Civil Society in Angola: Fiction or Agent of Change?[1]
Fernando Pacheco
Action for Rural and Environmental Development, ADRA-Angola
(Acção para o Desenvolvimento Rural e Ambiente, ADRA-Angola)

Introduction

When speaking about civil society in Angola we usually encounter two perspectives. The first demonstrates its weaknesses or calls into question its existence, without really relating this to the specific historical and cultural context and is almost always transmitted by non-African authors.

The renowned Christine Messiant, when reviewing the transition process to the multi-party system in Angola, does not veer away from this logic, because it just discourses on the formal aspects of the process and ignores the path that Angolan citizens are taking for the construction of their citizenship, that has nothing to do with the purposes of the dominant political and economic elites, nor with the catastrophic premonitions of many Western analysts[2].

Ulrich Schiefer goes further and affirms that in conditions such as those of Angola, the idea of civil society is generally "fiction", because the "real" civil society would consist of ethnically structured agrarian societies, marginalized or excluded, unable to connect with social organizations of a more complex nature[3]. Such an argument indicates a disturbing lack of understanding of the recent dynamics of these societies, namely the important and substantial migratory movements over the last few years in Angola heading towards the main cities, that profoundly altered the population distribution from the colonial era and that completely left out, the already over simplified, Western analyses that divided Africa into conceptual dichotomies such as "rural" and "urban" societies.

Other analysts, like Michel Cahen, understand that instead of speaking about civil society one should speak about social movements in African societies, something that is not substantially different from the above mentioned authors' arguments[4].

What stands out from these varying points of view and of others that are similar, is that they use concepts and analyses based on Western structures that exhibit a weak capacity to adapt to or be flexible to African realities. An analysis of democracy, for instance, cannot be limited to its formal or institutional aspects, relative to the parties or the State, as Messiant does[5], but must be supplemented with the substantive aspect, initiated by citizens' action, in its relationship to the existent government structures, through what was considered designated by civil society, although this civil society can present several specificities. In the Angolan case, the State, the

[1] Published in Nuno Vidal & Patrick Chabal (eds) *Southern Africa. Civil Society, Politics and donor Strategies* (Brussels & Luanda: Media XXI & Firmamento with Angolan Catholic University, University of Coimbra & Wageningen University, 2009), pp.123-134.
[2] Christine Messiant, "Transição para o Multipartidarismo sem Transição para a Democracia", in Nuno Vidal & Justino Pinto de Andrade (eds.), *O Processo de Transição para o Multipartidarismo em Angola* (Luanda and Lisbon: Firmamento, 2007, 2nd edition).
[3] Ulrich Schiefer, "Comments on the Case Studies and Marin Challenges – Debate; a few short Remarks", in *The Role of External Development Actors in Post – Conflict Scenarios Conflict Scenarios*, Office nº 258 the Centre for Social Studies of the Faculty of Economy of the University of Coimbra, September 2006.
[4] Conversation with Michel Cahen (Luanda, August 2004).
[5] Christine Messiant, "Transição para o Multipartidarismo sem Transição para a Democracia", in Nuno Vidal & Justino Pinto de Andrade (eds.), *O Processo de Transição para o Multipartidarismo em Angola* (Luanda and Lisbon: Firmamento, 2007, 2nd edition).

political parties and civil society organizations (CSOs) constitute the vertexes of the triangle with which one should analyze the processes of democratization, its accomplishments and inadequacies.

The second perspective, that can be referred to as "endogenous", emphasizes the strengths - although limited - and the potential of Angolan civil society for political, economic and social change, and for the establishment of a public area of jurisdiction independent of the State. This is what I intend to demonstrate through this text, in line with what Ganean Gyimah Boadi advocates, the equally famous Mozambican José Negrão, the Angolan Cesaltina Abreu, and, more recently, the Brazilian Idaci Ferreira, among others. I also intend to present the constraints inhibiting the development of such potential.

I – The Strong Socialist State, the Process of Democratization and the Emergence of CSOs.

