

## **The role of civil society in ensuring good governance: Challenges facing public libraries in South Africa**

Albert Arko-Cobbah

The idea of civil society has become more prominent in political and developmental parlance over the past twenty years. This is mainly due to successive waves of democratisation, beginning from Latin America, the Central and Eastern European countries (CEE) and spreading across the developing world, including Africa. Political scientists and practitioners have come to the realization that it is not just state institutions and policy initiatives that essentially ensure a high standard of democratic governance but also the civil society.

Good governance, generally, encompasses a broad array of practices that maximise common good. Some of the attributes of good governance are democratic practices, rule of law, and respect for human rights. The Paper will give a cursory look at the various theoretical arguments as to what constitutes good governance and how civil society plays a role in ensuring its compliance.

Students of statecraft are, generally, in agreement that in order for a free society to survive, there is the need for the preservation of the society's records and the provision of free and open access to them to all its citizens. Moreover, it is incumbent upon society to ensure that its citizens have the resources and skills that will enable them to access this information so as to participate effectively in the art of governance. Libraries as preservers of the knowledge of society, therefore, become crucial in this connection. The library enjoys a symbiotic relationship with democracy and, therefore, good governance. It provides access to government information, thus aiding the public to monitor the work of public officials. The Paper is, therefore, based on the theory that information access empowers civil society in its drive to ensure quality governance, and the public library with its philosophy of unfettered access to recorded information and knowledge to all people, is better placed to provide the necessary tool to civil society to perform this function.

The tradition mission of public libraries to support the self-education of the citizenry in order to make them more effective in participating in democratic governance is under constant siege. There is more emphasis on recreation and marketing. Public libraries in South Africa, like those in other developing countries, have the additional problems of funding, staffing and inadequate facilities such as information communications technology that mar their efficacy in playing the expected role. The paper argues that there is the need for both government and civil society organisations to take a common stance in the art of good governance with public libraries playing a vital role in this regard.

Civil society is an important aspect of democratisation process because it provides a vital link between citizens and the state. It also provides an environment that can be used to enhance community cohesion and decision-making. Information is vital to civic participation and also encourages its development. When people get better informed, they are most likely to participate in policy discussions and communicate their ideas and concerns freely. The development of an informed citizenry is one of the basic functions of public libraries. A library freely opened to all, irrespective of age, profession, race or colour, and in which there is free access to any literature required fulfils this function.

Good governance includes sustainable development. Public libraries are, therefore, expected to contribute to its advancement by providing timely and accurate information on environmental protection and the promotion of the idea of sustainable development within the communities they serve. This expected role of public libraries appears to have been relegated to the background. The paper strives to bring this to the fore and offers suggestions that will enhance the public library's role in this aspect of governance.

One of the major challenges facing a number of African countries is how to promote social cohesion and combat social exclusion. Ethnic strife and social exclusions threaten the peace and orderly development in Africa. South Africa with its racial polarisation and fledging democracy is not excluded to this threat. One of the traditional functions of public libraries has been the creation of public space, a setting for debate and a place where people of diverse backgrounds can congregate as a community. Community requires social interaction, a genuine coming together of people in physical contact to exchange ideas and feelings. South African public libraries can take a cue from the developed democracies and pay attention to this aspect of librarianship for the sake of peace, good governance and orderly progress.