THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE PROMOTION OF PEACE IN WEST AFRICA

Metolo Foyet
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The Role of Civil Society in the Promotion of Peace in West Africa

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West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI)
No. 9 Bingo Street, East Legon
P.O. Box AT 1956, Achimota
Accra, Ghana

Email : research@wacsi.org
Tel : +233 (0) 302 550 224


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Introduction

The year 2016 was marked as the “African year of Human Rights” and the African Union (AU) established important human rights instruments, including the Draft Protocol on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Draft Protocol on the Rights of Older Persons in Africa. There were also optimistic developments in the area of international justice.

The conviction of Hissène Habré for torture, war crimes and crimes against humanity was one of these, marking the first time a former African leader has been prosecuted for crimes under international law before a court in another African country. Concurrently, the continental human rights system faced numerous challenges, including attacks on the independence and autonomy of regional institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (Doswald - Beck, 2011).

The security situation on the continent remains fragile as many countries are afflicted by conflict or political crisis – for example, Cameroon from 2016 till now, Sudan’s and Central African Republic (CAR)’s continuous crisis - in which grim human rights violations and abuses are committed (Amnesty International, 2017).

What has been the role of civil society in the protection of human rights in these crisis situations? This paper attempts to answer this question by deliberating on the role of the civil society in the protection of human rights in conflict prone zones of West Africa. It continues by providing the contribution and limitations of the civil society as well as the opportunities for civil society organisations (CSOs) in the protection of human rights. Finally, it prolongs into an overview of the limitations and opportunities for the civil society in the protection of human rights in West Africa.
I- The Role of the Civil Society in the Protection of Human Rights in Conflict Prone Zones

International Human Rights Law (IHRL) is a system of international norms designed to protect and promote the human rights of all persons. These rights, which are inherent in all human beings, irrespective of their location, ethnic origin, religion, color, language, sex, nationality or any other status, are interrelated, interdependent and indivisible (Lockhart, 2005). IHRL lays down the obligations of states to act in certain ways or to refrain from certain acts, in order to promote and protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of individuals or groups (Amnesty International, 2017), for example, the establishment of the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) in 1993.

Through its involvement across sectors, civil society plays a critical role in peacebuilding processes. It does so by involving in wide-ranging peacebuilding processes in several capacities, including facets of justice and the rule of law, economic and psycho-social recovery and security and public order. Hence, CSOs serve as pillars of democratic systems, playing important roles in democracy and good governance for pre-and post-conflict societies.

The role of civil society has increasingly been recognised in both the domestic and international arenas. Peacebuilding programmes continue to give support to CSOs, echoing the growing importance of these groups in development cooperation (Belloni, 2006). In societies transitioning from war to peace and democracy, this interest corresponds to even more specific motivations:

2.1 Sub-contractors and mediators: In their capacities as sub-contractors for international agencies, CSOs play the role of mediators between outsiders and local communities and are generally the first (if not the only) to attend to the needs of members of society and provide crucial trauma support services to victims in the aftermath of violence, which is a dimension sometimes missing in transitional justice programs (Brahm, 2007). Their role is particularly crucial in three components of those processes:

2.2 CSOs deal with trauma and memories of violence. They provide invaluable services for the different dimensions of the psycho-social recovery process at the community level. CSOs are also at the forefront of memorial work and their contribution is particularly decisive when they integrate the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of healing processes in more conventional approaches. Research has shown the important role played by traditional healers and indigenous strategies that are deeply rooted in the social and cultural context (Mollica & McDonald, 2003).
2.3 CSOs support reintegration processes for refugees, displaced persons, and former combatants.
In contrast to international actors, local CSOs generally work to integrate the different dimensions of community reintegration and may in fact have a more comprehensive response to internally displaced persons (IDPs) than international agencies. Cooperation with CSOs, in particular at the community level, is also decisive in the work of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), which increasingly relies on CSOs, local capacities and offers support to CSOs in order to facilitate dialogue with and effective participation by different constituencies (UNHCR, 2004).

These projects are generally backed by activities supporting dialogue and local capacity building in the form of training. For example, in 2016, the UNHCR collaborated with CARITAS and the Red Cross to ensure that protection and border monitoring is carried out systematically in six targeted provinces in Burundi, and that findings feed into development actors’ programmatic design and planning (UNHCR, 2016). Another example is from Sierra Leone where, a decade ago, citizens had negative attitude towards state property and the citizenry was causative factor of the long civil war.

This led to initiatives such as the Attitudinal and Behavioural Change (ABC) project funded by the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund provided to Sierra Leone in 2009. Its purpose was to help the government to change this negative trend by re-orientating the minds of citizens through continuous engagement and discussions on the need to change their attitude towards work, authority, state property and fellow citizens. The same happened in Uganda with the country’s National Development Plan (2010–2015) repeatedly referring to various trainings and ways of programming that seek to transform the mindset of the population to appreciate productivity and development (Datzberger, 2015).