When independence took place, it was recognized the need for a strong national State, capable of guaranteeing the integration of socio-cultural diversities and national unity (without suppressing other forms of affirmation), of moderating imbalances/disparities and inequalities and of leading economic and social reconstruction. The Socialist State ruling after the independence targeted specific objectives: to eliminate the various deficiencies and injustices inherited from colonialism, integrate cultural and regional diversities, rehabilitate the socio-economic "relapse" and accelerate development. However, when it came to fulfilling these promises things were very different. The monolithic and sectarian character of the Socialist regime and the desire to control the independent social forces misrepresented such objectives, favouring incompetence and bureaucracy, at the same time that it significantly excluded or limited the participation of several segments of society, for example, Church members, entrepreneurs, those that had served the colonial regime, members of other liberation movements or past dissidents from the MPLA itself. It concerned the restriction of citizens' rights that culminated in enormous divisions in society and, to a certain degree, led to the civil war. This regime ended by developing a strong State at the expense of an obliterated society, where citizens did not have the right to participate freely within their own society.

Throughout the eighties, for several reasons, the Angolan State became less efficient and effective as regards public services provision. With the commencement of the transition process towards a multi-party system at the beginning of the nineties, an opportunity opened up for CSOs and it is at this point that they arose in force, gaining enormous support within that decade, at a time when State institutions were extremely fragile and unable to fulfil the most elementary services to citizens nor to define public policies or even to execute laws. In many circumstances, local administrations of the State relied on NGOs to carry out these functions.

Conscious of civil society's growing importance within the country, towards the end of the nineties the government decided to encourage and support the emergence and consolidation of pro-governmental CSOs that functioned as "chains of transmission" of its policies and strategies, trying to undermine, influence and co-opt the genuine civil society movement. Since these pro-governmental CSOs were not autonomous they were usually limited to the distribution of goods at no cost to the populace - contributing to a culture of irresponsibility, paternalism and promotion of clientelism -, transmitting messages that were favourable to the ruling party and at times organizing civil society debates on issues of interest to the government. These CSOs had easy access to public funds, while those that were not sympathetic to the ruling party faced serious challenges, not only in terms of funding, but also when it came to relating to State institutions.

This relationship between party in power, government and some CSOs was denounced by several analysts and public media. However, at a social level, it represented a strategy that the MPLA had cunningly implemented, unlike any other political power, through culture and sport, seducing the most popular musicians and capitalizing national football and basketball victories in their favour.

At the end of the nineties and the beginning of the new century, the relationship between non pro-governmental CSOs and the Government took on a different form, in that each side began to view the other not as a partner (since they held different opinions concerning the complex reconstruction, reconciliation, democratization and development tasks) but as an opponent and, at times, even as an enemy. This was true as much for civil servants, that considered themselves to be "proprietors of the State", as for certain NGOs that believed that civil society and all those that were militantly against the Government and the State were the only ones with morals and that were treading circumspectly, which caused extreme situations that were not in any way beneficial for either of the parties involved.

II - The Socio-Economic and Socio-Political Contribution made by CSOs.

From its emergence to - at least - the end of the war in 2002, Angolan civil society had a significant growth and social dynamism. Contributing to this were several factors, for example pluralism and freedom of association being constitutionally approved; the strong increase of humanitarian aid due to the needs created by war; civic sentiments and the citizens' movement on behalf of peace and of the need for the defence of Human Rights; the retraction of the State in the standard of services provided to citizens and its ever greater inability to control social forces; the action of the so-called international community, through the United Nations' agencies and others of a multilateral nature, of international NGOs and of some donors with greater involvement in Angola – that besides resources also helped to create a favourable political atmosphere for the growth of civil society and to stimulate the propagation of a culture respecting Human Rights.

Whether we like it or not NGOs deserve to be commended for the positive influence that they had on Angolan civil society. Since the beginning of the nineties they constituted the most dynamic segment of civil society. Unfortunately, many sectors of society's perception of them was negative, fed by most of the media and some influential intellectuals that were more and more unsupportive, forgetting the challenges they themselves faced in support of citizenship, against social exclusion, inequality and oppression. Such sectors were of the opinion that NGOs squander public funds originating from wealthy countries on themselves at the expense of the needy populace. Schiefer and like-minded analysts say that African CSOs mostly focus on projects that are sponsored by the international community and exist to sustain the wages of the members of these organizations[6]. This generalization clouds reality and is simplistic and abusive.

