Policy Brief on the role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) as Peacemakers during the social unrest in South Africa

Executive Summary

Despite having legislation that allows for collaboration between Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and the government, our study on the role of CSOs as peacemakers during social unrest found that the relationship between CSOs and the government needs strengthening. Considering the role CSOs played amid the July 2021 unrest, it is important to ensure that CSOs are involved in the continued rebuilding and peace brokering efforts. This brief demonstrates the juxtaposition in the relationship between CSOs and the State. On the one hand, the government has increasingly included CSOs in their strategic plans as key role-players in engaging, improving, and empowering society, and on the other hand, CSOs lack confidence and trust in government. Given this, it is important to explore the policy options (realistic and unrealistic) that could facilitate building the CSO-State relationship.

Policy recommendations are then toward distilling which of the options could pragmatically realise the desired and needed change, and includes, for example, incorporating appreciative inquiry in municipal development processes, establishing forums for CSO-government interaction, and providing training in effective methodologies that enhance meaningful participation.

A collaborative approach between the government and CSOs is crucial to address the underlying issues fuelling unrest in South Africa. By working together, there is far greater potential to establish an environment of dialogue, understanding, and peace, reducing the likelihood of future violent protests and promoting sustainable development for the country.

Context and importance of the problem

Amid the COVID pandemic, July 2021 saw a wave of unprecedented protest action, collective looting, and violence. The negative effects of the violent unrest on social cohesion and risk to human life, alongside the significant loss to the economy (approximately R50 billion), made this a significant

event in South Africa's recent history. While many believe that it was an act of political sabotage, others commenting (then and now) on the event pointed out that due to the high levels of inequality and unemployment, such unrest was inevitable. Many saw the increasing number of protests during the height of the COVID pandemic as a predictor of civil unrest.

Considering that levels of protest in South Africa are still high, and protests are increasingly violent, the concerns that it is not a matter of if, but when the next waves of unrest will need to be heeded. As some CSOs took an active stance and role during and in the aftermath of the civil unrest (including monitoring and reporting on the progress of the unrest, facilitating community dialogue to discourage more violence, and providing physiological and therapeutic relief), the question begs: What role can CSOs take in acting as peacemakers during times of unrest, and how can government support CSOs in this role?

Critique of policy option (s)

Currently, CSOs are mentioned as possible partners to the government in the National Development Plan Integrated and Crime and Violence Prevention Strategy and Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan. These policies describe the roles of CSOs as assistants in crime combating, improving access to services, providing violence prevention and reconciliation, creating interventions to support victims and vulnerable children and families, and holding the state accountable in the face of high levels of corruption.

The Non-Profit Organisation Act provides an environment in which non-profit organisations can grow and formalise by providing an "administrative and regulatory framework within which they can conduct their affairs". By registering with the Department of Social Development (DSD), CSOs can access government funding, a significant source of funding for CSOs. There is other legislation (e.g., the Municipal Systems Act, Disaster Management Act and Children's Act) that allows for national, provincial, and local governments to enter into an agreement with registered and competent CSOs to provide government services alongside the state.

Despite the range of legislation and policy that speaks directly to the role of CSOs and their relationship with the government, CSOs struggle to remain afloat. Additionally, in recent years, provincial and national governments have reduced their budget for providing funding to CSOs. Many struggle to get the necessary staff because they lack funding and cannot provide competitive salaries. Despite providing often philanthropic work, many CSOs are staffed by professionals (people who have higher education qualifications or several years of on-the-ground experience); and thus, require adequate resources to ensure staff retention and efficient service delivery. Having limited resources affects the reach and depth of their interventions and programmes.

Furthermore, numerous CSOs encounter challenges when attempting to establish meaningful engagement with the government and its entities. A prevailing issue within the CSO sector is a lack of trust in the government. The government and its entities often fall short in forging relationships with local organisations and fail to acknowledge the vital role CSOs play within their communities. This disconnect gives rise to a divide that limits the potential for productive partnerships between CSOs and the government. Consequently, the current legislation and policies have yet to bridge the gap effectively, impeding collaborative efforts.

Policy Options

Drawing on the current limitations, and mind the gaps, it is necessary to produce a policy that emphasizes the opportunity for government to co-create programmes and projects with CSOs. Rather than the government pursuing top-down approaches in development, a bottom-up approach facilitated by CSOs can strengthen community buy-in and enable trust between communities and government.

Due to their grass-roots knowledge and experience in community facilitation and building, CSOs can provide crucial insights into policy changes, implementation plans and decision-making processes; therefore, it is important that there is a cross-sectoral or intergovernmental policy that encourages the involvement of CSOs in these processes.