2.4 CSOs’ practices of fostering bridges between various sectors of society and involving diverse sets of local groups have been emulated by a significant number of transnational non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with the aims to foster coexistence, reconciliation, mutual tolerance, and mutual respect. These skills are provided through workshops, dialogue circles, and other structured experiences.

2.5 Trust builders within and between societies: CSOs help in (re)building trust and renegotiating a social contract within and between communities, by sponsoring activities that build bridges across divided societies. Human rights NGOs often form the most vibrant and powerful component of local civil society. They frequently are the first institutions with which outsiders interact at the different stages of a violent conflict. For example, by bringing the warring parties together through mediation (which the Ghanaian government failed to do), the joint efforts of the Nairobi Peace Initiative (NPI) and the Permanent Peace Negotiation Team (PPNT) in Ghana helped to resolve the protracted ethnic conflicts between the Gonja and Nawari/Konkomba and the Konkomba and Nanumba/Dagomba in Northern Ghana. Despite the international tribute as well as the thriving democracy in the country, Ghana is faced with disparate forms of violence springing from ethnic violence, land disputes, chieftaincy conflicts and the like.

In effect, according to Abdul Karim Issifu (2015), the Ghanaian government has already “spent over seven billion cedis to maintain the fragile peace in the Dagbon chieftaincy conflict Dagbon”. In Bukari & Guuroh’s article CSOs and peacebuilding in the Bawku traditional area of Ghana: Failure or Success?, the authors explain that “in an attempt to prevent government interference in the majority of conflicts and help ensure sustainable peace in violence prone communities in Ghana, CSOs tend to be the preferred option for peace mediation in the country (2013)".
Also, CIVICUS has worked with the NANGO (National Association of Non-Governmental Organisations) to co-organise the Zimbabwean consultation on CSO Development Effectiveness. Having maintained a strong partnership since 2008, both organisations have been working together on the Early Warning System project and Affinity Group of National Associations. Finally, some international CSOs have dedicated personnel in charge of tackling issues before, during and after conflicts. Oxfam has a full-time dedicated conflict adviser in its Myanmar country office for example. In charge of guiding organizational decision-making, Oxfam’s conflict advisers support CSO partners to analyse conflict and operate with conflict sensitivity.

2.6 Enhancers of local participation and ownership: The support for and participation of civil society enhances local participation, capacity, and ownership; three key factors in the sustainability and success of peacebuilding processes (CTWG, 2002). Here, CSOs have two key functions which are in practice, often combined in their actions: (1) in the implementation of field projects, to ensure local ownership and sustainability and (2) as advocacy agents, to bring important issues to the peacebuilding agenda that might otherwise be forgotten (Paffenholz & Spurk, 2006). An example from Mali is, Assistance to Resilience Communautaire which develops the skills and leadership of local residents, fosters a culture of learning and growth and contributes to poverty reduction through field actions.

2.7 Alternative modes of governance: Civil society serves democracy and good governance in peacebuilding scenarios. It may provide complementary (or even alternative) governance structures where the state is weak, incapacitated, or indifferent to its people’s needs. An illustration is that of the Arab Spring revolutions, which have drastically changed the way politics are done in the middle east and northern Africa today. Long serving presidents have fallen (Abdelaziz Bouteflicka in Algeria, Beji Caid Essebsi in Tunisia) and the election of presidents such as Kais Saied, marks the beginning of a new era in Africa, where candidates can win presidential elections without a party or much funding.

There are also the “For Fair Elections” protests in the Russian Federation, the “Tiananmen Square protests” in China, and the “Occupy Movement” in the United States of America, as responses to growing inequality. Other examples are protests against austerity measures in Spain and Greece. Finally, the documentary Kony 2012, by capturing worldwide headlines, gives an overview of the ability of a small group of people to speedily muster sizable online activity and media attention around a topic that had, until that time, been relatively unknown.

According to Pouligny (2006), CSOs are often seen to carry the best hopes for a genuine democratic counterweight to the powerbrokers, economic exploiters and warlords who tend to predominate in conflict-ridden weak or failed states and may even capture the electoral processes.

Civil society is one of the key pillars of any democratic structure. It is a paramount necessity in restoring and consolidating democracy and should therefore be supported as part of the democratisation agenda. By enhancing local participation and ownership, civil society facilitates participatory local governance mechanisms. CSOs also contribute by providing a link between state and citizens, producing information and ideas, promoting democratic values, encouraging open debate, pushing for social, economic, and political change, and building social capital. While these are civil society’s optimal functions and do not always reflect the possibilities or realities of each circumstance, they are representative of the valuable contribution civil society has the potential to play regarding democracy and good governance in conflict-prone environments.

