

# GRASSROOTS SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: A NEW NARRATIVE ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN AFRICA?

MOVIMIENTOS SOCIALES DE BASE:

¿UNA NUEVA NARRATIVA SOBRE  
LOS DERECHOS HUMANOS EN ÁFRICA?

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## Abstract

Recent geopolitical developments worldwide have led to a paradigm shift in both the context and strategies of doing human rights work in Africa. Grassroots social movements from Algeria to Zimbabwe are increasingly allowing citizens to take center stage and in some cases to circumvent traditional actors in the promotion and protection of human rights, both from the bottom up, and as a conversation space through which citizens realize their own power to make a difference. This article investigates the extent to which grassroots efforts –which are mostly intertwined with other issues such as governance, anti-corruption, and politics– could significantly resonate at the broadest possible level, shaping resilient futures and empowering communities to assert their rights. This article aims to shine new light on the interfacing and intersectionality of grassroots social movements and the human rights discourse in Africa as a potential new frontier for safeguarding and entrenchment of human rights.

**Keywords:** Africa; Vernacularization; Clicktivism; NGOization; Grassroots Social Activism.

## Resumen

Los recientes desarrollos geopolíticos en todo el mundo han llevado a un cambio de paradigma tanto en el contexto como en las estrategias para hacer que los derechos humanos funcionen en África. Los movimientos sociales de base desde Argelia hasta Zimbabwe están permitiendo cada vez más a los ciudadanos tomar el centro del escenario y, en algunos casos, eludir a los actores tradicionales en la promoción y protección de los derechos humanos, tanto de abajo hacia arriba, como un espacio de conversación a través del cual los ciudadanos se dan cuenta de su propio poder para hacer la diferencia. Este artículo investiga hasta qué punto los esfuerzos de base –que están en su mayoría entrelazados con otros temas como la gobernanza la anticorrupción y la política– podrían resonar significativamente en el nivel más amplio posible, configurando futuros resilientes y empoderando a las comunidades para hacer valer sus derechos. Este artículo tiene como objetivo arrojar nueva luz sobre la interfaz y la interseccionalidad de los movimientos sociales de base y el discurso de los derechos humanos en África como una posible nueva frontera para salvaguardar y afianzar los derechos humanos.

**Palabras clave:** África; Vernacularización; Clictivismo; ONG-ización; Activismo social de base.

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### 1. Introduction

**B**y way of introduction, it is important to highlight that Africa has been late to join the human rights bandwagon. To some of its former leaders, rights, especially civil and political, were viewed as a western construct with limited applicability. The path along which human rights initiatives evolved might be partly accountable for this situation<sup>2</sup>. In recent years, global economic and political power is perceived to be shifting, particularly the United States and Europe’s economic and political power appear to be in decline, which are the strongest forces behind human rights enforcement. Indeed, it can be argued further that this shift in geopolitics could lead to new human rights narratives in the African continent.

<sup>2</sup> FOOT, Rosemary, “*The Cold War and human rights*” in Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (eds), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Cambridge University Press 2010.

But first, it is important to point out that the perceived global power shift is only one of many trends that are shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and arguably may not be of primary importance when considering the future of human rights. In his analysis in *Global Trends and the Future of Human Rights Advocacy*, David Petrasek noted that other factors such as “trends in the areas of population growth, migration, education, poverty levels, women’s empowerment, global economic integration, urbanization, technological development and many more will all shape profoundly the future of human rights”<sup>3</sup>.

This article will critically evaluate the current human rights scholarship and practice in Africa to determine the future of human rights scholarship. Let it be made clear that there are five sub-regions in Africa, each one of them with different human rights experiences. As recently confirmed by the world’s most celebrated indices which measure the levels of human rights enjoyment, there have been cases of both progress and retrogression in Africa<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, this article will focus on the general trends of human rights and not impose a pattern. Rather, it allows a pattern to emerge from the few examples chosen because they represent the different historical, economic, and political aspects of contemporary Africa. It is also worth mentioning that although predictions of human rights are often fiercely contested, this has not discouraged scholars from coming up with a number of studies to present the likely scenarios that pose both opportunities and challenges for the protection of human rights<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the purpose of this article is to summarize trends identified

3 PETRASEK, David, “*Global Trends and the Future of Human Rights Advocacy*”, SUR – International Journal On Human Rights, v. 11, n. 20, Jun./Dec. Available at <<https://sur.conectas.org/en/global-trends-and-the-future-of-human-rights-advocacy/>>, accessed 16 March 2019.

4 Amnesty International, “State of the World’s Human Right Report 2018” (Amnesty International Ltd, 2018). <<https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/POL1067002018ENGLISH.PDF>> accessed 22 March 2019; Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2019 Democracy In Retreat” <<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019/democracy-in-retreat>> accessed 22 March 2019; Human Rights Watch, “World Report 2018” (Human Rights Watch, 2019) <[https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world\\_report\\_download/201801world\\_report\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world_report_download/201801world_report_web.pdf)> accessed 22 March 2019.

5 BURKE, Roland, Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.

in a range of studies, and draw out points that are likely to be of high interest to those considering the future of human rights on the African continent.

