
A cross-national study on civic service and volunteering in Southern Africa

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Abstract

This study indicates that civic service is an emerging social phenomenon and field of enquiry in Southern Africa, and reflects international trends. Civic service has certain distinguishing features which are a reflection of the complex contemporary social, cultural, economic and political developments both regionally and in the changing global context. The social development approach to civic service is emerging as one of the defining features of service in the Southern African context. This presents an opportunity for growing the service field in relation to expanding knowledge, practice, research, policy, and setting an agenda for action in the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

Key words

Civic service; volunteering; social development; community service; youth service

Introduction

In the context of globalisation, civic service and volunteering is emerging as a growing social phenomenon and field of enquiry (Moore McBride, Sherraden, Benítez & Johnson, 2004; Moore McBride, Benítez & Danso, 2003). Service and volunteering have deep historical and cultural roots in the African context. Shaped by the service traditions in the societies where it emerged, service reflects the complex contemporary social, cultural, economic and political changes globally and in the Southern African region. Worldwide economic integration processes have increased the vulnerability of domestic economies to external shocks, resulting in rising poverty levels and social disparity. Global changes, coupled with national and regional political and economic problems, civil conflict and instability, the HIV and AIDS pandemic, weak democratic and administrative institutions and a lack of social policies to boost social development, are challenges facing some of the countries in Southern Africa.

Formally and informally organised civic service and volunteering initiatives complemented by the growth of indigenous non-governmental organisations in Sub-Saharan Africa are emerging as a response to the declining human development situation (Patel & Wilson, 2004; Fowler, 1995). Preliminary research on service in the African context suggested that service is a growing social phenomenon and could make a significant contribution to social development regionally (Patel & Wilson, 2004). Further investigation into service in Southern Africa could inform theory, research, policy and intervention strategies.

A North-South partnership between a non-governmental organisation, academics and academic institutions culminated in a five-country cross-national study in the Southern African Development Community. This research collaboration consisted of Volunteer and Service Enquiry Southern Africa (VOSESA), the Global Service Institute (GSI) at the Centre for Social Development at Washington University in St Louis, USA, and the Centre for Social Development in Africa at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. The research was conducted between 2005 and 2006 with the view to replicating the research aims and objectives of the Global Service Institute's study (Moore McBride et al., 2004; Moore McBride et al., 2002). This cross-national study in the SADC aimed to build foundational knowledge and understanding of the nature and scope of service and the contribution that it might make to social development policy, research and practice regionally. For the purpose of the study, civic service is defined as an "organised period of substantial engagement and contribution to local, national or world community, recognised and valued by society, with minimal monetary cost to the participant" (Moore McBride et al., 2004:10S).

The research design was of an exploratory and a qualitative descriptive nature. The paucity of published information on civic service in the region favoured the utilisation of an exploratory research design. The five countries selected for the study were Botswana, Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The countries selected had some service activities and skilled in-country researchers who conducted the research. The country researchers focused on identifying any programmes that complied with the definition of civic service as defined for the purpose of the study. Forty-four key informant interviews were conducted with representatives from government, non-government organisations and donors. In addition, 13 focus groups consisting of 108 respondents participated in the focus group discussions. Twenty formal and informally organised programmes were identified and studied in-depth. Generic research tools were devised and adapted to the country situation. An interview schedule and a structured guide to conduct the focus group meetings were devised. These research tools guided the data collection in the respective countries. The respondents were purposively selected based on defined selection criteria. Five country reports were produced and the data analysis was conducted based on these reports (Kaseke & Dhemba, 2006; Moleni & Gallagher, 2006; Perold, Carapinha & Mohamed, 2006; Rankopo, Osei-Hwedie & Modie-Moroka, 2006; Wilson & Kalila, 2006). The research methodology is documented fully in the overall report which synthesised the five country reports (Patel, Perold, Mohamed & Carapinha, 2007).

The findings of the study are discussed with reference to three key questions:

- What is the nature and scope of service in the respective countries?
- What is unique about service in the African context?
- What are the implications of these initiatives for civic service policy from a social development perspective?