1. World Alliance for Citizen Participation
The Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC) Nigeria - demonstrates the above mentioned by engaging the legislature and its support organs at national and sub-national levels for enhanced performance. CISLAC also mobilises citizens to effectively engage government on developmental issues and enhances investigative, policy and legislative reportage across all media platforms.

In Niger, the Timidria Association educates and sensitises the population on their rights and duties and attempts to fight against all forms of slavery by assisting the socio - economic reintegration of victims of slavery and other forms of discrimination and by promoting the emancipation of women and the protection of the child.

In Cameroon, African Centre for Community and Development (ACCD) is integrating marginal internally displaced and other vulnerable groups into educative modules. By doing so, ACCD promotes Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Agenda 2063 as well as United Nations policies across Cameroon, Africa and the globe.

2.8 Advocates of justice and enhancers of the rule of law and public order: CSOs generally play a leading role in promoting social justice and the rule of law. They are particularly involved in monitoring and advocacy activities, playing a vital role in drawing global attention to specific cases of human rights abuse in conflict situations (Fitzduff, 2006). They can also assist groups in developing capacity to seek justice and are involved in different types of public education and training activities around these issues.

2.8.1 CSOs often create, participate or contribute to justice assistance programmes, when the state judicial system is unable to administer justice, or the number of perpetrators is high enough that it is logistically impossible to prosecute each individual. On one hand, they are relied on to establish or help run alternative traditional and informal justice systems (i.e. security committees, informal dispute resolution mechanisms, paralegal mechanisms) or train personnel in these systems on procedural or substantive issues as well as train paralegals to advise or represent parties in a dispute. On the other hand, CSOs monitor the activities of non-state judiciary systems as well as report on human rights abuses and discrimination against women, the youth and marginalised groups. They equally help ensure more equitable outcomes and strengthen overall accountability in the justice system.

2.8.2 CSOs have often been central in documenting human rights abuses during civil conflict or counter-insurgency actions, which are contexts that may require transitional justice efforts: once the conflict is over. In the post-conflict environment, civil society frequently is a prime advocate of accountability for the past, often conducting its own investigations into human rights abuses and pressuring national and international authorities to investigate the past. Civil society also shapes the debate on which transitional justice mechanisms are the most appropriate for its country, and what form reparation programmes should take.

According to the International Center for Non-for-profit Law (ICNL), CSOs often provide legal expertise, turn over information they have collected, provide volunteers who accompany witnesses to trials (ICNL, 2011) and bring forward courageous individuals and virtual leaders who play key roles in efforts to uphold justice. CSOs also help mobilise broader sections of society to participate in transitional justice and disseminate the lessons of that experience to a wider national and international audience.

2.8.3 CSOs are often involved in security reform processes, especially the reform of the police and prison systems, helping enhance results orientation and the transparency of reforms. Broad participation also minimises the risk of setbacks (UNDP, 2004; UNDP, 2011). There are experiences among the rare Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR)'s and small arms control success stories that have aimed to introduce normative compliance through local and/or informal peace agreements.

These agreements may include voluntary disarmament
and reintegration clauses such as the Community Arms Collection and Destruction Programme in Sierra Leone. They also might include declarations of weapons-free areas where civilian as well as combatant weapons are collected (as in South Africa). These initiatives rely on the authorities and the strong involvement of community-based organisations (Pouligny, 2006).

2.8.4 CSOs are also very involved in mine clearance activities, in terms of both advocacy work and participating in different dimensions of field programmes. The most prominent example is the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), a coalition of international NGOs working for the banning of anti-personnel mines (Cameron, 1999).

Other commissions of enquiry are set up to address victims’ specific violations. Even though they are, by definition, established at the initiative of the government authorities, they are most often a result of concerted demands by the civil society and sometimes also by the international community (De Santis di Nicola, 2016).

2.9 Cross-sector peacebuilding functions of civil society: Across sectors, civil society serves a certain number of functions. For Paffenholz and Spurk (2006), focusing on these functions, instead of on actors or sectors of activity help better define outcome and impacts, improve planning processes, and set clearer expectations to facilitate monitoring and evaluation.

Following are suggested to distinguish seven key functions of civil society that provide a comprehensive framework for disaggregating and mapping civil society’s contributions to peacebuilding. It is important to note that by protecting human rights in conflict zones, CSOs contribute to peacebuilding efforts in those areas.