Many community organizations functioned almost all over the country, sustained by volunteers, with work and resources originating from within their own communities. In his study on the role of community associations in the promotion of citizenship and in the construction of democracy in the community of Dombe Grande (Benguela), Idaci Ferreira exhaustively describes the experiences of community groups that work as volunteers, contributing with their own effort and

---

[6] Ulrich Schiefer, "Comments on the Case Studies and Marin Challenges – Debate; a few short Remarks", in *The Role of External Development Actors in Post – Conflit Scenarios Conflict Scenarios*, Office nº 258 the Centre for Social Studies of the Faculty of Economy of the University of Coimbra, September 2006.

resources in order to reach their objectives. The author concludes that in spite of not yet being consolidated, the groups were promoting participative dynamics, stimulating new forms of dialogue, influencing the local administration, as well as solving their problems and thus gaining influence. In spite of their action being local, they seemed to possess a great potential to improve the quality of democracy and of citizenship in Angola[7].

Based on my own field experience, I can refer to various other organizations that, at both a central and provincial level, based their practice on voluntary action – ranging from all to many of their members – in defence of causes such as the environment, the fight against AIDS, human rights, civic education, attempting to influence politics and public practices (e.g. Juventude Ecológica *Ecological Youth*, FOJASIDA - *Fórum Juvenil de Apoio a Saúde e Prevenção da Sida* -Youth Forum for the Support of Health and Prevention of AIDS, SOS Habitat, Mosaiko Cultural Center, OPSA – *Observatório Político e Social de Angola*-Political and Social Observatory of Angola, as well as ADRA). Local community organizations from several locations within the country were playing an important role, be it economically (e.g. access to credit or commercializing of cattle), socially (access and supply of basic social services) or institutionally (participation in councils for reconciliation and forums with the State administration). In some municipal districts, the associations integrated into independent unions, despite government pressure that they be subordinated to UNACA - *Confederação de Associações e Cooperativas Agropecuárias* -the Agricultural Confederation of Associations and Cooperatives (e.g. the cases of Cubal and Cáala).

The growth of community organizations became evident when a community set judicial action against the government for hindering them by setting aside land for public investment (as took place in the province of Huambo), or when a consortium of associations demanded participation in the technical evaluation of the NGOs that support them, something that became more and more frequent.

These changes were the result of local dynamics and of the help offered by some NGOs, whose work was to provide services, promote rights (of various types), reinforce skills, facilitate access to information, create lobby groups and provide sponsorship. Using participative methodologies, they established horizontal relationships with community organizations and contributed to their autonomy and self-esteem. In a country where relationships between "centres" and "peripheries" were traditionally authoritarian and of a vertical nature, those changes were extremely relevant. On the other hand, the political influence stemming from some NGOs was fed and legitimized by their relationship with community organizations.

The aforementioned critical and caustic positions in relation to the NGOs, should be thwarted recalling that, besides the crucial humanitarian action that they carried out during the worst phases of the armed conflict in Angola, helping to save millions of people from dying from hunger and disease, the NGOs continued after peace to provide extremely important public services, from health to education, to sanitation, to food security, among many others.

One must take into account the contribution of civil society in general and of the NGOs in particular for the ongoing democratization process in various areas of performance. The first concerns the contribution given for the achievement of peace and for a progressive change in the decision making process, breaking the bipolarisation between the two biggest parties, UNITA and

---

[7] Ferreira, Idaci, *The Role of Community Association in Promoting Citizenship and Building Democracy: Exploring the Case of NRA (Núcleo Representativo de Associações - Representative Centre of Associations) and Associations in Dombe Grande Comune – Angola;* Thesis of Dissertation of Master's degree, Sussex University, 2007.

MPLA, that characterised the Angolan political scene since 1975; a second one concerns the development of theoretical ideas on democracy (in dimensions beyond formal) and on citizenship (in a fundamental sense), more advanced than that of the political parties; in third place, what stands out is the decisive role in the change brought about in Angola in the promotion and defence of human rights and of citizenship, in the defence of women's rights and of gender balance, in the construction of a democratic culture and of a more quality public space, in the civic education of citizens and in the influence on some public policies in domains as diverse as poverty, land, press, decentralization and education, among others; and lastly, we need to mention the promotion of participation and pluralism of ideas, the construction and reinforcement of a civic sense within groups and organizations and the promotion of values like reconciliation, tolerance and the construction of a consensus on the great challenges facing the nation[8].

