

“We have to create demand for better governments”

Interview with Namhla Mniki-Mangaliso on empowering civil society in Africa

Ms Mniki-Mangaliso, could you give us an overview of the key purposes and activities of your organisation African Monitor?

African Monitor is an organisation that operates in Sub-Saharan Africa, and our essence is to build capacity for ordinary citizens to hold their governments accountable. One of the projects, the largest at the moment, is called Citizens Report. Here we basically

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build a movement of young people to hold governments accountable for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). So these young champions collect citizens-generated data, they use it to assess the extent to which the SDGs have been implemented and then they engage with local authorities as well as national authorities. We have just completed the first year of Citizens Report, and young champions across the countries have been meeting with ministers and members of parliaments to engage on SDG implementation. I think the programme is exciting mainly because it demonstrates that people on the ground, normal citizens, have a role to play in ensuring that the SDGs are implemented. And so we have seen young people being transformed from people who did not know much about the SDGs to becoming national champions of the SDGs, eg. by starting organisations around the SDGs. So this is a very exciting time in the life of African Monitor.

African Monitor has working relationships with many civil society organisations around the continent, including in places with weak democratic institutions. How

can civil society overcome the influence of change-resistant ruling elites?

Let me be frank in saying that the life of civil society is not easy, and in many spaces civil society is still immature. What this means is that even though there are a plethora of community initiatives and community-based organisations, most of those are informal and most of them are ill-resourced or un-resourced. Our focus with African Monitor and with our partners is to strengthen that civic voice. And so we work through platform systems to ensure that this happens.

“There is a groundswell of people, citizens across the African continent who want to engage.”

Let me make an example with the SDGs: We are part of the African Working Group on SDGs which is a regional platform that has brought together civil society organisations working in Africa to promote the SDGs and sustainable development. And through this platform, what we then set up were national SDG platforms. Hence organisations do not stand on their own anymore to engage governments but rather, through the network system, can strengthen each other and support each other. In spaces where democracy is not so strong, take South-Sudan as an example, we are working with our sister organisation there to try to strengthen their capacity. It is not the easiest task because sometimes these spaces are difficult to engage in, but I think what’s positive is that there is a groundswell of people, citizens across the African continent who want to engage. And so it is not that there is an absence of actors and agents. It is just that we need to find a way of being much more supportive in strengthening and building the capacities of these organisations.

“Our focus is to strengthen that civic voice.”

For me, I think the bottom line is that the SDGs are going to be impossible to implement unless communities can realise their agency and can find ways to hold governments accountable. I love this idea that we have to create demand for better governments. The way you create greater demand is to make sure that the people who vote have power. And the way you do that is to build capacity for civic agency, and that's what I think the solution is.

You have been part of the external reviewer team of the German sustainability strategy in 2017/18. Based on this experience and considering your activities in Africa, what could Western decision-makers or Western civil society learn from the African context?

“Spaces of power and elitism can be blind to injustice.”

Let me say one or two things about Germany and its position on sustainability and the international community first. What impressed me is the extent to which sustainability has become institutionalised in Germany, that it has become ordinary language, that there has been a sustainability strategy for over a decade, and that it is part of the sensibility of how institutions work here; I think that's exciting.

“What we can teach the world is to develop the humility and the eye to see injustice and inequality.”

One of the things that we started zooming in on is that Germany and countries like Germany in Europe, in the Western society, have always been assumed to be better off. So if you think about the Millennium Development Goals, it was basically a programme by the West for developing nations. But the SDGs are saying that there is a plethora of other things that similarly developed nations need to take care of. So a very good example, here in Germany, is the concern about the migration issue. How do you develop social cohesion? How do you develop the capacity to react to rising poverty? I think the value that I brought as an African – the value that I think Africa potentially brings – is that we have been dealing with issues of exclusion for so many years. So we could bring light to systems with which we are trying to integrate our societies better, to platforms and the institutional mechanisms that we have developed to make sure

that we have more integrated systems. Spaces of power and elitism can be blind to injustice. And I think if you are coming from the African context, because you have been exposed to injustice, you can see that immediately. Therefore, what we can teach the world is to develop the humility and the eye to see injustice and inequality, and the willingness and the political commitment to deal with it. So that injustice is no longer seen as something that is acceptable because not everybody can be rich, but rather to bring in a new understanding of what humanity should be like.

“In a world where Donald Trump is a President, it is important that you have powers that are willing to say ‘no, it's not okay to sow divisions in the world.’”

The other thing is about the special role and responsibility of economically advanced countries such as Germany. In the past that role was seen as ‘come, we'll help you fix it’ or ‘we'll fix it for you’. That role is changing. But it doesn't mean that the role is not there anymore. It just means that the way in which these countries lead now has to be inclusive, has to be about listening and understanding the other side, and then be willing to create the spaces where concrete action can take place. But the leadership has to be there. In a world where populism has become the thing, in a world where Donald Trump is a President, it is important that you have powers that are willing to say ‘no, it's not okay to discriminate, no it's not okay to lead with prejudice, no it's not okay to sow divisions in the world’. And to have countries like Germany to stand up and say ‘we want to create a better world, we want to create a sustainable world, and this is how we are going to do it and lead in that process.’

Namhla Mniki-Mangaliso

Namhla Mniki-Mangaliso is the Executive Director at African Monitor (AM), a continental organisation focussing on the fight against the exclusion of the disadvantaged and poor in Africa, the monitoring of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the battle against Illicit Financial Flows. She also serves as the Co-Chair of the Africa Civil Society Network (CSO). Mniki-Mangaliso was also a member of the International peer group advising the German government on its sustainability strategy.



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