The overall structure of this article is divided into five sections beginning with and including this introduction. Next, this article gives a brief background of the history of human rights in Africa in the second section. The third section will then go on to discuss the emergence and role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Africa. The fourth section discusses the main ideas of the article which will focus on two main elements, namely the local promotion of human rights and the use of technology. Finally, the last section presents the implications of the findings of this article on future research and provides a number of conclusions.

## **2. A Brief History of Human Rights in Africa**

In Africa, as stated in the introduction, the idea of human rights is a comparatively recent phenomenon. For instance, the 1963 Charter establishing the Organization of African Unity (OAU) imposed no explicit obligation on Member States to further the protection of human rights<sup>6</sup>. The OAU's founding Charter only required Member States to have due regard for human rights as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in their international relations<sup>7</sup>. At that juncture, most members of the OAU prioritized socio-economic development, territorial integrity, and state sovereignty to human rights protection. As claimed by Ahmed El Obaid and Kwado Appiagyei Atua, the discussion of human rights in Africa must be grounded in its political and ideological history and, more importantly, in the continent's history of nationalism and anti-colonialism<sup>8</sup>.

The principal human rights instrument, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (also known as the Banjul Charter) was adopted by the OAU

<sup>6</sup> See in general MURRAY, Rachel, *Human Rights in Africa: From the OAU to the African Union*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> ACHPR, A Guide to The African Human Rights System, Pretoria University Law Press, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> AHMED EL OBAID and KWADO APPIAGYEI ATUA, "Human Rights in Africa A new Perspective on Linking the Past to the Present" (1996) 41 McGill LJ. 819.

Assembly in 1981<sup>9</sup>. Thus, between 1961 and 1979 African jurists, experts, and governments were preoccupied with the debate on how to develop a system for human rights protection in Africa<sup>10</sup>. Regrettably, during the long period it took for them to negotiate a human rights treaty, repression and corruption led to massive human rights violations under the gamut of ideologies such as, socialism, one-partyism and pan-Africanism. This may have contributed to the widely held image of Africa as a global hotspot for major human rights violations.

Today, in addition to the Banjul Charter, the African Union (AU), the successor to the earlier OAU, has adopted numerous treaties further elaborating human rights as well as a plethora of soft law declarations. It is important to note that law is meant to change behavior, and international treaties (including human rights conventions) are typically designed to change the behavior of the states that have signed and ratified them<sup>11</sup>. That said, there is a considerable amount of literature by socio-legal scholars that suggests that state commitment alone is not sufficient. For instance, one of the socio-legal studies reveals that “international human rights laws do not succeed by themselves but only when there is an active global civil society promoting those rights abroad and a vibrant national civil society advocating for those rights on the ground”<sup>12</sup>.

It is unsurprising that although by the early 1980s human rights in Africa was already a topic of discussion was an idea whose time has come, many governments did not play a major role in promoting them. This may have been due to the fact that the majority of African governments either did not have domestic human rights institutions in place or in those that had, the mechanisms were still nascent and evolving. Consequently, the human rights promotion and protection gap was filled in by international NGOs and their local branches<sup>13</sup>.

9 Entry into force: 21 October 1986.

10 B. OBINNA OKERE, “The Protection of Human Rights in Africa and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights: A Comparative Analysis with the European and American Systems”, *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (May, 1984), pp. 141, 144.

11 NEUMAYER, Eric, “Do International Human Rights Treaties Improve Respect for Human Rights?”, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2005, 49 (6), p. 925.

12 MEYERS, Stephen, “NGO-ization and Human Rights Law: The CRPD’s Civil Society Mandate”, MDPI, 2016.

13 SHIMAN, David, *Teaching Human Rights*, Center for Teaching International Relations Publications, U of Denver,

Since the 1990s, the non-profit sector in Africa has grown rapidly. For example, South Africa alone has an extensive and lively non-governmental sector which boasts roughly 100,000 registered NGOs and an estimated 50,000 unregistered ones<sup>14</sup>. The NGO sector is worth over \$1 trillion a year globally<sup>15</sup>. It employs millions of workers, not to mention countless volunteers<sup>16</sup>. According to statistics from 2006, NGOs spend about the same amount of money on development each year with the World Bank<sup>17</sup>. What is more, NGOs have become key actors not only in promoting rights but also democracy and economic development. Yet not everyone agrees they should extend their work to issues outside human rights, as this may be "a tall order for any actor to fulfil"<sup>18</sup>. As shall be seen below, the massive influx of NGOs in Africa has wide implications on the development of human rights.

### **3. NGOization and Human Rights in Africa**

NGOs are at the heart of our understanding of the human rights trajectory on the African continent. It is necessary here to clarify exactly what is meant by the term NGO.

"The term non-governmental or non-profit is normally used to cover the range of organizations which go to make up civil society. Such organizations are characterized, in general, by having as the purpose of their existence something other than financial profit. However, this leaves a huge multitude of reasons for existence and a wide variety of enterprises and activities. NGOs range from small pressure groups on, for example, specific environmental

1993, 6-7.

14 JANKELOWITZ, Lauren, "*Managing South African nonprofit organisations for sustainability*", Unpublished thesis University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2007.

15 HALL JONES, Peter, "The Rise and Rise of NGOs", Global Policy Forum, 2006, available at: <https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/176-general/31937.html>, accessed 23 March 2019.

16 *Ídem*.

17 *Ídem*.