The effort of civil society and its contributions are so much more important when they take place in a context of several constraints, as is the case in the still existent political culture of authoritarianism, patrimonial administration of the political-economic system, political dependence of the national business community and the excessive weight of the informal sector in the economy[9].

III. Citizenship and Participation vs. Difficulties in Separating Civic and Political Space

One cannot, in my perspective, analyze the subject of civil society in Angola without relating it to the issue of citizenship. This need becomes more relevant since the fights for citizenship in our country have always taken place in parallel with the fights for independence (anti-colonial) and for peace (end of the civil war). As José Bengoa would say, when citizens are not conscious of their rights and duties it is not possible to construct a participative and substantive democracy, a democracy that refers to the conquest process and the growth of citizens' freedom, to the respect for cultural differences within society and to the statement of values such as justice, solidarity, recognition and self-determination, and finally, to a democracy in which all citizens are free to participate[10].

Today there seems to be a growing need in Angola, as a result of the weakening of public institutions and the discrediting of political parties, for significant segments of citizens to participate in the solution of their problems, in public life and in the definition of public policy. Such need is more significant when it acts at a local level, alongside the communities, in the communes and municipal districts, for it is at the local level that we find institutions with which most of the citizens are more easily able to identify with, socially, economically and culturally[11].

---

[8] Robinson, M. & Friedman, S., "Civil society, democratization and foreign aid in Africa" in *IDS Discussion Paper 383*, 2005.

[9] Christine Messiant, "Transição para o Multipartidarismo sem Transição para a Democracia", in Nuno Vidal & Justino Pinto de Andrade (eds.), *O Processo de Transição para o Multipartidarismo em Angola* (Luanda and Lisbon: Firmamento, 2007, 2nd edition).

[10] The substantive democracy of Bengoa corresponds to the democracy of high intensity that Boaventura de Sousa Santos speaks of; see Bengoa, José, "L´education pour les mouvements sociaux", in revista *Proposiciones*, nº 15, Santiago of Chile, 1987; Sousa Santos, Boaventura (org.), *Democratizar a Democracia: Os Caminhos da Democracia Participativa* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2002); also Sousa Santos, Boaventura, "O Estado Heterogéneo e o Pluralismo Jurídico", in Santos and Trindade (eds), *Conflito e Transformação Social: uma paisagem das justiças em Moçambique* (Porto: Afrontamento, 2003).

[11] Pacheco, Fernando & Santos, Guilherme, "Desenvolvimento Local e Ambiente-Local and Environment Development: a experiência da ADRA e o caso do município dos Gambos, in *ONGs dos Países de Língua Oficial Portuguesa na luta contra a Pobreza pelo Bem-estar e a Cidadania* (Lisboa: ACEP, 1999).

Partly as a result of the work and influence of CSOs near the communities, the State administration is trying to restructure itself at a local level, based on new legislation concerning the organization of Local Administrations of the State – ALE (*Administrações Locais do Estado*). This legislation inserts innovative elements, such as the local administration management of part of the budget and of investments as well as the participation of citizens within public consultation mechanisms aimed at the communes and municipal districts, through local CSOs. However, the ALE are still structurally fragile, not having the power to make decisions and possessing a very limited capacity for services provided to the citizens. These facts, allied to the weak development of the local economy, partially explain the current levels of poverty and the still weak participation of citizens in these processes.

