

Rights versus Redistribution? And Other Strategic Dilemmas facing Zimbabwean Social Movements

**Erin McCandless
University of Zimbabwe**

Civil and social movements have fuelled significant change in Africa in the 1990s. Southern African civil actors in particular have generated significant *political* change. This is no small feat, given that in the 1970s and 1980s the most common mechanism for political change in Africa was the military coup d'état or armed struggle. At the same time, there are questions about what structural changes this activism of the 1990s produced – e.g. in Zambia and Malawi. There is a growing contemporary concern about civil society's ability to ensure the realization of policies that benefit the poor and bring some measure of economic justice. In Zimbabwe, and across Africa, rampant poverty and lack of resources and capacity combine with political instability and violent conflict to create a difficult working environment for civil society actors. The severity of challenges generates a powerful need for partnerships with government and donors. But at what cost to the building of a healthy autonomous civil society? Questions arise around how CSOs can strive to both represent the poor *and* constructively engage in processes that too often co-opt them. Are more contentious forms of protest more successful in achieving goals? Perhaps most fundamentally, which is the more expedient and assured path to achieving human development? Is it *political* change, i.e. enshrining participatory processes within decision-making at all levels, or advocating for a new constitution or change of government? Or is it *economic* change, i.e. advancing particular policies and programs changes that will ensure more equitable distribution of wealth? Moreover, what is the actual impact of these different approaches on wider social goals such as the building of human development—a process placing people at the centre of the development, widening their choices through opportunities to education and employment, and access to health and resources?

This paper will investigate key strategic tensions that Zimbabwean social movements face, challenges dichotomised positions on *political* (i.e. rights) versus *economic* (i.e. redistribution) and *participation* versus *resistance* strategies for change, and begins to reflect on a wider vision for peace and human development in Zimbabwe. The paper will draw on social movement literature from around the world and Africa in particular, with respect to strategies and methods for understanding them. Case study dissertation field research on several key social movements – including the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) and the war veterans – alongside other civil society organisations will be utilized throughout the analysis.