Development of civic service

Service has deep historical and cultural roots in the African context. Pre-colonial African societies relied on mutual aid, kinship and community support to meet human needs. Traditional cultural beliefs and practices encouraged collective responsibility, solidarity and reciprocity. The idea of service is embedded in local languages; different words and phrases refer to service and are still used today. In Botswana, the word *tirelo* is used, which means “something done for others” and *boipelego* means “self reliance”; volunteer village caregivers in Zimbabwe are referred to as *vabatsiri* and *hunhu* which means “to be a responsible human being”. All five

countries in the study are former British colonies and similar economic, political and social developments were observed in each country. Colonialism resulted in the adaptation of the socio-economic and political organisation of these societies to meet the needs and interests of the colonial powers. Pressures were placed on kinship and community support systems, and the denigration of indigenous cultural practices resulted in the erosion of the service ethos over time. However, some beliefs and practices do continue to exist while others have been refashioned to adapt to present conditions.

After independence, the service ethos featured strongly in nation building and the national development policies and plans in some of the countries. In Botswana, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe, youth service became more prominent after independence. Youth service programmes declined in the 1980s due to maladministration, corruption and nepotism; and financial and political problems, including allegations of elitism in many African countries (Patel & Wilson, 2004). While these programmes were government-led and compulsory, they nevertheless delivered tangible benefits for both beneficiaries and participants. Service was later constrained by the decline in public funding following the oil crisis in the 1970s and the adoption of structural adjustment policies in the 1980s by many governments in these countries. In all five countries studied, it was evident that the nature and scope of service and volunteering changed in line with economic and political changes in the societies. In Botswana, a shift to conservative free market policies in the 1990s resulted in a worsening of the plight of poor people. In Zimbabwe, the declining political, economic and social situation and the failure of government impacted negatively on poor and vulnerable people. This declining situation resulted in a proliferation of service activities outside of the state, where civil society organisations and informal community and village level structures emerged to address the gap in meeting the needs of the people. The service ethos was strongly established in the social services and anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, and service continues to be a growing phenomenon supported by strong sectoral policies aimed at national reconstruction and development.

A further distinguishing feature of service developments in the contemporary Southern African context is that the socio-economic profile of the servers tends to match that of the beneficiaries. In short, servers are poor and vulnerable themselves, which differs significantly from the server profile in industrial societies where servers come from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds (Gillette, 2003; Voicu & Voicu, 2003; Flick, Bittman & Doyle, 2002; Reisch & Wenocur, 1984). This presents particular policy challenges for the design and management of service programmes in the region. In some programmes in the region, governments play a major role, while in others there are strong partnerships with civil society and

community-based organisations, international agencies and donors. In conclusion, contemporary notions of service are informed by international development agencies, civil society organisations, community initiatives and governments, who are increasingly shaping knowledge and practice about service (United Nations Volunteers, 2005; Leigh, 2005).

The regional socio-economic and political context

In 2001, the SADC region, made up of 14 countries, had a combined population of 208 million people (SADC, 2003). The five countries which form part of the study are all members of the SADC. Agriculture and minerals play a major role in the regional economy, with 70 per cent of people depending on agriculture for food, income and employment, especially in rural areas where three quarters of the population reside. The SADC has the highest gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in sub-Saharan Africa. Economic performance has improved since the mid-1990s because of the improved political situation and management of the economies. However, the overall economic situation remains delicate in some countries due to the under-developed structure of the regional economies (Noyoo & Patel, 2005). South Africa and Botswana are higher income countries with GDP per capita being higher than the regional average. Conversely, Malawi and Zambia are classified as low-income countries. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund also consider Zambia a Highly Indebted Poor Country, which indicates its under-developed status. Since 2000, Zimbabwe has experienced multiple socio-economic and political problems which have widened and deepened poverty levels. The political isolation of the country has resulted in the retreat of many development agencies and increased demand on local voluntary initiatives to provide social welfare services.

There is a high rural-urban migration rate in the region due to migration and the displacement of populations caused by economic and social under-development and regional conflict. Civil war and political strife, coupled with natural disasters, have worsened the socio-economic and human development standing of the region as a whole. Although the Human Development Index (HDI) showed an overall improvement between 1995 and 2000 (UNDP, 2000), the human development situation is being reversed in some countries due to the impact of HIV and AIDS. Botswana and Zimbabwe experienced the greatest decline in life expectancy in sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2003). The political crises in Zimbabwe since 1997 have impacted negatively on socio-economic development.

Poverty reduction remains a key challenge: 70 per cent of the population in the

region live below the international poverty line of US\$2 per day and 40 per cent of the region's population, or 76 million people, live in extreme poverty (SADC, 2003). The poor also include marginalised groups such as children, older persons, women, people with disabilities, rural communities, youth and displaced people. Poor health indicators including high infant, child and maternal mortality rates exist; with high rates of cholera, HIV and AIDS prevalence, malaria and tuberculosis impacting negatively on the health status of the population. All countries in the region have high HIV/AIDS prevalence rates, with Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe recording some of the highest rates. It has been estimated that over the next decade, five to seven million people will die of the disease in their prime years, leaving two million orphans and transforming family structures and the demography of the region (Department for International Development, 2002).

Regional co-operation and development is being driven by the SADC, which transformed itself into a development community based on market integration in response to the regional, political and global economic context. The major challenges facing the region are to promote high economic growth rates, eradicate poverty, effect improvements in the delivery of social services, and place the region on a sustainable development path (SADC, 2003). The SADC is structured into clusters focusing on various sectors that include Social and Human Development and Special Programmes. The mandate of this cluster is to harmonise policies, strategies and standards including education, skills development and training, social welfare with a focus on vulnerable groups, health care, social security, and employment and labour standards. While the SADC Framework of Integration (SADC, 2003) reflects these priorities, it is constrained in implementing these social policies due to a lack of institutional capacity and fiscal constraints. The regional agenda does not specifically recognise and actively involve the private sector and the civil society organisations that play a significant role in civic service and volunteering. The private sector is however small in most African countries except South Africa (Noyoo & Patel, 2005). In fact, in some countries in the region, civil society groups are viewed not as development partners, but rather as a threat to the existing political order. There is scope for national and regional co-operation between state and non-state partners in achieving social development. The findings of this study demonstrate that civic service is a viable social development intervention, and that service strategies could make a significant contribution to regional social development. Finally, this brief overview of the development of service and the regional context discussed above shows that the wider historical, socio-economic and political reality of the societies in which service operates, shapes the direction that service takes.

Civic service and social development

The conceptual framework of the research study is informed by the social development approach to civic service and volunteering (Patel, 2003). The social development approach to social policy was first introduced by the United Nations to address the human development needs in the world's poorest countries following independence from colonialism in the 1960s. In the late twentieth century, the approach has re-emerged as a response to unequal and distorted development, and was endorsed by the United Nations World Summit for Social Development in 1995 (United Nations, 1996). In Africa, there is a resurgence of interest in the social development approach to address the intractable human development problems continentally and regionally (African Union, 2006; NEPAD, 2001; SARD, 2001; SADC, 2003; UNDP, 2000; Republic of South Africa, 1997). The SADC countries have adopted the Millennium Development Goals, however the SADC region is faced with many challenges in achieving these goals (Tembo, Teputepu & Mwape, undated). Currently, the African Union is in the process of drafting a social policy for Africa informed by the social development approach. Essentially, social development is concerned with harmonising economic and social policies and programmes. Social development is a pro-poor approach that promotes people-centred development, human capabilities, social capital, participation, and active citizenship and civic engagement in achieving human development (Patel, 2005; Midgley, 1995). Social development is a rights-based and pluralist approach that focuses on strong government action and partnership between individuals, groups, communities, civil society, donors, development agencies, and the private and public sectors (Patel, 2005). The social development approach to civic services provides a useful and appropriate conceptual framework to study civic service in the African context, in that it allows for an analysis of service programmes at different levels of intervention, namely, individual, family, household, community, and organisational and policy levels.

Findings

Nature of service

Meaning of service

The research findings suggest that there is limited recognition of the concept “civic service” as defined by Moore McBride et al. (2004). The respondents used the concepts civic service and volunteering interchangeably. However, the concept volunteering or volunteerism was better understood in Botswana, Zimbabwe and Zambia, where reference to volunteerism featured prominently and was used operationally to describe

civic service activities. The idea of service has taken root in South Africa and service was better understood there than in the other countries in the region.

The values of service were also derived from the Constitutions of some of the countries, which upheld social and economic rights in the case of South Africa, and economic development and participation in development in the case of Malawi. The building of a caring society is emphasised in Botswana's vision for the future. However, while Zimbabwe is a constitutional democracy, the flouting of constitutional principles has been widely documented.

Across the five countries, common elements in defining service emerged from the study. Firstly, the idea that service should provide tangible and intangible benefits to individuals, families, neighbours, the community and the wider society, and that such benefits should accrue to the most disadvantaged, was widely accepted by the respondents. A second idea commonly supported among the respondents was that service involves giving of oneself freely with limited or no expectation of financial gain. Thirdly, the meaning of service was also strongly associated with a philosophy of reciprocity between the server and the beneficiaries, the achievement of self-reliance, the empowerment of individuals and communities, and the fostering of civic responsibility. Fourthly, there was consensus among the participants of the notion that civic service should be related directly to national development goals. Finally, service appeared to have a social meaning that is shaped by the wider historical, socio-cultural, economic and political reality of the societies in which it operates.

Motivation to serve

The understanding of the meaning of service could be approached from the perspective of what motivates people to serve. Pawlby (2003) poses the question as to who benefits most from the service. Is it the giver or the receiver of service?

The findings across the five countries raised more questions than answers about the motivations of servers. Cultural and religious motivations were prevalent in all countries and were a significant motivator of servers. In South Africa, the desire to contribute to building a new democratic nation was also a strong motivating factor, which is an expression of citizenship responsibility (Pawlby, 2003). While community and societal benefits motivated most servers in the study, individual benefit also featured strongly in server motivations. Many servers, especially youth, were motivated by the opportunity to develop skills, gain work experience and the likelihood of obtaining gainful employment. In some instances, stipends were paid to servers and in others, where service was part of a scheme, it involved an exchange of in-kind resources. Kaseke & Dhemba (2006:22) point to the mutuality of the benefits derived from giving and receiving in the Zimbabwean situation.

Wilson & Kalila (2006) observed the complexity that enters the relationship between the server and the beneficiaries when stipends are paid to servers. For some proponents of service, this is not service, as the benefits to the server outweigh advantages to the recipient. Across the countries, large numbers of poor people volunteered their time and effort free without remuneration, while increasingly, service provider agencies involving volunteers are paying servers a stipend. Wilson & Kalila (2006) in their country report raise issues about the sustainability of such programmes and the morality of depending on unpaid volunteers to provide welfare services to communities, while they are unable to support their own families. This is particularly pertinent as volunteers tend to be persons of low socio-economic status who are engaged in their own daily struggles to survive. In some instances, the servers seek to benefit from the programme by accessing part of the benefits that accrue to the beneficiaries.

Pawlby (2003) points to the tension that may exist between the value that is placed on the act of giving versus the value of the service given. While this tension was found to exist in the Zambian context, in the Zimbabwean situation the act of giving provided an opportunity for collaboration and mutuality where both servers and recipients are poor and are dependent on each other for survival and support. However, servers were also viewed negatively in some situations, as it constituted unpaid work.

Scope of service

There are no accurate aggregated figures on the number of servers across the five countries. However, the data suggests that service is widespread and expanding in the region. Volunteering is the dominant type of service. Where information was available for the total number of programmes studied in-depth, there were on average 83 volunteers per programme in Malawi, 156 in Zimbabwe and 1 598 in South Africa. The latter figure is high because one of the programmes had a disproportionately large number of servers. Limited information was available on the age of the programmes. In Malawi the age of the programmes ranged between 10 years and 21,6 years while the average for the Zimbabwean programmes was 19,6 years, which suggests that the Zimbabwean programmes are more established. In contrast with these programmes, the South African programmes post-1994 were newer initiatives that were, on average, less than four years old. Volunteering, however, is well established in the social services in South Africa.