It is in this context that, for instance, CSOs have helped to stimulate and promote the creation of local forums, where the communities and their organizations interact with public institutions. These opportunities are in line with what certain Anglo-Saxon literature calls "new democratic spaces"[12], or in other words, areas of participation and opportunities for citizens to deliberate about issues of common interest, that can so greatly satisfy social and economic needs. Since in Angola political discussion is restricted to the spaces of "formal democracy", with little connection to the population, CSOs carry out an important political and democratic function when they provide an independent public sphere to the citizens, out of State control, of association and participation, where they can freely voice their opinions and state their priorities[13]

Executing its civic but also political role it is natural that CSOs are confronted, sooner or later, with institutional political power. The relationships between State and civil society in Angola have been greatly marked by the evaluation of the services provided that characterized the activity of many organizations during the war. Many of those holding positions of authority still believe that an NGO must limit itself to partnership with the Government. Based on this view there arose within the government an absurd idea that NGOs, who are called to help solve citizens' problems, should not contribute to the definition of public policies or for the solution of such problems, nor for the defence of those same citizens' rights, because if they do they will be getting involved in politics, as if the Constitutional Law banned citizens the right of being involved in politics.

This understanding of the CSOs' role led to the repressive and authoritarian position taken by some government institutions, in July 2007, when a few national and international NGOs were threatened with being rendered illegal, based upon the argument that they were interfering with politics and were overstepping the boundaries of their social responsibilities.

Such attitudes, stemming from the Government, are not democratic and were opposed by nearly all of society. There are citizens that are not involved in party politics, but that nevertheless want to and are entitled to participate in public life. In these cases the CSOs and civic space are a legitimate and viable alternative.

IV - The CSOs' Potential for Change and their Limitations.

Beyond all of the structural and situational constraints related to the political system, its modus operandi and characteristics exclusive to the regime, the CSOs potential for change is still conditioned by limitations that exist within the CSOs themselves and that must first of all be

---

[12]Robinson, M. & Friedman, S., "Civil society, democratization and foreign aid in Africa" in *IDS Discussion Paper 383*, 2005.

[13] Roque, S. & Shankland, A. "Participation, Mutation and Political Transition; New Democratic Spaces in Peri-Urban Angola" in A. Cornwall & S. Schattan Coelho (eds), *Spaces for change?* (London: Zed Books, 2006).

overcome by their own organizations in terms of organizational practices, positions and action strategies.

In the first place, CSOs should look at themselves introspectively and take note that, many of them, suffer from the very same inadequacies and addictions that the State institutions are accused of, such as the lack of internal democracy, authoritarianism, the lack of freedom to question leadership, the absence of transparency and responsibility, as well as corruption.

In second place, CSOs should reflect on their role in society and develop a new vision for development, they should touch base more with the communities with whom they work in order to promote encompassing discussion and reflection to better define their own strategy and direction, in a sustainable manner. For example, the "Forum for the Community Development of Catumbela" has made it their goal to contribute towards the development of Catumbela, but within the organization they have never reflected on what "development" in the context of Catumbela means, neither have they ever challenged the community to reflect on the very same issue. The creation of the Catumbela industrial area can, for instance, look extremely attractive in terms of the creation of employment, but can also render the corn and bean production of many family producers unfeasible and in this way alter the community's socio-economic balance These issues and processes of reflection and action should be put into practice, intensely and extensively, in order for them to effectively contribute to the development of communities.

In third place, I highlight the need to maintain plurality and multiplicity within civil society, refusing homogenisation of representation. One of the major weaknesses pointed out to Angolan CSOs is the lack of ability that they demonstrate in expressing common positions within trading platforms. The point highlighted is the lack of a representative body that is able to dialogue, negotiate, influence, and finally, to interact with the Government or the international agencies. However, we need to ask ourselves who, after all, stands to gain with the organization of homogenisation through vehicles like the so-called "platforms"? The answer cannot be linear, based upon the advantages that the representation mechanisms offer, but it seems clear to me that the Government and the aforementioned agencies greatly value the advantage that they gain through having only one spokesman expressing a particular opinion. Moreover, a large central/national platform demands a certain level of organizational skill and the ability to gain the trust of the overwhelming majority of CSOs, in order to make collective representative action possible; conditions that in the Angolan context still do not exist.

Besides the normal differences in point of view, the organizations in the provinces demonstrate a great lack of trust concerning the mechanisms and representative structures of their positions, fearing domination by the organizations of Luanda. In effect, the manner in which FONGA - Forum of Angolan NGOs - was formed and acts, demonstrates a tendency towards the concentration and centralization of its power in Luanda. Whenever this organism is intended to take up positions on political and social matters, the fact that it does not have the legitimacy to operate on behalf of all of Angolan civil society is not taken into account.

