisations tied to the diaspora, which 25% of them have managed to do. It is gratifying to note that over three-quarters of local CSOs feel that they are playing an essential role at country level, while more than two-thirds believe that their actions during the crisis will improve their standing in the public eye. This aspiration for credibility is also implicitly commensurate with the following statement: “African CSOs have relied largely on Western donors for funding. With the West experiencing the brunt of the pandemic and their economies struggling, African CSOs will feel the effect. Coming to terms with this reality, African CSOs need to find new continental, regional and national resource opportunities, including support from governments.”

In essence, and this is the key lesson of the study, the organisations surveyed are arguing for root-and-branch change, a stance that the crisis has reluctantly forced upon them. There is a distinct sense of optimism, expressed as an invitation to reflect on new, more pragmatic and innovative working practices that are more in line with the world of tomorrow. The organisations in question hold their future in their own hands and they have embraced it, holding on tight to the concepts of organisation and association, promotion and communication: “This is a good time for African CSOs to question the sustainability of their models and make changes where needed, and also to prioritise activities that might guide them towards sleeker operations in future.”

In its report, EPIC-Africa is again conveying an appeal from the participating CSOs to funding bodies, governments and their peers: “Without losing sight of the long-term, measures are needed to help CSOs manage and overcome the immediate impact of Covid-19.”

With regard to donors, CSOs reiterate their request for additional and unrestricted funding to create pooled funding mechanisms for CSOs, for support for their digital transformation, for their inclusion in

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national emergency funding mechanisms and, lastly, for the allocation of African resources to local organisations.

Governments are particularly advised to “leverage CSOs’ experience and expertise in planning, coordinating and implementing national responses to Covid-19” and to “support CSOs’ operations and Covid-19 activities through national emergency funding mechanisms”.

Finally, CSOs themselves are reminded that it is important to “organise and connect with other CSOs and stakeholders to advocate for inclusion in national government responses to Covid-19 and emergency funding mechanisms” and to “start reimagining organisational strategies for the post-Covid-19 period”.

Africa, still relatively spared from the health implications of Covid-19, cannot escape the collateral damage of this pandemic: it is far from over and the full extent of its consequences for the economy and communities are yet to be measured. When compared to Europe, and even more so to the American continent, the long-delayed Covid-19 crisis will generally (except for a few cases such as South Africa) continue to progress more slowly than elsewhere, raising questions and hopes in a torrent of uncertainty.

Conducted within a noticeably short time frame, the study by @AfricanNGOs and EPIC-Africa reflects the scale of the upheaval experienced by Africa’s CSOs. It also emphasises that the crisis may bring hope for CSOs, particularly in terms of essential changes to the localisation of aid. For such localisation to become effective, however, and as pointed out in a previously cited report⁷, donors must rethink their approach to funding by enabling actors in the Global South to benefit both from capacity-building and dedicated financing for their overheads. @AfricanNGOs and EPIC-Africa can be relied upon to ensure that these wishes do not go unheeded: their initiators plan to implement a follow-up survey in late 2020 to assess the evolving impact of Covid-19 on African CSOs.

Translated from the French by Derek Scoins

Biography • Irène Sesmaisons

Irène Sesmaisons has over twenty years’ experience in the management of non-profit organisations, and since 2016 she has been the director of Eficens, a consulting firm specialising in the evaluation of development projects in West African countries and building the capacities of civil society organisations. Irène is also an associate trainer at the Bioforce centre in Dakar and a member of AFECTI (the Federal association of experts and consultants in international technical cooperation), F3E, the Office for Economic Policy and Regional Development (EPRD), the expert committee of Fondation Ensemble, the projects committee of the Agence Micro Projets and the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), the International Advisory Council of SOS SAHEL, and the board of directors of Lega Pace. She is a mentor/coach for MakeSense Afidba. She was previously director of the grants department at Tostan in Senegal, head of the civil society department of the French Embassy in Washington, director of Fondation Ensemble, and deputy director of Enda Morocco.

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⁷ « Le paysage des organisations de la société civile africaines... », *op. cit.*