Box 1 provides an indication of the scope of service, confirming the notion that service is a growing social phenomenon based on secondary data. Voluntary service was the most widespread with the exception of compulsory community service for healthcare professionals in South Africa. Further, local community-based service

activities were predominant in all countries. In Malawi, two thirds of volunteering activities were community-based, according to a large household survey (Pelsler, Burton & Gondwe, 2004). Community-based organisations had links with large national, faith-based, international and governmental programmes. There appeared to be multi-layered co-operation between government, NGOs and CBOs linked from village level, through district structures, up to national level in Botswana (Rankopo, Osei-Hwedie & Modie-Moroka, 2006).

Box 1: Scope of service

Malawi	South Africa	Zimbabwe	Zambia
69% of households were involved in community-based organisations, village, church, school, self-help groups, and interest groups ² ; 33 000 volunteers were involved in the Malawi Red Cross	An estimated 17% (8 million people) of the population volunteer their time ³ 12 768 servers were involved in eight organisations; there were 5 801 compulsory community service professionals in 2004/2005 and 11 892 National Youth Service participants	627 servers in six community-based organisations	55 060 volunteers in the Public Welfare Assistance Programme; 20 000 volunteers in organised programmes; thousands of servers in informally organised socio-economic programmes ⁴

Note: No secondary data were available on the scope of service in Botswana.

While social and human development goals featured in the global study, programme goals were oriented more towards developing the skills, employability, knowledge, cultural understanding, self-esteem and the character of the servers (Moore et al., 2002). In sharp contrast, the five-country study highlighted the importance of achieving dual benefits to both servers and beneficiaries. This, however, depended on the nature and type of programme.

The form of service was also studied in relation to the formality and informality of the structure of the programmes. A distinction was made between formal and informal service, with formal service being more structured and requiring an intensive commitment of time (at least one week per month full time); and informally structured service being defined as localised, community-based, flexible in time commitment and responsive to local needs.

The data on Botswana suggest that there are two types of volunteering programmes: informally and formally organised programmes (Rankopo et al., 2006). The informal programmes are common and are informed by socio-cultural, religious and community values, with a limited reach. The formal programmes have a wider reach, may be informed by a combination of cultural, religious and community values, and tend to be more aligned with national development goals and needs.

A continuum of formal and informally organised volunteering activities may be discerned from the data. There was some collaboration between informal and formal programmes; thus a hybrid of the two forms was evident. The research on South Africa suggests that service programmes are largely voluntary and formally structured and organised. Informal programmes may have a comparative advantage over formal programmes in that they are locally responsive and emerged organically through community mobilisation efforts, with servers coming from the communities being served. However, where informal programmes collaborate with formal programmes, it is important to ensure that their comparative advantage is not compromised. As social development programmes modernise in a society, local informal initiatives may disappear over time. The challenge for service policy and programmes is to build on the strengths of local informal service activities without compromising their efficacy (Patel, 2003).

Distinguishing features of service

The social development approach to civic service is emerging as one of the defining features of service in the Southern African context. A conceptual framework developed by Patel (2003) to depict the salient features of civic service from a social development perspective informed the analysis of service initiatives. The analysis confirmed the distinguishing features of service with some modifications. Box 2 provides a conceptual framework for civic service from a social development perspective that could guide further research, policy development and an agenda for action in the SADC.

Box 2: Social development and civic service

Character of civic service	Social development
Vision	Pro-poor change; challenges unequal and distorted economic, political and social development nationally, regionally and globally; proactive involvement of governments in developmentally oriented civic service.
Goals	To promote social and economic development; to encourage participation of the socially excluded in development; to achieve tangible and intangible improvements in the quality of life of people.
Principles	Social and economic justice; empowerment; pro-poor strategies; collective action to promote public benefit, distributive values, social solidarity, reciprocity and active citizenship.
Programme type	Activities connected with human, social, economic, community and infrastructure development; building the assets of the poor; local economic development; promoting productive employment; strengthening social capital; building human capital; building democracy through promoting civic engagement and delivering social services, developing local institutions and good governance. Psychosocial support services; community care; peer and lay counselling; home-based care services; mutual aid; and community development and community education.
Access	Targeted interventions at the socially excluded, particularly the poor.
Auspices	Service is part of a pluralist system – strong role for the state in collaborative partnership with civil society, private sector, donors, development agencies. Government facilitates and supports service development through enabling policies. Civil society groups are significant drivers of civic service.
View of servers and beneficiaries	Servers and beneficiaries are active partners in social development; both are change agents. Benefits of service reach both servers and beneficiaries.
Local and global activities	Local, national, regional and global focus on human and social development; involvement of international and local agencies.