18 DICKLITCH, Susan, *The Elusive Promise of NGOs in Africa. Lessons from Uganda*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1998, 98.

concerns or specific human rights violations, through educational charities, women's refuges, cultural associations, religious organizations, legal foundations, humanitarian assistance programs –and the list could continue– all the way to the huge international organizations with hundreds or even thousands of branches or members in different parts of the world”<sup>19</sup>.

Returning briefly to the *modus operandi* of NGOs, until the late 1980s, a specific model of transnational activism was consolidated within the human rights movement. This model established a division of labour in the movement whereby local NGOs worked to collect reports on human rights violations in their countries, while international NGOs sought to give them greater visibility and force on the global scene<sup>20</sup>. In a study, which illuminates the influence of NGOs on human rights, Claude E. Welch identified six principal strategies of NGOs, namely education, empowerment, enforcement, documentation, democratization, and development<sup>21</sup>.

Further, NGOs have used the medium of publicity to attract international attention, particularly the attention of member states of the United Nations that are expected to exert pressure on the rogue states to comply with human rights or face consequences<sup>22</sup>. Eric A. Posner puts it rather bluntly that the popular belief is that governments should promote the well-being of all people in their countries, and that in the cases of failure, other countries should intervene and replace governments that fail to comply with this duty<sup>23</sup>.

19 Council of Europe, “Manual for Human Rights Education with Young People”, available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/human-rights-activism-and-the-role-of-ngos>, accessed 08 July 2019.

20 CHILLIER, Gastón and BRANDÃO TIMO, Pétalla, “*The Global Human Rights Movement in the 21st Century*”, SUR, 2014, 20. Available at: <https://sur.conectas.org/en/the-global-human-rights-movement-in-the-21st-century/>, accessed 23 March 2019.

21 See in general WELCH, Claude E., *Protecting Human Rights In Africa: Strategies and Roles of Non-Governmental Organizations*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995.

22 CARISCH, Enrico , RICKARD-MARTIN Loraine and MEISTER, Shawna R. , *The Evolution of UN Sanctions: From a Tool of Warfare to a Tool of Peace, Security and Human Rights*, Springer, 2017.

23 POSNER, Eric A., *The Twilight of Human Rights Law*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

More recent attention has however focused on whether the aforementioned strategy of NGOs has been successful<sup>24</sup>. Factors that may have contributed to poor performance of NGOs have been studied under the NGOization theory within development studies, which offers a framework for analyzing the potential unintended consequences of donors<sup>25</sup>. The most succinct definition of NGOization has been offered by Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor who defined it as the professionalization and institutionalization of social actions by NGOs<sup>26</sup>. Choudry and Kapoor argued that NGOization has long been a hotly contested issue in grassroots social movements and communities of resistance<sup>27</sup>. In their conclusion, the struggles over knowledge and power are intrinsic to movements for social change, and as a result, alternatives arise from struggle, active engagement, reflection, and action<sup>28</sup>. The next section will discuss how grassroots social movement can articulate alternative ideas of human rights where the need for direct action has led them to by-pass traditional NGOs.

#### **4. The Rise of Grassroots Social Activism**

Regrettably, the field of human rights lacks a comprehensive and rigorous conceptualization of the role that civil society plays in human rights narratives<sup>29</sup>.

24 BUKOVSKÁ, Barbora, "*Perpetrating good: Unintended Consequences of International Human Rights Advocacy*", SUR, 2008, 5. Available at: <http://www.surjournal.org/eng/conteudos/pdf/9/bukovska.pdf>, accessed 23 March 2019; See also POSNER, Michael, "*Human Rights and Non-Governmental Organizations on the Eve of the Next Century*", Fordham Law Review, 1997, 66, 627.

25 CHOUDRY, Aziz and KAPOOR, Dip (eds), *NGOization: Complicity, Contradictions and Prospects*, Zed Books; New ed., 2013 ; CHAHIM, Dean and PRAKASH, Aseem, "*NGOization, Foreign Funding, and the Nicaraguan Civil Society*", Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 2014, 25, 487.

26 CHOUDRY, Aziz and KAPOOR, Dip (eds), *NGOization: Complicity, Contradictions and Prospects*, Zed Books, 2013.

27 *Ídem*.

28 CHOUDRY, Aziz, "*Global Justice? Contesting NGOization: Knowledge Politics and Containment in Antiglobalization Networks*" in CHOUDRY, Aziz and KAPOOR, Dip (eds), *Learning from the Ground Up*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 17, 32.

29 For example, in relation to democratisation, see DIAMOND, Larry, "*Toward Democratic Consolidation*", Journal

What is more, it has been reported that the dynamics, politics, and richness of knowledge production within social movements and activist contexts are often overlooked in scholarly literature, and sometimes even in the movements themselves<sup>30</sup>. This article will refer to a modest emerging body of critical literature on NGOs' implications in the professionalization of social change, and the present author's own activist engagement, to help illuminate the rise of grassroots social activism.

Whilst it is not the intention of this article to provide a detailed description of criticisms that have been presented against the NGO sector, a brief discussion is useful in order to have a clear understanding of the rise of grassroots social movements. Critics have argued that there are widespread fears that NGOs are increasingly taking on a corporate character, due to the requirements of funding<sup>31</sup>. Specifically, there are widely shared views that corporatization has caused NGOs to favor donors over the impoverished communities whom they are meant to be helping<sup>32</sup>. As a result, it is possible that NGOs lost the community trust as they were seen as only providing short-term, so-called *Band-Aid* solutions sustaining poverty at a systemic level<sup>33</sup>.

Augusta Dwyer's book *Broke but Unbroken* reveals how grassroots movements distinguish themselves from NGOs. She argues that NGOs typically work on one very tangible project, while grassroots social movement engages in long-term issues that can have a lasting impression<sup>34</sup>. For instance, grassroots social

of Democracy, 1994, 5, 4–17, and MERCER, Claire, "NGOs, Civil Society and Democratization: A Critical Review of the Literature", 2 Progress in Development Studies 5, 2002; with regard to development see HOWELL, Jude and PEARCE, Jenny, Civil Society and Development: A Critical Exploration, Lynne Rienner, 2002.

30 CHOUDRY, Aziz and KAPOOR, Dip (eds), Learning from the Ground Up, Op. Cit., 1.

31 See in general, VAN HUIJSTEE, Mariette et al., "Challenges for NGOs Partnering with Corporations: WWF Netherlands and the Environmental Defense Fund", Environmental Values, 2011, 20 (1), 43.

32 KUMAR, Pradeep, *Pushpa Sundar: Foreign Aid for Indian NGOs: Problem or Solution?*, VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 2012, volume 23, pages 837–839.

33 See in particular MARTLEW, Nick, *Band Aids and Beyond: Tackling Disasters in Ethiopia 25 Years After the Famine*, Oxfam International, 2009.

34 DWYER, Augusta, *Broke But Unbroken: Grassroots Social Movements and Their Radical Solutions to Poverty*, Fernwood Publishing, 2011.

movements are often formed as a result of one particular problem, but they do not, as Dwyer observed, simply desert a project once they have achieved their goals. Grassroots social movements continue to fight for others and this is what distinguishes grassroots social movements from NGOs<sup>35</sup>.

The present author recalls how at a local NGO expo passers-by were lamenting that NGO personnel were spending too much money and resources showcasing their work and on their administrative needs rather than the actual business of assisting people in need. These passers-by bemoaned the lack of “activists” who they said have now been replaced by “career civil society practitioners”. This may be quite a fitting critique of NGOs as it conforms to the common perception of elitism in the NGO sector. However, the central contention of this section is not to lay bare the limitations of NGOs as such. The primary aim of this section is to show how NGOs’ shortcomings may have accelerated the rise to a new form of grassroots social movement activism.

It will be too easy and misleading to attribute the rise of grassroots social activism to “institutionalized” NGOs. The emergence of grassroots social movement can also be understood from the malaise and failure of national politics and mobilization strategies by African governments. A long op-ed entitled *NGOs vs. Grassroots Movements: A False Dichotomy* warned that blame should not be directed “neither on the outside donors who do what they do, nor on the national organizations who may be supported by them”<sup>36</sup>. As one fervent defender of NGOs, the author cautioned about the over-simplified juxtaposition of pitting the presumed donor-driven globalized agendas of NGOs against the more homegrown national agenda of popular social movements<sup>37</sup>.

Hence in this article, the present author argues for a more nuanced view that is based on the shift in the global geopolitics which may have diminished the role of NGOs to a greater extent. To give an illustration, look at the case of the Chinese model of development combining political repression and

35 *Idem*.

36 AZZAM, Fateh, “*NGOs vs. Grassroots Movements: A False Dichotomy*” Al-Shabaka, 6 February, 2014. Available at: <https://al-shabaka.org/commentaries/ngos-vs-grassroots-movements-a-false-dichotomy/>, accessed 27 March 2019.

37 *Idem*.

economic liberalism, which has attracted numerous admirers in Africa. With this in mind, consider on the other hand, how the traditional champions of human rights –Europe and the United States– have floundered. For example, according to Human Rights Watch in 2017, the United States moved backward on human rights at home and abroad<sup>38</sup>. Similarly, “Europe has turned inward as it has struggled with a sovereign debt crisis, xenophobia towards its Muslim communities and disillusionment with Brussels”<sup>39</sup>.

An implication of this is the possibility that grassroots social movements have gained traction. Social movements that originate in the grassroots of society often contain the potential to change the narratives. A useful example would be the movements of the 1960s which reshaped politics and society in the United States, Western Europe, and beyond. It may be argued that their impact resonates even today and was what is now being witnessed across Africa. These new actors are acting in the same way a variety of earlier movements did by giving a voice to the interests of the poor and neglected (for example labor, farmer, populist, religious, and anti-slavery movements throughout the United States and other nations)<sup>40</sup>. As shall be seen below, although grassroots efforts in Africa may be intertwined with other issues, such as governance, anti-corruption, and politics, the effects resonate at the broadest possible level, shaping resilient futures and empowering communities to assert their rights.

#### **4.1 Senegal**

Senegal is widely held as one of Africa’s most stable democracies. In terms of civil and political rights, the government’s respect for civil liberties has improved over time, and the country is known for its relatively independent media and public freedom of expression. Thus, in 2011, there was a political uprising when former President Abdoulaye Wade attempted to amend the Senegal

38 Human Rights Watch, “Country Summary, United States”, 2017, 1.

39 POSNER, Eric, “The Case Against Human Rights”, The Guardian, 4 December 2014. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2014/dec/04/-sp-case-against-human-rights>, accessed 29 March 2019.

