



An Interview with Dr. Bhekinkosi Moyo, Board Chair of the Association for Research on Civil Society in Africa (AROCSA).

How did you become involved with AROCSA and what led to the acceptance of your current role as board chairman?

So, let me start by saying that I knew of AROCSA in the early beginnings because Shariq – who was the director of ARNOVA - and I used to meet at various ISTR conferences and he did mention to me early on that ARNOVA was thinking of expanding to places like Asia and Africa and that he would be travelling across Africa just to do some consultations.

I'm trying to think which year it was; maybe around 2012, 2013 thereabout. Or 2014. I can't remember exactly. He did actually make a trip down to Africa. And I was one of the people that he managed to meet among others, just trying to figure out the state of civil society, what are the needs and so on and so forth. At the same time, Innocent Chukwuma from the Ford Foundation, was also battling with the idea of trying to assist leaders of civil society organisations – in particular founders of civil society organisations – who were struggling to let go of what they had set up, whether 15, 18, 20 years back. And so the issue of succession and transition was kind of on his mind at that time. He had come up with this idea that maybe the Ford Foundation should support a program that would assist in helping founding directors and founders to transition to the next level. In the main, these were transitioning mainly to becoming professors of practice, among others. And so he was looking for a vehicle to actually do that. Shariq was also doing the rounds in Africa trying to expand AROCSA. That became almost like the meeting of minds for both of them. The agreement was that ARNOVA would kind of host AROCSA for a couple of years and the fellowship that Innocent was thinking about would then be managed by ARNOVA. And so I'm assuming at that point they also were thinking about how to operationalise those ideas.

So AROCSA, I think then the founding board was made up of Esi and some professors from Nigeria including Tade - for purposes of registration but also actually for purposes of beginning to roll out programs – and one of their programs was the conferences. And I happened to be invited to attend in Johannesburg. At that conference I met with Innocent, Shariq, and Nicolette from the Ford Foundation. I was at the height of my own transition from the Southern African Trust moving to setting up the centre at Wits. And they then approached me and said 'you know there's this fellowship program, it's the first of its kind and we think that you are a perfect candidate for the fellowship.' So they encouraged me to apply, and at the same time they asked me if I could join the AROCSA board and help them using my own experience in civil society, my knowledge of pan African institutions among others and help them really to just build up and see what could emerge out of that.

So, this was in 2017, I think, around June, July. So I did agree. I applied and I agreed that even if I didn't get the fellowship I'd join the board. And I got the fellowship but based on my own

transition my board refused for me to go in January of 2018. I ended up going on the second cohort in September, 2018. Once I had left the Southern Africa Trust, I attended the first board meeting of AROCSA in Michigan in November, 2017. And that's where the processes were being developed, the strategy was being developed. We were trying to recruit a new director then. And I think it was at that meeting that I was then asked to be the chair of the board.

How would you characterize the board's role at AROCSA?

Boards differ from one sector to another and even within civil society we have different kinds of boards. You have boards that are elected and you have boards that are selected through a recruitment process. And you have boards that are hands on and boards that are very strategic. And depending on the type of organization and the stage of its growth, you can actually have the board move from one form to the other. So when it comes to AROCSA, the AROCSA board is currently nominated and selected. However, if we were to go strictly with the idea of an association, then our board would have to be elected not selected. But currently it's nominated and selected simply because we haven't the structures in place to allow for AGMs among others so that members could select their board members. So, in the long run if the strategies moves us along the lines of an association with members and those members have got voting rights, then our board will probably be elected. So that was the first point I wanted to make so that we are clear about the roles that are currently played.

And then the second part is that because AROCSA was just an idea, that is an initiative that is to be hosted by another body, and there wasn't much staff in place, the board had to become very much hands on. So you'll find that a number of board members play very active roles in the day to day stuff of AROCSA. Things might change now because there's a secretariat in place but before that, a lot was really done by board members. So we were a hands-on board. And that's normal in the beginning of every institution to have a board play hands on. But over time we would advise and it is expected that those roles would start shifting, such that the day to day hands on at the level of management in the institution and the board plays a strategic and oversight role which is really the fiduciary role of a board. So they set policy, they make sure that things are done right, and they make sure that they exercise the final oversight of an institution. At this stage, the board is currently doing both, which is not a good thing because when things go wrong you can't really separate the person who is monitoring and the person who is being monitored.

So, yes, we are at the stage where we are operational, moving towards separation of function between the board and management.