On the other hand, one must bear in mind that one of the greatest threats to the performance of civil society is what can be called an "avant-garde movement", often pointed out as being the exclusive evil of Marxist-Leninist parties, but that ends up being a universal organisational temptation, especially in environments like ours, where inequalities are so abundant, overwhelming and diverse. Even people that are in favour of effective democratization are frequently tempted to assume leadership positions concerning certain issues without the required legitimacy, without taking into account the other CSOs' views that they intend to represent and fail

to analyse the consequences of such acts within the remaining organizations and even less still within the communities themselves.

One of civil society's most significant incentives is the absence of avant-garde leaders that can artfully speak on behalf of citizens that do not have the same opportunities to make their voices heard. Contemporary history is full of sad and at times dramatic examples of what represented, and still represents, the organisational vanguards and the illuminated leaders, on whom everything depends and towards whom all supposedly owe everything. No one in civil society can hope to represent all of society, but can only represent small segments of it. We should all be able to autonomously demand that citizens' rights consecrated in Constitutional Law be ensured and respected and, if this is the case, we will already be greatly contributing towards the democratization of our society.

V –The New Model of Economic and Political Development and its Inadequacies.

Profiting from the favourable international economic climate – the increase in the oil price - the Government began to implement a strategy of economic development, whose general lines can be found in a document proposed by the MPLA for Angolan society on June 20th, 2007 – National Agenda of Consensus (*Agenda Nacional de Consenso*).

This document proposes a development model based upon the creation of fixed capital (infrastructures), financial capital (banks and insurance as a first phase, capital market as a second phase), human capital (scientific and technological) and social capital (a strong civil society derived from economic growth, from political stability and macroeconomics).

This developmental approach has several weaknesses and can be criticized from different angles besides the fact that it creates serious doubts concerning its feasibility in terms of reaching its objectives.

Firstly, the model of accelerated growth and modernisation of the economy, with a strong emphasis on infrastructures, was precisely the model followed by several African countries in the first years of independence and resulted in several failures. In general, these experiences revealed that the *rentiére* logic adopted by the post-colonial State contradicted and subordinated the logic of capitalist or socialist production, depending on the case, and failed to produce the expected results in terms of economic development. Currently, in the context of liberalization, the interference of the State in economic administration would be justifiable, in this first period of transition, in order to create a physical and human capital base and regulation of the market. However, what effectively assists is the adaptation and survival of the *rentiére* logic to a multi-party system, with personal use of public property on behalf of the governing elites and their cronies. "Clientelistic" and patrimonial practices did not disappear with the simple advent of the market economy and of the multi-party system.

The taking of a different approach to development would implicate a deep transformation of the actual system and *rentiére* logic (based on the growing oil profits) into a system based on a productive logic. However, oil continues to play an extremely important role in the economy and to facilitate clientelistic processes such as the new agricultural policies attributing vast extensions of productive lands to people linked to the governmental elites, without taking into account the criteria of effective skills for its appropriate use.

The development model that we are following is based on the primacy of economic growth over democracy and human rights. Such model underlies the interventions of MPLA leaders at the highest level. In their perspective, as long as the GDP continues its upward trend, it is of no importance that "growth" comes about through "islands" (as taking place with the condominiums, shopping centres and agriculture-industrial projects like "Aldeia Nova"), at the expense of equality and social justice.

In second place, rehabilitation and construction of infrastructures are beginning to raise serious concerns. Besides its extraordinary high costs, criticism was raised, that was confirmed over time, concerning the quality and durability of those enterprises and in relation to the overwhelming presence of foreign companies and workers in the process, pushing the Angolan workers aside, missing an opportunity to reduce unemployment and train Angolan technicians. In the same way, critics point out to the deterioration of the education system at every level, contributing to the lack of training of Angolan staff in numbers great enough to meet the needs arising from economic growth and development within the country. The investment in fixed capital is therefore being accomplished without the due parallel investment in human capital.

Thirdly, we have the issue of decentralization. In spite of some progress as regards to legislation, the lack of ability to decide at the level of municipal districts concerning the conception, negotiation, recruiting, monitoring and evaluation of the enterprises is worrying, and does not favour accountability nor the growth of local institutions, that have proven to be weak in their operation and in their ability to provide services to citizens. This weakness demonstrated by local authorities hinders CSOs that develop their projects there, adding to the difficulties already faced in the affirmation and stimulation of citizens' social participation in public life. Similarly, the local business community faces countless difficulties to emerge and develop far from the centres of decision and of State administration, not being free to function as vehicles of alternative development to oil through the increase of provincial agricultural and industrial production.

In short, the "development" model proposed presents several deficiencies and imbalances, once the concern with modernization (in which the infrastructures assume prime place) takes precedence over all other dimensions. The Angolan economy continues to marginalise most of its citizens, deprived of the benefits afforded to clientele and devastated by the high levels of unemployment and low-paid unskilled labour, being left with no alternative but the informal sector.

Unlike the abovementioned, a model of sustainable development should combine modernization with civic, political, economic, social and cultural rights and balance greater participation with social mobility, respect for the diversity of identities, cultural values and environment[14]. In a context where those in power are in agreement with clientelism that propitiates corruption, it would be of the utmost importance to promote more social justice, finding means to better distribute the national income in order to ensure social peace.

In many aspects, the government "development model" seems to encompass an attempt to return to pre-independence, based upon the year of economic reference of 1973 – the best year of the Angolan economy. No matter how urgent the need to rehabilitate infrastructures and to put services to work, reconstruction cannot mean putting things back as they were before, for two fundamental reasons: because in the history of societies it is not possible to turn back and repeat the conditions of the past and, because, in fact, unlike what many refer to, we never had a "model country" on an economic, social or political level in the first place. The colonial era was always

---

[14] Bengoa, José, "L´education pour les mouvements sociaux Education for Social Movements", in revista *Proposiciones*, nº 15, Santiago of Chile, 1987.

characterized by having accentuated serious situations of socio-economic injustice and restriction of rights; the post-independence regime progressively abandoned the initially promised socio-economic rights and reinforced centralism, monolithism, authoritarianism, the top-down approach, the lack of transparency and accountability with serious difficulties in promoting popular participation, among several other negative aspects[15].

From a political perspective, the model now proposed (the Western-type democracy) also did not take into account the reality and needs of the country. The transition process arrived in Angola with the so-called third wave of democratisation that began to impact several African countries in late eighties. Its arrival translated itself into a multi-party system and a market economy in early nineties, promising to solve two main problems - war and underdevelopment. It was a "promise" that implicated the adoption of a liberal Western political-economic system; at a time when in other continents this model was already proven to be extremely problematic, demonstrating a lack of representation and participation[16]. If it was like this in other places, where such a system benefited from an entire past of endogenous construction of the societies that adopted and developed it, how much more careful should it be of transposing and adapting it to the realities of Africa.

However, such a careful adaptation in Africa did not take place and Angola was not the exception, not taking into account its socio-cultural environment, nor its specific needs, such as the need to construct the idea of a nation (still fragile), the need for citizens to participate effectively in the national political life through other means rather than political parties, the need to represent cultural or regional diversity, or even the possibility of taking advantage of experiences of community administration in rural and peri-urban areas. In other words, there was no attempt made to "Angolanise" democracy [17]

Traditional methods of individuals' participation within their communities were not taken into account. Had these methods been taken advantage of, or at least some of their mechanisms adopted, they would have facilitated the adaptation and support of the new model, as something rooted in the communities' tradition, facilitating and stimulating the citizens' participation in public life through the new institutions and democratic procedures. An example of these traditional methods is *Onjango*, which is a very common institution in Angolan rural areas and is of fundamental importance in the administration of community life, in the exercise of leadership, in the resolution of conflict, in the transmission of values to the youth[18]. With the introduction of some corrective factors – such as a better balance of age and gender - this and other traditional methods of administering community life could improve and increase the level of democratic participation.