Fostering collaboration should also be a continuous project for government departments and entities. Open, transparent, and consistent communication channels need to be built between CSOs and government entities. Policy should be developed that encourages departments, particularly those focused on service delivery, to share challenges and success with relevant CSOs. The trust deficit between CSOs and the government can be changed if coordination and cooperation between parties are emphasized.

Promote the use of appreciative inquiry methodologies in community development projects. This will allow communities to reflect on their strengths and assets and allow for municipalities to provide development projects that are informed by and better respond to the communities' needs and perspectives.

Encourage sectoral capacity building by facilitating dialogue between CSOs. This will allow for cross-learning which is important in the discovery of new methodologies and best practices. Additionally, it can facilitate collaboration amongst CSOs so that they are able to gain a larger reach, together.

Policy Recommendations

Realising that one of the key causes of discontent – which leads to unrest – is the government's failure to communicate effectively and acknowledge the grievances raised by communities (through formal channels as a start). CSOs often have an inherent understanding of community needs, and the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Municipalities should incorporate processes of appreciative inquiry, asset-based community development, and strengths-based community development into their IDP processes. Given the expertise of CSOs in these methodologies, it is important that municipalities engage directly with CSOs to facilitate such processes. It should be ensured that IDP meetings are inclusive of all stakeholders and empower stakeholders outside of government to be vocal, and at the forefront of these meetings.

2. Establish national and sub-national forums that facilitate cross-learning amongst CSOs and the government. This necessitates that the NDA ensures they have a comprehensive database of CSOs so that the less prominent CSOs can be brought to the forefront and receive the necessary capacity building they may need. Considering that the NDA has regional offices, there is an opportunity to ensure that these offices become integrated in their surrounding region. These offices should be adequately resourced and should establish strong relationships with the CSOs in the region – CSOs often work at the regional level.

3. Facilitate training in methodologies that have been shown to work in communities. By providing funding for such training, CSOs skilled in these methodologies will be able to provide an in-depth training, based on practical experience. Where the forums above can provide high-level opportunities to be exposed to these methodologies, these trainings will provide a deeper understanding and further capacitate other CSOs to use these methods themselves.

These recommendations are founded on fostering a collaborative approach to governance. The events during the unrest demonstrated that communities do not appreciate an authoritarian

government. It is the responsibility of the government to cultivate cooperative relationships with communities, and in this process, CSOs emerge as crucial partners. Recognising the authority and capability of CSOs and citizens to contribute to the development of their communities, while ensuring an open and transparent government, can play a vital role in alleviating the discontent that fuels mass violence and disrupts the fabric of our society.

References (Annotated Bibliography)

Mongale CO (2022) Social Discontent or Criminality? Navigating the Nexus Between Urban Riots and Criminal Activities in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal Provinces, South Africa (2021). *Frontiers in Sustainable Cities* 4. DOI: 10.3389/frsc.2022.865255.

Post-apartheid South Africa experienced a surge in public protests, notably urban riots involving politically, socially, and economically marginalized residents. This study examines the link between urban riots and criminal activities in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal provinces following the arrest of former President Jacob Zuma. The riots began as a demand for his release but escalated into widespread looting, vandalism, and violence. Underlying factors include COVID-19-related hardships, rising inequality, unemployment, political tensions, and racial issues. The riots caused severe human insecurities, impacting poverty, health, and employment. The study utilizes mixed research methods and content analysis.

Municipal IQ (2021) Why recent civil unrest was (mostly) dissimilar to service delivery protests. 22 July.

Recent civil unrest and looting in South Africa differed from service delivery protests in several ways. The unrest was concentrated in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, affecting five municipalities. Looting was a major feature, unlike in-service delivery protests. Targets included economic supply chains, medical facilities, and radio stations. Municipal IQ used media reports to compare the event to previous service delivery protests.

Office of the Presidency of South Africa (2021) Report of the Expert Panel into the July 2021 Civil Unrest. 29 November.

The report as commissioned by the President analyses the circumstances for the July 2021 unrest. The analysis reveals that multiple complex and obscure factors contributed to the unprecedented outbreak of violence in post-apartheid South Africa. The report notes that addressing the underlying conditions is crucial to prevent future similar crises. The fear is that such violence may reoccur due to political contestation, poverty, inequality, and lack of service delivery. Factional battles within the African National Congress have also become a source of instability. Building an equal, inclusive, and just society is essential for lasting peace and stability. The security services' response and coordination in times of unrest need improvement.