40 VAN TIL, Jon, HEGYESI, Gabor and ESCHWEILER, Jennifer, “Grassroots Social Movements and the Shaping of History” in CNAAN, Ram and MILOFSKY, Carl (eds) Handbook of Community Movements and Local Organizations, Springer, 2008.

Constitution and abolish term limits against the political will of the majority. Two grassroots social movements, Y'en a Marre ("Enough-is-Enough") and Movement 23 ("June 23 Movement"), played a critical role in preventing former President Abdoulaye Wade's attempt to amend the constitutional provision on term limits and hang on to power. These grassroots social movements acted without the backing of the long-established, and once extremely important, Senegalese human rights organizations to defend their civil and political rights. NGOs were rendered virtually irrelevant, as they were not always present on the streets, and were not consistently able to use the moment to give their causes new visibility.<sup>41</sup>.

#### **4.2 Burkina Faso**

There is robust academic evidence that shaming can have a positive impact on the human rights situation in targeted states<sup>42</sup>. However, research further points out that the success of shaming can largely depend on international actors as an important remedy against deadlock when the space for domestic opposition is not conducive<sup>43</sup>. With this in mind, a look may be had at Burkina Faso, a small country with a tiny population and internal politics which most foreign correspondents tend to find somewhat pedestrian. Unsurprisingly, it receives only little attention, despite its poor socioeconomic rights record that made it one of the least developed countries in Africa and its citizens desperately poor. In 2014, a grassroots movement mobilised rapidly and powerfully against the long-time Burkina Faso president, Blaise Compaoré. One of them, a social movement called Balai Citoyen (the Citizen's Broom), proved to be especially

41 NADER, Lucia and AIDOO, Akwasi, "*Africa's social movements present opportunities, not threats, for rights groups*", Open Global Rights, 2015. Available at: <https://www.openglobalrights.org/africas-social-movements-present-opportunities-not-threats-for-rights-groups/>, accessed 1 May 2019.

42 KINZELBACH, Katrin and LEHMANN, Julian, "*Can Shaming Promote Human Rights? Publicity in Human Rights Foreign Policy*", A Review and Discussion Paper, European Liberal Forum, Available at: [https://www.gppi.net/media/Kinzelbach\\_Lehmann\\_2015\\_Can\\_Shaming\\_Promote\\_Human\\_Rights.pdf](https://www.gppi.net/media/Kinzelbach_Lehmann_2015_Can_Shaming_Promote_Human_Rights.pdf), accessed 2 May 2019.

43 KINZELBACH, Katrin and LEHMANN, Julian, "*Can Shaming Promote Human Rights? Publicity in Human Rights Foreign Policy*", A Review and Discussion Paper, European Liberal Forum. Available at: [https://www.gppi.net/media/Kinzelbach\\_Lehmann\\_2015\\_Can\\_Shaming\\_Promote\\_Human\\_Rights.pdf](https://www.gppi.net/media/Kinzelbach_Lehmann_2015_Can_Shaming_Promote_Human_Rights.pdf), accessed 2 May 2019.

instrumental using the symbol of a broom to convey the idea of sweeping away the corrupt presidential clan<sup>44</sup>. Most traditional local human rights NGOs were taken completely by surprise. The experiences from Burkina Faso illustrate how an immediate threat of deteriorating political conditions can unite different actors against a repressive regime<sup>45</sup>. Further, despite the presence of opposition parties and civic activists who often serve as watchdogs against the actions of the government, mobilization remains crucial when the political landscape is about to deteriorate or become even more repressive<sup>46</sup>.

#### 4.3 Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe's gross human rights violations are widely documented, including attempts of military intervention by the United Kingdom<sup>47</sup>. However, after years of human rights documentation and litigation by NGOs, which has largely failed to secure immediate human rights protection, in April of 2016 thousands of protestors took to the streets of the capital, Harare, demanding the resignation of Robert Mugabe as president, accusing him of political misrule and economic mismanagement. Zimbabweans protested against government repression, poor public services, high unemployment, widespread corruption, and delays in civil servants receiving their salaries. A national strike, named "stay-away day", began on the 6<sup>th</sup> of July and subsequent protests took place across the country and diaspora. This social movement was founded overnight through a Facebook video by a lesser known preacher which he called "ThisFlag", creating a campaign that went viral. Although the campaign did not remove Mugabe at that time, in November of 2017 thousands of Zimbabweans took to the streets alongside

44 WIENKOOP, Nina-Kathrin and BERTRAND, Eloïse, "*Popular Resistance to Authoritarian Consolidation in Burkina Faso*", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 16 May 2018. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/16/popular-resistance-to-authoritarian-consolidation-in-burkina-faso-pub-76363>, accessed 2 May 2019.

45 Idem.

46 Idem.

47 SMITH, David, "*Tony Blair Plotted Military Intervention in Zimbabwe, Claims Thabo Mbeki*", The Guardian, 27 November 2013. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/27/tony-blair-military-intervention-zimbabwe-claim>, accessed 4 May 2019.

the army and forced Mugabe to resign. While Zimbabwe's grassroots social movement has not solved all the country's human rights challenges, it remains a tangible reminder that populations can demand human rights when diverse groups in society pull together to create or use suitable conditions for change.