Another important consideration if adapting the democratic model to the African and Angolan realities would have been the possibility to begin the electoral process at a local level. That would

---

[15] Conceição Neto, Maria da, "Reconstrução Nacional: Desafios e Perspectivas", in *O cidadão e a política*, II Semana Social Nacional da CEAST- Conferência Episcopal de Angola e S. Tomé e Centro Cultural Mosaiko (Luanda 25 a 29 Novembro 2003).
[16] Sousa Santos, Boaventura (org), *Democratizar a Democracia: Os Caminhos da Democracia Participativa* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2002).
[17] Lopes, Carlos, "Democratizar África ou africanizar a democracia?", in jornal *Público*, Lisboa Setembro 11, 1994; Pacheco, Fernando, "Angola: Construindo Cidadania num País em Reconstrução - a experiência da ADRA", in *V Colóquio Internacional sobre Paulo Freire*, (Pernambuco-Recife: Centro Paulo Freire de Estudos e Pesquisas, 2005).
[18] *Onjango* is a word in the Umbundu language, but in other Angolan languages one finds designations for the same type of institution: as mbanza (Kimbundu or Kicongo), cota or tchota (in Tchokwe).

have had visible advantages, such as a larger share of the political-administrative power between the central and local level, greater involvement by citizens in public politics, more expansive and better approach to those policies and of central power to the reality of the communities' life. General elections would come in a second phase, thus ensuring wider participation and articulation of the local and national realities.

Conclusion

The contribution of Angolan CSOs to the democratization process is so much more meritorious as it has taken place in a context of much adversity and within a relatively short period of time. However, given the complexity of the Angolan context, the possibility for civil society to provoke lasting or structural change is limited.

True change in society should start at the level of each individual's behaviour and transposed to the society as a whole. In a context as complex as that of Angola this means the healing of traumas and complexes provoked by colonialism, racism, regionalism, social exclusion, war, dependence, authoritarianism, repression, apart from the need to change the clientelistic and neo-patrimonial mentality and behaviour of each individual. In order for change to take place the majority of the population have to be profoundly aware of their need and be committed to change.

At the central level, within political, administrative and party structures, change is difficult, once the *rentiére* logic seeks to reproduce itself within its macro dimension mechanisms, impeding the transformation of the system. In agreement with Chabal, formal regime changes cannot, in general, be translated into systematic political reforms. With few exceptions, the one that prevails is the continuation of neo-patrimonial policies (or *rentiére*), that are incompatible with sustainable development[19]. The confusion between party structures and State administration remains. It has been shocking to observe the way in which public media was manipulated by the MPLA during the electoral campaign of August 2008, assuming a clear posture of propaganda. All over Angola a significant amount of civil servants did nothing in August 2008 but work for the MPLA's campaign. The Public Treasury should demand payment from the MPLA for at least part of the expenses incurred as a result of the presidential campaign trips made during the month of August that served the party strategy for a smashing victory at the pools.

Faced with this context it is crucial for civil society to organize itself in order to monitor public politics in the coming years. CSOs should be impartial concerning the political scene, develop social commitment with those excluded and discriminated against, fight for social justice and be independently positioned in relation to the State. These organizations will play an important role in taking the democratic debate into non-formal spaces, so important in our social fabric and in the development of new social relationships, at the same time attempting to create room for dialogue amongst themselves, as well as strengthening those that already exist.

In both the short and medium-term, the strategy for change should focus at the local level, that of small communities, because at this level citizens are more open to the need for and possibility of conquering citizenship spaces, autonomy and power. In spite of the fact that these spaces are relatively limited in their dimension and reach when considered at a national level, they represent however, enormous conquests for the lives of those that conquer them. The opportunity offered by the decentralization process will be able, if well taken advantage of, to favour this type of local transformation, through increased institutional interaction between CSOs and public institutions,

---

[19] Chabal, Patrick, "Introdução", in Nuno Vidal & Justino Pinto de Andrade (eds.), *O Processo de Transição para o Multipartidarismo em Angola* (Luanda and Lisbon: Firmamento, 2007, 2nd edition).

stimulating greater participation. The activation of this process will gradually take place through the new democratic spaces – consultation forums and councils to voice public opinion - that have begun to emerge throughout the provinces and whose development should be stimulated, supported and reinforced. Local elections could serve as a pivotal moment to initiate change in how politics is practiced in Angola.