Source: Adapted from Patel (2003:96-97)

Implications for civic service policy

The philosophy of civic service is shaped by what a society believes a government's role and responsibility should be towards its citizens, and what the role and responsibility of citizens and civil society is in achieving development. Where service is conceptualised as part of national goals, governments are likely to promote service actively through social policies. However, none of the countries had specific formal social policies or legislation on service and volunteering. Instead, they were integrated into other social policies and national strategies such as those concerning social welfare/development, health, HIV/AIDS, orphans and vulnerable children, and rural development. In some countries, youth development policies also provided for service and volunteering. The country researchers were in agreement that a lack of policy was a barrier to the development of the field and that it limited the visibility of service, resulting in societal benefits not being acknowledged in economic and social development policy and planning. In poor countries where public financial resources are constrained, service is a form of social engagement in the society and draws on local human and social capital as key assets to achieve social development.

A significant number of respondents in the country studies expressed the concern that the service ethos is being eroded as governments and foreign donors have become more involved in service delivery. Where governments have not done this, there was nevertheless the expectation by the people that governments should provide social services and safety nets to meet people's needs. A tension is perceived to exist between increasing state responsibility for human needs, and retaining and promoting active citizen engagement in social development through service. A trade off is perceived to exist between these principles. Civic service policies and programmes that intend to achieve social development will need to find solutions that will reconcile these tensions.

From the above discussion, it is clear that service policy in the region appears to be underdeveloped. Where it exists, an integrative approach has been adopted by different countries where service policies are mainstreamed through existing sectoral policies. This approach facilitates the effective implementation of service programmes and may have a wider impact. The approach has its disadvantages. Firstly, there is a lack of overarching policy to guide the implementation of service. Inadequate policy co-ordination and a lack of sharing of knowledge and best practice to build service as a field of enquiry, and a strategy to achieve social development, is a further limitation.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that civic service and volunteering, in particular, is emerging as a viable social development intervention in the SADC region. This presents an opportunity for developing the service field with a development agenda that contributes to equitable social and economic development and active citizenship. The study also provided evidence of the extent of involvement of poor people in civic service, which is a significant asset, and may be an indicator of the level of social capital in a society. However, the benefits of service and the contribution of the voluntary sector to national social development in the SADC have not been determined.

A research agenda to promote service in the region needs to be developed. Some of the pointers for such an agenda include the need for a quantitative study to assess the size and scope of the service sector in the region. A cost benefit analysis of service programmes and their contribution to national economic and social development will go a long way in demonstrating the efficacy of service. There is also a need for an evaluation of the quality of service programmes and their impact. Research of this nature could inform future policy and programme development and could improve the case for “strong policy” (Sherraden, 2001) in the SADC. The profile of the servers who are mainly poor women and older persons presents a particular policy challenge. The appropriateness of the payment of financial incentives and other forms of non-monetary incentives needs to be debated.

Action research of this kind with a social change agenda could aid the setting of a service agenda in the SADC. Limited collaboration exists between the countries in the SADC, and a regional service network might be an effective vehicle to advance the field and to advocate for a service agenda. A positive relationship exists between the size of the voluntary sector and the extent of service activities. It has become apparent that where states have failed, service has flourished. Neo-liberal solutions that lead to the abrogation of state responsibility for human well-being cannot be supported, while a state-dominant approach that does not recognise the role of actors outside the state in achieving social development is similarly flawed. It is in this respect that the social development approach to civic service, which acknowledges the roles of the different parties in a collaborative institutional arrangement, provides a greater opportunity for the growth of the field in the region. The social development approach to civic service provides a well-developed set of ideas to inform service policy, and may yield positive benefits to society and return on social investment (Sherraden, 2001).

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Endnotes

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- ² Household survey (Pelser et al., 2004)
- ³ Everatt & Solanki (2005)
- ⁴ Ministry of Community Development & Social Services (2004)