The above case studies demonstrate how with all the geo-political changes occurring at the beginning of this century, some international actions and grassroots social movements actors have emerged as a viable alternative to NGOs. There are two important issues emerging from the above case studies, namely the need for the transition of human rights to meet the local conditions and the significant role played by social media which has not only allowed a broader majority to disseminate cases of human rights, but also to change the human rights narratives in Africa. These two issues are discussed below.

## **5. Vernacularization**

So far this article has incidentally referred to how social groups have mushroomed to satisfy the need to make human rights more locally relevant, particularly in the context of changing the geopolitical environment. This section will discuss in detail how human rights can be made more locally relevant by interpreting existing global norms in the light of needs identified by community organizations. Further, it will discuss the efforts by grassroots social movements to interpret human rights on a local level through the process of vernacularization.

The concept of vernacularization was developed by the political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson to explain the process of the migration done by European states from the original Latin language to languages based on the Latin alphabet (which led to a ground for, and justification of, nationalist sentiments among the citizen of those European countries)<sup>48</sup>. There has been an increase in usage of the concept by human rights scholars to refer to a process of appropriation and local adoption of human rights. To put it in other words, vernacularization describes how human rights can take on some

48 ANDERSON, Benedict, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, Revised edition, Verso, 2006.

of the ideological and social attributes of a place, but also retain some of their original formulation<sup>49</sup>. The concept of vernacularization is used in the context of the present article as the process in which human rights are extracted from the universal setting to make them meaningful and fitting in the local social and cultural setting.

It is important to note from the onset that, by arguing in favor of the localization/vernacularization<sup>50</sup> of human rights, this article does not intend to dismiss the validity of the UDHR or other major human rights conventions as a catalogue of universal human rights norms. That point has been subject to intense debate<sup>51</sup>, which is still open<sup>52</sup>.

Having said that, despite a growing body of literature on regional interpretations of human rights in other parts of the world<sup>53</sup>, little research has been conducted on human rights discourse in Africa, where the study of human rights remains rooted in law and largely divorced from the social practice of human rights as performed by civil society groups<sup>54</sup>. Therefore, it is possible that despite the term “human rights” being increasingly popular language of civil society advocacy internationally, it is also possible that this “common language” is being

49 MERRY, Sally Engle and LEVITT, Peggy, *“The Vernacularization of Women’s Human Rights”* In S. Hopgood, J. Snyder, & L. Vinjamuri (Eds.), *Human Rights Futures* (pp. 213–236). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 219.

50 Note in this section the terms localization/vernacularization are used interchangeably. Moreover, local in this sense refers to all the normative orders below the global one such as regional, subregional, and national.

51 For arguments on cultural relativism of human rights, see in general DONNELLY, Jack *“Human Rights and Human Dignity: An Analytic Critique of Non-Western Conceptions of Human Rights”*, *The American Political Science Review*, 1982, 76, 303; CERNA, Christina M., *“Universality of Human Rights and Cultural Diversity: Implementation of Human Rights in Different Socio-Cultural Contexts”*, *16 Human Rights Quarterly*, 1994, 740.

52 DE FEYTER, Koen *“Localizing Human Rights”*, Institute of Development Policy and Management Discussion Paper 2006, 2. Available at: <http://www.ua.ac.be/objs/00152976.pdf>, accessed 22 March 2019.

53 See WIESSALA, George, *Re-Orienting the Fundamentals: Human Rights and New Connections in EU-Asia Relations*, First Edition, Routledge, 2006; CESARINI, Paola and HERTEL, Shareen *“Interdisciplinary Approaches to Human Rights Scholarship in Latin America”*, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 2005, 37, 793.

54 VILJOEN, Frans (ed), *International Human Rights Law in Africa*, 2nd Edition, Oxford University Press, 2012.

used to reflect distinct concepts drawing on local perspectives and traditions<sup>55</sup>.

Consequently, some African human rights scholars and practitioners are now seeking answers on the role indigenous concepts play in assimilating and shaping human rights. Questions have been raised on the exact relationship between African customs, for example: what is the relationship between *ubuntu* –a concept of reciprocal humanity, and human rights, a common international language of advocacy and accountability<sup>56</sup>? These questions are explored below, with reference to Botswana, a country where rights are often depicted as foreign and where the local concept of *botho* (also widely known as *ubuntu*) has deep social and cultural resonance.

As mentioned earlier, despite ongoing debates about whether it is possible to have regional or culturally located conceptions of human rights<sup>57</sup>, significant intra-continental variation, and high levels of ratification of international human rights treaties, there are indications of broad but distinct African approaches to human rights. For instance, in comparison with the dominant international discourse highlighting individual civil and political rights, African human rights documents and discourse give greater prominence to reciprocity, collective rights, and socioeconomic rights<sup>58</sup>.

### 5.1 Botswana

In many African societies, human rights are observed in relation to the community rather than the individual. Contrary to domestic government and media, human rights activists in Botswana increasingly view *botho* as a local translation of human rights. In doing so, they are tentatively building a culturally specific understanding of human rights including international components such as universality, but also highlighting culturally important traits such as

55 KENYON, Kristi Heather, "*Localizing the Global/Globalizing the Local: Reconciling Botho and Human Rights in Botswana*" in PRUCE, Joel (ed), *The Social Practice of Human Rights*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

56 *Ibidem*, p 101.

57 VILJOEN, Frans (ed), *International Human Rights Law in Africa*, 2nd Edition, Oxford University Press, 2012.

58 KENYON, Kristi Heather, "*Localizing the Global/Globalizing the Local: Reconciling Botho and Human Rights in Botswana*"..., Op. Cit.

reciprocity<sup>59</sup>. Botswana is a classic example of how indigenous concepts can play a role in assimilating and shaping human rights narratives. Semantically speaking, the concept of *botho* can make human rights messages more comprehensible and palatable in the domestic context.

By using this concept, grassroots social movements are increasingly able to promote human rights in light of local knowledge and situated in a social and cultural context rather than as a foreign concept. The example of Botswana illustrates what Kristi Heather Kenyon forcefully argued, that “human rights are no longer, if indeed they ever were, ‘owned’ by lawyers, the UN, or the global north. Instead they are reinterpreted and reinvented in different settings, existing as a multitude of hybrids drawing on both global and local points of origin”<sup>60</sup>.

## 6. Clicktivism

The English Oxford dictionary defines the term as “the practice of supporting a political or social cause via the Internet by means such as social media or online petitions, typically characterized as involving little effort or commitment”<sup>61</sup>. Clicktivism involves non-activists taking action –often in spheres traditionally engaged only by activists or professionals (governments, NGOs, international institutions, etc.). Put in other words, clicktivism “is an encroachment of politics and civics into people’s everyday worlds which tend to be dominated by mundane concerns of day-to-day existence or dominated by the consumerism transmitted through traditional media”<sup>62</sup>. Clicktivism has also made inroads into the area of the professionalized human rights advocacy, changing its contours as the examples below illustrate<sup>63</sup>.

59 Ibidem, 118.

60 English Oxford Dictionary online <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/clicktivism>, accessed 22 February 2019.

61 Clicktivist, “Clicktivism breakdown, What Kony 2012 Says about Clicktivism” (Clicktivist, Mar 7 2012) <http://www.clicktivist.org/posts/2015/11/clicktivism-breakdown-what-kony-2012-says-about-clicktivism>, accessed 22 March 2019.

62 Ídem.

63 DRUMBL, Mark A., “*Child Soldiers and Clicktivism: Justice, Myths, and Prevention*”, Journal of Human

## 6.1 Uganda

The *Kony 2012* campaign, conducted under the auspices of an American advocacy group called Invisible Children, brought to the international platform atrocities allegedly committed by the so-called Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Through the use of social media and a short documentary, the campaign highlighted the plights of child soldiers to the international fora and raised approximately \$16 million in support of Ugandan communities and raised awareness of the LRA's atrocities by reaching an estimated 100 million people. Invisible Children influenced the meeting of a global summit discussing the LRA and the occurrence of a Washington DC, rally attracted thousands of *Kony 2012* supporters, including world leaders and influential activists. The *Kony 2012* campaign stridently encourages the LRA's leader, Joseph Kony's, capture and transfer to the International Criminal Court (ICC) to face an array of charges, including the war crime of unlawful recruitment, enlistment, or active use in hostilities of children under the age of fifteen<sup>64</sup>.

## 6.2 Nigeria

Bring Back Our Girls (BBOG) is a unique example: initially meant to be a one-day march, it has now entered its fifth year. The campaign was made in response to the kidnapping of 276 Nigerian school girls from a secondary school by a terrorist group known as Boko Haram. Outraged by the violation of human rights and subsequent lack of western media coverage, the hashtag #bringbackourgirls was retweeted 4 million times by ordinary citizens. The BBOG made significant headway in terms of social awareness and government interaction. As a result, the United States and British government pledged to send a team, including military personnel, intelligence, and hostage negotiators, to assist the Nigerian government. BBOG also promoted various feminist qualities across Nigeria; the public empowerment of women's rights activists by the campaigns has drawn the attention needed to urge Nigeria to adopt national laws

Rights Practice, Volume 4, 2012, p. 481, 482.

64 NAGARAJAN, Chitra, "*#Bringbackourgirls hasn't brought back Chibok's girls, but it has changed Nigeria's politics*", The Guardian (14 April 2015). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/14/nigeria-women-activists-boko-haram>, accessed 22 March 2019.

against violence against women<sup>65</sup>. The BBOG explicitly distinguishes itself from NGOs in that it does not accept funding from either foreign or local donors. The leadership believes that funding may shift BBOG's focus from pressurizing government and they also fear that once they start accepting private funding, they could be seen as partisan<sup>66</sup>.

### 6.3 Cameroon

The ongoing monitoring of human rights violations in Cameroon using open source investigation methodologies and digital crowdsourcing also illustrate how ordinary people can use technology in the promotion and protection of human rights. Using their phone cameras, volunteers have been able to expose human rights abuses in Cameroon. Amnesty International provided assistance by carrying out forensic analysis of the videos, which helped to expose human rights abuses by the security forces, a fact that has been denied by the government. The use of mobile phones by citizens made it not only possible for NGOs to use meticulous open source investigation methodologies to corroborate by testimonies from the ground. For instance, NGOs such as Amnesty international relied on various sources of evidence such as geolocation of the video, expert analysis of the uniforms and weapons used, and linguistic and other contextual clues in the speech that gave away the identities and ranks of the soldiers. The results were then utilized to expose the violations as well using the new information to counter the official propaganda. In the case of Cameroon, ordinary citizens using basic technology have managed to provide irrefutable evidence showing Cameroonian security forces committing human rights atrocities, including extra judicial execution of civilians<sup>67</sup>.

65 OJEBODE, Ayo et al, "How Bring Back Our Girls went from hashtag to social movement, while rejecting funding from donors" (Oxfam Blogs, 10 October 2018) <https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/how-bring-back-our-girls-went-from-hashtag-to-social-movement-while-rejecting-funding-from-donors/>, accessed 22 March 2019.

66 MARIN, Milena, "Beyond Clicktivism: Using Tech To Expose Human Rights Violations". <https://imaginebelfast.com/events/beyond-clicktivism/>, accessed 22 March 2019.

67 ADHIKARI, Anindita et al, "Grassroots Reform in the Global South Research and Innovation" Grants Working Papers Series, (21 September 2017) [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/Grassroots\\_Reform\\_in\\_the\\_Global\\_South\\_-\\_Research\\_and\\_Innovation\\_Grants\\_Working\\_Papers\\_Series.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/Grassroots_Reform_in_the_Global_South_-_Research_and_Innovation_Grants_Working_Papers_Series.pdf),

## 7. Way forward

The case studies above show that technology can strengthen grassroots social movements and allow those citizens outside the formal human rights industry to compete for space to shape and determine human rights narratives. Yet, as noted in the introduction, identifying trends does not necessarily translate into predicting a definitive outcome. The emerging practice in this article might have either beneficial or detrimental consequences for human rights, and most likely will be a combination of both.

In closing however, it is noteworthy that NGOs and grassroots social movements often have similar objectives at their core. They are both seeking to end poverty, empower individuals, address human rights challenges, and reduce inequalities. As argued earlier, a growing donor-dependency complex among NGOs, as well as their short-term, project-oriented, and top-down nature, the agenda and political outlook of many NGOs are necessarily affected and even subjugated, and their links to the community are weakened. Is it time for civil society to move away from “NGOization” towards some idealized form of mobilized movement committed to the primary needs of the grassroots?

The answer lies in a collaboration between NGOs and grassroots social movements. There is a clear need for longer-term efforts to: bring new actors into human rights movements, take on the issues that communities perceive as priorities, and emphasize action at the local level. The co-existence of NGOs alongside grassroots social movements can create a diverse civil society which can effectively promote human rights NGOs to work in solidarity with grassroots and social movements. For instance, NGOs could act as facilitators, advocates, and educators of existing movements founded by impoverished communities. There is well-documented evidence of local and international NGO partnerships. This suggests that the two can work as complements to one another rather than supplements.

Donors play a central role in ensuring that local needs are addressed by investing in the work of locally-rooted organisations and trusting community leaders to set their own agenda. Too often these agendas have been set by

human rights funders rather than local communities. It is therefore a welcome development that certain development partners are working on finding ways to fund grassroots movements directly<sup>68</sup>.

Turning to the use of technology, it is clear that grassroots activism has been enhanced through the use of modern technology. It is to be stressed that clicktivist campaigns are gaining ground within society, as evidenced for instance by the Ugandan *Kony 2012* and the Nigerian BBOG case studies above. Succinctly, both examples illustrate the effectiveness of clicktivism; the highly disseminative power which has allowed widespread participation in international spheres, resulting in the increased awareness of social issues. Through innovative use of both participatory and symbolic actions, clicktivism has made a significant impact on the human rights impact in African social systems and has facilitated measurable social change.

That said, clicktivism cannot replace the personal connection cultivated through traditional protesting techniques. Although the majority of young people in Africa are associating with online campaigns in order to support human rights, online action is often limited only to an international audience. What clicktivism truly represents is the next tool for international political evolution; one which in its ubiquitous and mobilizing power can strengthen human rights campaigns not only in Africa but globally<sup>69</sup>. As an estimated half a billion Africans are connected online, international organizations should utilize this opportunity<sup>70</sup>.

There is no denying the fact that the cultural setting of an environment to a large extent influences the ways in which human rights are promoted and protected. There is a strong need to localize global human rights as a target, rather than as a description of current practice, that is to say a means of resistance to

68 MUIR, Jesse Max, "The Effectiveness of Clicktivism in Grassroots Political Campaigns". <https://jessemuir.wordpress.com/2015/09/22/the-effectiveness-of-clicktivism-in-grassroots-political-campaigns/>, accessed 20 May 2019.

69 Internet World Stats, "Internet Usage and Population Statistics". <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm>, accessed 22 May 2019.

70 BAXI, Upendra, *The Future of Human Rights*, Oxford University Press, 2002, 1; DE FEYTER, Koen 'Localizing Human Rights Institute of Development Policy and Management", Discussion Paper 2006, 2 <http://www.ua.ac.be/objs/00152976.pdf>, accessed 22 March 2019.

abusive power<sup>71</sup>. As Koen De Feyter argues in his seminal article, there is a need for more popular participation in human rights, particularly at a time when decisions on economic globalization are taken at levels remote from the people affected by them .

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71 Idem.

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