

## 4 • Building democracy and citizenship at the local level: the Núcleo Representativo das Associações do Dombe Grande

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### Introduction

Over the past ten years, the discussion about democratization processes in Africa have seen several political observers and scholars (van de Walle, 2001; Ake, 2005; Olukoshi, 2006) asking whether liberal democracy has been able to bring about effective political transformation and social and economic development. Although in many African countries a system of formal democracy has been established and elections have been held regularly, these authors point to strong control and centralization of political power, and to control of national resources by political elites that restrict the space for citizen participation, redistribute few resources and demonstrate little accountability.

In Angola, however, although the ‘macro’ political structure has been sending out signals that it is centralizing power and control, over the past few years there have been debates and initiatives towards greater participation in public and political space. A new participatory dynamic has emerged at the local level that has the potential to contribute to the construction of democracy in the country. To examine this dynamic, we will look at the Núcleo Representativo das Associações do Dombe Grande (NRA – Federation of Representative Associations of Dombe Grande), a federation of fifteen local associations that emerged in the 1990s in the comuna<sup>1</sup> of Dombe Grande, a small town some 63km from the provincial capital, Benguela. We ask if the political and social dynamic of the NRA’s experience of mobilization has empowered ordinary citizens, and whether this can be seen as the beginning of deepening democracy. We seek to understand the local dynamics of this associative movement, to see whether it provides an opportunity for those social groups that have long been excluded from meaningful political participation to have an impact on the country’s democratization process.

The chapter begins with a brief overview of the role of civic associations in African democratization and development, before moving on to

discuss the history and politics of democratization in Angola. We then turn to examine the trajectory of the NRA and its member associations. Finally, we focus on the evolving relationship between the NRA and local government, discussing what it shows about the opportunities and limitations of civil society participation in processes of democratic deepening.

### **Civic associations in the democratization processes**

Although democracy has spread around the world in recent decades,<sup>2</sup> several scholars and political activists have pointed to the limitations of the 'liberal democratic model' that is generally proposed. The liberal model of democracy, critics say, puts an emphasis on electoral processes and on a set of procedures and institutional designs, neglecting citizen participation in public affairs and generally disregarding the specific historical features and trajectories of each country (Santos and Avritzer, 2002; Olukoshi, 2006; Gaventa, 2006b).

In Africa, electoral democracy was widely adopted in the 1990s – an era that has been pinpointed as a very important time of political change, and one of great optimism. However, the limitations of African democratization have also been widely noted. Critics point to the way in which democratization processes have focused mainly on changes to the political system, without paying much attention to economic and social rights (Ake, 2005). Critics also point out that electoral democracy has allowed powerful elites to become legitimized, has favoured the growth of patrimonial political regimes, and has achieved little in terms of empowering ordinary citizens (Ake, 1996; Chabal, 2006; van de Walle, 2001; Messiant, 2006; Vidal and Andrade, 2006). Deepening democracy in Africa, critics say, should also mean improving the social and economic lot of ordinary African citizens – that is, it needs to pay attention not only to citizens' political rights but also to their economic and social rights (Ake, 1996; 2005).

In recent years, civil society has been seen in developing countries as a vehicle for deepening democracy. Civil society organizations (CSOs) provide an independent space for structuring the common goals of citizens, for articulating their demands for rights, for influencing public policies and for providing additional checks and balances on government behaviour (Edwards, 2004; Gaventa, 2006b). However, the concept of civil society itself has also generated debate in academic and development aid circles. The dominant view in the 1980s, which presented civil society as providing the ideal path to solving all the problems of developing countries, has been challenged. One of the important dimensions

in the debate on developing countries, especially in Africa, is how the conflation of 'civil society' with 'non-governmental organizations' (NGOs) – usually understood as providing services funded by government and international development agencies (Howell and Pearce, 2001) – has reduced the social and political role that these organizations could have. Olukoshi (2006), for example, notes that NGO-supported processes are often driven by international development agencies and may not always be based on local social dynamics. While there is broad agreement on the positive role that civil society may play in democratization and development, any analysis of it needs to be based on the specific histories and contexts of each society (Edwards, 2004; Gaventa, 2006b).

Several authors stress the plural impact that civic associations in particular have on democracy (Putnam, 2003; Avritzer, 2002; Warren, 2000). As collective actors, these organizations have contributed to democratization by representing and fighting for the interests of particular social groups. Some authors argue that the role of associations in the construction of citizenship and democracy is related to their objectives and their attitude to collective action (Chen et al., 2007). For instance, there are associations whose field of interest is economic and whose scope is restricted to their membership; they have no commitment to a larger collective. Other associations are more concerned with the common good and act to promote transformation in society.

Moreover, associations can also contribute to the construction of political subjects and can enhance citizens' political participation and their power over public policy. Associations may function as 'schools of democracy', as they socialize individuals into practising core civic and democratic values, such as tolerance, dialogue and deliberation, trust, solidarity and reciprocity. In a recent study on citizenship in São Paulo and Mexico City, Houtzager et al. (2007) confirmed the value of associations in what they call the exercise of 'active citizenship'. Associations, these authors say, enhance levels of 'active citizenship'; that is, they make citizens more active – for example, in seeking collective solutions for the self-provision of goods, in engaging with public institutions for the provision of public goods, or in holding state bureaucracy accountable for the provision of those goods. However, these authors note, although associations contribute to making 'active citizens', and consequently to increasing levels of political participation, they do not significantly affect the quality of the relationship between the government and citizens in general, or levels of government accountability, and may make only a limited contribution to the overall democratic processes (*ibid.*).