What do you do for/with the organization in addition to board meetings? What about other board members?

So there are two levels to respond to this question. One is at an individual level as a board member and chairperson. The other is from the perspective of the full board.

So as the chairperson my role is to run the board. So that's my role. It's basically to make sure that the board is functional, it's to make sure that the board is developed, it's to make sure that we meet our compliance requirements when it comes to statutory requirements around how many meetings we should have in a year. And if need be make sure that the board is accessed and properly developed. So having board development meetings and sessions. So that's part of my role as the chair, to run the board. But I also have the responsibility on signing on most of the institutional documentation that does not sit at the level of management. I also have the responsibility on behalf of the board to manage management. So that's my role as the chair of the board.

The ED of AROCSA reports directly to the chair of the board. I don't do that in my individual capacity of course but I do it in terms of delegated by the functions of the role of the chairperson of the board. So whatever decision I take it is expected that I would have consulted with the other board members and whatever direction I take it is assumed that the board would have consulted and I would have their blessing in saying we're doing this in this way or that way. And I think in addition, as an individual board member, I also play roles that kind of dig from my own expertise. So if it's issues of assisting with editorial of papers – so currently I'm sitting on the papers that were written by fellows in the last cohort which I am finalising for publication. But that's not because I am a board member that's because of my expertise in the field that the fellows were focusing on. But also in terms of the network that I have developed, I have that opportunity to assist the organisation in terms of creating linkages, making introductions.

But also when it comes to issues that have to do with relationship building especially with our donors among others. That's an area that I play some roles in, including our relationship with ARNOVA, who is currently our fiscal sponsor for the fourth grant. So that's me as Bheki and the chair of the board.

But the board as a whole, I know, in addition to attending board meetings, the board is really supposed to utilise its skills for the benefit of the organisation. In the board you have lawyers, you have researchers, you have administrators among others. When we're designing programs

AROCSA, we need to make sure that we use those skills for the maximum benefit for the institution. But also they come along with very serious networks and various serious institutions that are backing them up. So when thinking about events, thinking about partnerships, the board is your first point of call in terms of getting some guidance on what to do. So that's the most important thing.

And then the board as you know is the custodian of the strategy of the institution. So the board has to develop the strategy working jointly with management. And then the board will then delegate the execution of the strategy to the management of AROCSA. And then from that point onwards the board has to monitor the implementation and execution of the strategy and so in the annuals, in the tally meetings, in the reports that are produced, the board has to make sure they play a role in terms of just making sure that the strategy is on point.

But there are issues that have to do with managing risk, that's the role of the board as well. So the board has to manage risks. And risk can stretch from IT all the way to finances and HR among others. And so as we grow as a board we definitely need to have committees and one of the committees will have to focus on risk audit and potentially budgets among others. That is also the function of the board, to sign on audits. Firstly, to recruit the auditors and also to sign on audit reports that are produced every year. You could also utilise your board for purposes of opening up new relationships with donors and funders especially them helping you to make the ask and potentially to just introduce you to doors that you ordinarily could not open on your own. So there are a number of things that the board really needs to do but I think in the main, those are the ones that I would emphasise in a call like this.

What would you say is the underlying philosophy driving AROCSA, and how should that translate into its corporate goals and objectives?

So, I mean, this one is a bit difficult. But if I look at what has happened so far until today, I would see AROCSA lead, or rather, anchoring its work and processes including its mission and vision on an Africa centred narrative that seeks to improve, I'd say, the state of civil society in Africa through research, policy, and to some extent teaching. So, it is really about a capacitated civil society in bringing to a level where it uses evidence based policies to advocate for anything that would help champion its cause. So, there's an element of an Africa centred narrative and approaches but there's also an element of recognising that there's something valuable that you get when you bridge civil society and academia or civil society and research especially for policy development, influence, and implementation.

And how that then kind of translates in the corporate goals and objectives I think is really about developing objectives and goals and activities that promote – first and foremost – an African based institution or association that seeks to strengthen civil society in Africa. And I think that when you look at the fellowship program, you look at perhaps what is coming up now on the PhD workshops and the PhD fellowships, and to some extent some of the conferences that have been put in place, the whole idea of an Africa based, Africa centred association comes out very, very clearly.

I think the second is also the idea that even though we were first located as a project of ARNOVA, we are now engaged in a long process of delinking from ARNOVA to be a fully blown, well governed, registered African institution. And then the third element of it is basically the whole idea of producing a different cadre of leaders in civil society that is influenced by both academia and practice. And so these are the people that are normally called pracademics.

So you're not producing a full-blown academic, neither are you producing a full-blown practitioner. But you're producing people that kind of walk that middle way. And that is probably the future because if you have people who are just based on theory, they lack then the other dimension of practice and if you have people based on practice then they lack the other dimension of theory and so you need that calibre of leadership that can understand both worlds and that would set them apart from the rest of the other kind of leaders in the sector or elsewhere. So, I see that as probably the closest I can respond to this question at this point in time.

What sets AROCSA apart from similar organizations in Africa?

So I think we do have a couple of institutions that might look like they're closer to AROCSA but actually we don't have one at this point. If we do, they are specific in probably one region or one sector. So let me take for example WACSI in West Africa, the West Africa Civil Society Institute. Their work is really at the interface of capacitating civil society and its leaders but that's focusing on West Africa so that's number one. And number two as much as they try to do research and do some policy work, they don't have a strong academic linkage. And that's what AROCSA wants to do. AROCSA wants to do everything, strongly with academic institutions and associations. So I think that standard will set AROCSA apart.

If you look at CODESRIA which is strong from an academic point of view, it does have a bit of civil society in there but it is not set up to basically be at the middle of civil society and academia. It's a social science research council. It might have something to do with civil society but that's not its

mission. I'm trying to think of other civil society networks across the continent. You have CIVICUS. CIVICUS is basically a movement. It's basically a membership based movement whose role is to just look at civil society and advocate for an enabling environment across the continent. So, having a group that is dedicated to producing academics is something unique. We don't have one like that currently in the continent so that's what sets AROCSA apart. And if AROCSA were to work very hard to try to actually define that identity and set itself apart, this would be one of the unique identifiers of AROCSA. So we do have similar institutions but they're not doing exactly what AROCSA is doing. So I would emphasise that element. I think issues of membership and so on and so forth, those are standard across different other institutions and they may not even be the unique identifiers of what AROCSA is. But it's that mixed level of academia and practice that I think will set AROCSA apart. So you've ISTR. ISTR is basically an association of scholars and later on they're adding practitioners but the focus is professors and scholars. Same with ARNOVA. But this is really clear in the sense that you're looking at an equal representation of academia and practice in this vehicle called AROCSA.

What value do you imagine AROCSA's key stakeholders (leading civil society scholars, practitioners, partner organizations and funders etc) to contribute to its continued growth?

To respond directly to your question here, I actually see leading civil society scholars or academics playing a role of giving back to the young ones especially the second tier, third tier leaders. It is expected that given the gaps in leadership in the sector those that manage to go through AROCSA programs, especially the fellowship among others, should be in a position to give back to the sector by capacitating the young ones. But also, if they do attend the fellowship they must be able to present back at their institutions what they have managed to produce in the three months that they are given but also present back to the sector in the countries and regions where they are located. So there's an issue of giving back to the sector what you've benefited.

But I think there's also a sense in which AROCSA could actually leverage these scholars and leaders to create a network that can become a platform for best practices and peer learning and that's something that I think is needed in the civil society sector. And then thirdly, you could actually document the experiences of most of these leaders for the benefit of the sector and the future generations. In terms of the partner organisations and funders, I mean of course AROCSA is still very, very young. AROCSA still requires a lot of partner institutions to collaborate with but also to almost give AROCSA some kind of a ride of you wish. So instead of starting at zero, you actually start somewhere because you're riding on those that have been around for a bit of time.

And then of course funders. We're not just expecting them to give money we're expecting them to bring in their technical assistance, their expertise, their networks, as well as their social capital into building AROCSA into the formidable organisation that it ought to be so that's what I would see as the value addition of the partners.

But, we need to also come up with an answer as to what value are we providing to these partners ourselves as AROCSA.

There's another question we need to ask Shani and you need to find ways of asking it and answering it. You see when you're thinking of value proposition it's got to be both ways. So on the one hand is what value is AROCSA giving to these stakeholders and in return what value are we expecting from the stakeholders.

If AROCSA were to be on the cover of your favourite newspaper or magazine in five years' time, what would you expect the story to be about?

I mean five years is a very short time. So, I would imagine that whatever magazine I would be thinking about, it would probably be talking about an alternative platform that is being developed for innovative ways to produce pracademics in the continent in the area of civil society. So I wouldn't be thinking of it as an already established parallel university so to speak. I would see it as a platform that has been created with innovative ideas on how to produce pracademics in the civil society space in Africa.