6. Although the model above provides a useful and comprehensive tool for understanding civil society roles in a range of undertakings, other classifications are available - i.e. a school of thought started by German political scientists presents a model of five functions of civil society extracted mainly from research on system transformation in Eastern Europe. The model is enriched by many practical case studies of the role of civil society in different contexts: protection; intermediation between state and citizens; participatory socialisation; community building and integration; and communication.
7. World Bank Social Development Department, Civil Society and Peacebuilding, 12.
### Cross-sector Peacebuilding Functions of Civil Society

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| Protection of citizens  | • International accompaniment;  
                          | • Watchdog activities (only in interaction with monitoring and advocacy function);  
                          | • Creation of zones of peace;  
                          | • Community patrolling; and  
                          | • Human security initiatives (local and international). |
| Monitoring for accountability | • Early warning systems;  
                               | • Election monitoring and observation;  
                               | • Human rights monitoring; and  
                               | • Monitoring of the different branches of the state (justice, security, and economy). |
| Advocacy and public communication | • Agenda setting;  
                                    | • Bringing themes to the national agenda in conflict-ridden countries (roadmap projects, awareness workshops, and public campaigns); and  
                                    | • Lobbying for civil society involvement in different discussions and negotiations regarding the peace process (country-specific peacebuilding strategic frameworks and poverty reduction plans).  
                                    | • Advocacy for specific dimensions of the reforms; and  
                                    | • Public education and media mobilisation. |
| Socialisation and promoting a culture of peace | • Dialogue and reconciliation initiatives;  
                                             | • Peace and history education through different channels (radio, television soap operas, street theater, peace campaigns, schoolbooks, poetry, festivals, etc.);  
                                             | • Exchange programs and peace camps;  
                                             | • Conflict transformation or negotiation training and capacity building; and  
                                             | • Joint vision building workshops for a future peace society. |
| Building community: conflict-sensitive social cohesion | • Joint service delivery;  
                                                        | • Community associations;  
                                                        | • Joint cultural or work initiatives; and  
                                                        | • Memorial work. |
| Intermediation and facilitation between citizens and state | • Parallel civil society forums;  
                                                             | • Civil society observer status in governance bodies;  
                                                             | • Civil society informing international actors; and  
                                                             | • Civil society mediation between various actors and factions. |
| Service delivery | Education, food, housing, micro-credit, community infrastructures, healthcare, including mental health services, etc. |
II- Limitations and Opportunities for the Civil Society in the Protection of Human Rights in Africa

It has been argued that the first and second practices exhibited by CSOs under point (d) of section II (alternative modes of governance) contribute to a neo-liberal agenda to privatise the state, thus undermining sovereignty and allowing state responsibility to be skirted. Despite the overall appreciation of the impact CSOs have been making through a series of innovative and traditional approaches, institutions like the World Bank have warned against further undermining state capacity. Paffenholz and Spurk argue, “In emergency and conflict situations, a critical judgment is required on the allocation and sequencing of external support, i.e., how much and how long to rely on CSO service provision, and when to shift focus to strengthening state capacity (Paffenholz & Spurk, 2006).”

Although the involvement of CSOs is less common in the sector of security and they are more rarely in the lead, CSOs can play a role in enhancing security. CSOs play an important role in providing opportunities to former combatants to demobilise after war, but their participation in other dimensions of disarmament, demobilisation, reinsertion and reintegration (DDR) programs can be as important for the success and sustainability of these aims. CSOs can put in place alternative mechanisms that promote security, especially crime prevention and victim support systems, in partnership with the dimensions in need (DFID, 2002). The support and development of civil society might appear more feasible and promising to donors in terms of effecting quick and visible change than the reform of government institutions, which requires large-scale and long-term undertakings (Foy, 2002).

Conclusion
Conflict in all its forms is endemic all over the world. Violent conflict is prevalent in West Africa, especially in its western hemisphere. The latter has held the highest numbers of the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions, due to turbulences that have occurred from civil wars in Cote d’Ivoire, Sierra Leone and Liberia to political disputes in Mali, the Gambia and both Guineas. Even though individual states, humanitarian agencies, regional organisations (Bjørn, 2005) and the UN all play important roles in protecting civilians, whether through military, humanitarian, political or legal action, the responsibility of peace, security and ensuring human protection primarily resides with governments. Nevertheless, CSOs have demonstrated their capacity to complement government’s efforts in peace and security; and political leadership across the world has come to realise the strength of CSOs in anticipating, preventing and resolving conflicts because of their in-depth knowledge of context and expertise in working closely with communities. The latter is usually illustrated by the application of international human rights law and international humanitarian law (which both share the goal of preserving the dignity and humanity of all) by CSOs during and in the absence of conflicts. Finally, the different formulations of the role of CSOS is widespread. They are known to oppose or limit the power of the state; assist and trim back the state by taking on social functions such as education; further democracy by demanding popular government accountability and promote wide participation in governance. They equally serve as providers of intellectual vision, advocacy, problem solvers, as well as critics and watchdogs. However, despite all these, the main question that needs to be answered is how governments could-and should—mobilize the transformative potential of civil society instead of perceiving the activities of the later only as oppositional.
SOURCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY


