

# The role of civil society in conflict prevention: West African experiences

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Civil society's visibility and influence in conflict prevention and peacebuilding has grown globally. Civil society actors have increasingly become vital forces in discourses, initiatives and programmes that foster peace and security across the world. Specifically, civil society has been instrumental in the reconceptualization of security from a "state-centred" process to one that is "people centred". This focus on people-centred security emanates from the belief that fundamentally the sustainable security of states can only be attained through the security of its people. This belief is shared in regions across the world that have experienced open conflicts and civil wars, which have ravaged communities and brought devastation to the lives of ordinary people.

West Africa has witnessed a number of protracted civil wars and intra-state conflicts. These conflicts have resulted in millions of deaths, the displacement of communities, proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW), and the stagnation of growth and development in the region. The nature of these conflicts exposes and draws in local populations: West African conflicts are intricate, multifaceted and multi-party, and as a result it is impossible for state actors to prevent, manage or resolve them without the assistance and involvement of non-state actors.

Civil society in particular has been at the forefront of promoting localized peacebuilding initiatives, initiating reconciliation processes, advocating for adherence to peace agreements and building capacities in peace education. In spite of playing such laudable roles, however, civil society still faces a number of challenges, ranging from poor organization among actors within the sector, poor funding for activities, governments' mistrust and the often antagonistic interaction between civil society and government. This article examines the various contributions civil society organizations (CSOs) have made to conflict prevention in West Africa.

## *What is civil society?*

Defining civil society and identifying which organizations fall within the framework of civil society continues to be a challenge. The difficulty of conceptualizing civil society in West Africa is that there is a tendency to focus on non-governmental organizations (NGOs), excluding groups and associations that reflect West Africa's associational culture, e.g. traditional governance structures.

The Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) of the African Union defines civil society as comprising social groups; professional groups; NGOs, community-based organizations (CBOs), voluntary organizations; and cultural organizations, among other segments in which women, youth,

children, national diasporas and elements of the private sector such as market women's associations and the media are listed.<sup>1</sup>

Civil society has also been described as the arena outside the family, the state and the market, where people associate to advance common interests.<sup>2</sup> The notion of an arena where people associate to advance common interests has strong resonance in West Africa as it enables the definition of civil society to include formal and informal groupings such as traditional chiefs, Queen Mother associations, youth movements, market women, religious groups and the media.

### ***What is conflict prevention?***

Analogous to civil society, conflict prevention presents definitional challenges. It remains an ambiguous concept that has transformed over time. The former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali described conflict prevention as preventive diplomacy, an "action to prevent disputes from arising between parties, to prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflicts and limit the spread of the latter when they occur".<sup>3</sup>

In West Africa, the Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) defines conflict prevention as:

activities designed to reduce tensions and prevent the outbreak, escalation, spread or recurrence of violence. Conflict prevention strategies may distinguish between *operational prevention* (measures applicable in the face of imminent crisis) and *structural prevention* (measures to ensure that crises do not arise in the first place or, if they do, that they do not re-occur). The emphasis is not on preventing conflict per se (conflict being a natural consequence of change) but in halting its descent into violence.<sup>4</sup>

Civil society's involvement in conflict prevention in the region corresponds with this definition; it has contributed to structural and operational prevention in a variety of ways.

### ***Civil society and conflict prevention***

CSOs in Africa have a strong history of being at the forefront of movements that dislodged entrenched authoritarianism to introduce democratic governance on the African continent. In West Africa, civil society, through trade and student unions, women's groups and professional associations, was active in the struggles for independence. As the political context in different West African countries evolved from the post-independence era to military and autocratic rule, to current endeavours to build democratic states, the role of civil society also evolved. CSOs across West Africa have been important catalysts for ending military dictatorship, advocating for pluralist and open societies, and promulgating democratization and good governance.

Civil society actors have also filled a vital role as primary providers of basic social services in war-torn societies where viable public institutions and state apparatus are non-existent or considerably weakened. In these anarchical environments, CSOs have become important actors in the processes of mitigating conflict and building peace. It has to be acknowledged, however, that civil society is not a homogeneous group, therefore it cannot be said that all CSOs are by definition peacebuilders. In countries like Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia and Sierra Leone, some CSOs have been accused of aligning themselves with warring factions and assuming political positions in the conflict. However, this does not diminish the positive contributions other CSOs have made in promoting peace and preventing conflict. In both latent and open conflict situations, civil society has been key in addressing socio-economic disparities in society; assisting with humanitarian relief; promoting human and

women's rights; and contributing toward strengthening government organs like the judiciary and the security sector. Furthermore, civil society's proximity to local populations has also made it critical to mediation, reconciliation and other community peacebuilding initiatives.

### *Practical contributions of civil society to preventing conflict*

Civil society in West Africa has played key roles in preventing violent conflict in a number of ways. These include being involved in early warning and response, advocating against the proliferation of small arms, ensuring that peace processes yield inclusive agreements, contributing toward post-conflict reconstruction, and promoting the involvement of women in peacebuilding.

Central to successful peacebuilding is local ownership and the engagement of local actors in the development and implementation of peacebuilding strategies. CSOs represent important resources of local knowledge and expertise and are uniquely equipped to mobilize individuals in peacebuilding activities. In many instances, CBOs drive community harmonization and assist in rebuilding relationships in post-conflict situations.

It is difficult to capture in this article the entirety of CSOs' contributions to conflict prevention in West Africa. However, the following practical examples of CSOs' interventions in conflict will provide an insight into the extent of their input, both formal and informal.

#### CIVIL SOCIETY AND EARLY WARNING

Conflict early warning and response has been described as the sine qua non of conflict prevention. It consists of the systematic collection and analysis of information coming from areas of crisis for the purposes of anticipating the escalation of violent conflict, developing strategic responses to crises, and the presentation of options to critical actors for decision-making.

The development of early warning systems has gained popularity across Africa, and the African Union and its Regional Economic Communities are all at different stages of developing institutionalized systems. In West Africa, CSOs have played pivotal roles in the development of the region's framework for conflict early and response. For example, the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) has been instrumental in "on the ground" conflict monitoring as part of the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN). ECOWAS realized that it lacked the institutional and technical capacity to implement an early warning system, which was a central component of its conflict prevention mechanism. WANEP capitalized on this opportunity to fill the vacuum by utilizing its networks to develop a grass-roots early warning system that passes information to the ECOWAS mechanism. This grass-roots network is the critical web that feeds into four zonal bureaus and the Observation and Monitoring Centre at the ECOWAS Secretariat in Abuja, Nigeria. Through WANEP, civil society is thus involved in filtering, monitoring and analysing conflict information at the community and national levels.

This experience of collaboration between WANEP and ECOWAS has been highlighted as a best practice of how to build alliances with civil society in operationalizing early warning systems and is being examined by other subregions in Africa that are in the preliminary stages of developing early warning systems, such as the Economic Community of Central African States.

#### CIVIL SOCIETY AND SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS

The scale of the proliferation of SALW in West Africa is a major security concern. It is estimated that of the 639 million SALW circulating globally, 7 million are in West Africa.<sup>5</sup> Small arms are easily available

in the region and with the intermittent eruptions of conflict, the local arms manufacturing industry is thriving.

This dire situation has led many CSOs in the region to focus their energies on advocating against the proliferation of arms. The collective advocacy efforts of CSOs through initiatives like the West Africa Action Network on Small Arms (WAANSA) have yielded constructive outcomes in the region. For example, CSOs were at the forefront of the process calling for an ECOWAS convention on SALW. On 14 June 2006, the Conference of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government signed the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related Materials. (This convention was pre-dated by the Declaration on the Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation and Manufacture of Light Weapons in ECOWAS member states, which was signed on 31 October 1998.)<sup>6</sup>

CSOs also work at the national level to raise awareness of the dangers of arms production, and the ease with which arms can be smuggled across porous national borders. In Ghana, the Foundation for Security and Development in Africa (FOSDA) has gone further by donating metal detectors to the Ghana Police Service in the Northern Region to help track down illicit arms and ammunitions. In Senegal, civil society has been particularly active in the fight against the SALW proliferation. The Mouvement contre les Armes Légères (MALAO) is one of the main organizations that focuses on communication and awareness-raising strategies, education and research. MALAO also works in

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partnership with the Senegalese National Commission (responsible for controlling the proliferation of small arms) and has initiated numerous sensitization, lobbying and training activities.

There can be no doubt that the level of awareness and the success in policy change on SALW in West Africa is attributable to civil society. Advocacy in this area continues, but already the indelible contribution of

CSOs in bringing this security challenge to the public domain has ensured that policy makers will not ignore the present and future dangers of the spread and proliferation of arms.

#### CIVIL SOCIETY AND PEACE TALKS

The inclusion of civil society in peace processes in West Africa has evolved with each process. Delegates and participants at peace processes in the 1990s were limited to warring factions and political parties, with international observers and representatives of intergovernmental organizations such as ECOWAS, the African Union and the United Nations.

However, the protracted nature of the civil conflicts in countries like Liberia and Sierra Leone meant that peace talks came to represent desperate opportunities to bring stability to countries. The inability of the warring factions to reach sustainable and implementable agreements, for example the failures of the Abidjan Peace Accord of 1996 and the Conakry Peace Plan of 1997 (both on Sierra Leone) led many civil society actors to inject themselves into subsequent talks. Civil society actors argued that the voices and needs of ordinary citizens needed to be heard and discussed at the peace table. CSOs' expertise, skills and capacities were useful in creating the right conditions for talks, building confidence between parties, shaping the conduct and content of negotiations, and influencing the sustainability of peace agreements. Groups like the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia and of Sierra Leone, the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) and the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) have been critical to ensuring that warring factions come to the negotiating table and that the agreements reached reflect the needs of the people. During the actual peace talks, these CSOs have engaged in behind-the-scenes diplomacy, urging compromise and in many cases building trust between the parties. After peace agreements have been signed, CSOs have

played a public service role by educating citizens in the terms of the agreement and in strategies for holding leaders accountable.

The success of civil society's involvement in these peace talks stresses that peace processes are not purely political and military endeavours. CSOs' ability to influence the talks and their outcomes buttresses the argument that the needs, aspirations and concerns of people directly affected by the violence are integral to the negotiation process.

#### CIVIL SOCIETY AND POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION

When the conflict is over, civil society still plays important roles, and CSOs are often a strong factor in ensuring peaceful transitions to democratically elected governments. Specialized CSOs have the capacity to promote reconciliation, enhance local ownership of peacebuilding initiatives and contribute toward democratization processes. Civil society has been pivotal to the transitional justice processes that have occurred in Liberia and Sierra Leone. CSOs played crucial roles in establishing Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) in both countries and were key to retributive justice proceedings in the Special Court for Sierra Leone.

In Sierra Leone and now Liberia, civil society was and is instrumental in raising awareness of the TRCs, keeping the public updated on proceedings, documenting experiences and exposing any deficiencies in the process such as inadequate procedures for taking statements, lack of initiatives to protect witnesses testifying about rape and similar crimes, and low levels of citizen representation in the process. In the case of Sierra Leone, CSOs are leading the calls for implementation of the TRC recommendations.

Civil society is also actively involved in initiatives to reform the security sector in these countries. It can also be credited with assisting with socio-economic recovery programmes such as poverty reduction strategies, youth employment and women's microfinance projects, which are crucial to rebuilding economies decimated by the wars.

#### WOMEN'S ROLE IN CONFLICT PREVENTION

Finally, the impact of wars on women both as victims and perpetrators has meant that the tactics of women as peacebuilders have also had to change, from holding less visible roles to assuming more strategic and influential roles. As West African states became militarized, women became less relevant in formal peacebuilding. Peacebuilding initiatives were designed by men, making the role of women in promoting peace unclear and uncertain. However, at the peak of the violence in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the early 1990s, grass-roots women's groups worked through local associations, faith-based groups and guilds to protect their families and communities. They formed efficient networks to spread information of attacks and safe routes, thus saving lives and reducing the impact of the violence. Many used information provided by family members who had joined rebel movements to protect their communities. At the national level, groups like the Liberian Women's Initiative and the Campaign for Good Governance in Sierra Leone began advocating women's involvement at all levels of peacebuilding.

Clearly, women wanted their voices to be heard and to make their mark. In 2000, MARWOPNET—a joint peace initiative of women ministers and parliamentarians, journalists, lawyers, academics, researchers and individuals from the private sector of the Mano River region (Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone)—prevented hostilities re-erupting among the three countries by bringing their leaders back to the negotiating table. These initial advances have inspired the formation of wider women's networks such as WIPNET and women's peace advocacy campaigns such as the Liberian Women's

Mass Action for Peace, which was heralded as being a central player in restoring peace to Liberia in 2003.

These groups and others like them have contributed to changing the stereotypes of women from the vulnerable and “protected” sector in conflict situations to credible actors in peacemaking. This shift has led to key advancements in women’s participation in peace processes. For example, women were observers in the Sierra Leonean peace talks in Lomé. In Liberia, Ruth Sando Perry became Chairwoman of the transitional government, the Council of State (1996–1997). These achievements have been cited as the reason for the increase in the numbers of women in decision-making positions in post-conflict societies.

## ECOWAS AND CIVIL SOCIETY RELATIONS

Cognizant of the need to prevent violent conflicts both nationally and regionally, on 10 December 1999 ECOWAS unanimously established the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security.<sup>7</sup> Two years later the heads of state signed a supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance to foster participatory democracy, good governance, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and a balanced and equitable distribution of national resources.<sup>8</sup> The Mechanism (as it is otherwise known) and its supplementary protocol provide a comprehensive framework for conflict prevention, peace and security in West Africa. More recently, in January 2008, the ECOWAS heads of state and government adopted a Conflict Prevention Framework, which attempts to address structural and operational conflict prevention and peacebuilding, and provides guidelines and entry points for actors to engage in prevention initiatives.

Civil society has been working closely with ECOWAS in implementing these instruments. Notable examples include the Centre for Democracy and Development, WANEP, FOSDA and the West African Women’s Association (WAWA), which work with ECOWAS on issues of governance, early warning, small arms proliferation and gender, respectively.

Aside from these specialized concerns, civil society in West Africa has formulated a structure for formalized engagement with ECOWAS in areas that promote structural prevention of conflict, e.g. good governance, election observation and stopping corruption. This is the role that the West Africa Civil Society Forum (WACSOF) plays. WACSOF’s formation as an institutionalized platform for civil society to interact and contribute to policy processes was visionary and pointed to a desire on the part of ECOWAS to develop a more collaborative relationship with civil society.

ECOWAS’s collaboration with these organizations demonstrates the importance of strategic partnerships between civil society and governments. In this regard, the role of civil society has gone beyond the traditional activities of monitoring and policing governments to that of providing a credible bridge between policy makers and their constituencies. The positive results emanating from such healthy relationships should not be confined to the West African subregion, but should serve as examples of best practice for the rest of the continent.

### *Challenges facing civil society in West Africa*

As outlined above, civil society plays a pivotal role in conflict prevention. Nevertheless, there are a number of persisting challenges facing civil society in West Africa.

- *State–civil society relations*: though there has been a significant shift at the level of the ECOWAS Commission on conflict prevention and the importance of including civil society in structural and operational prevention, at the national level, most states in West Africa

still view issues of conflict prevention as being within the realm of state security. This viewpoint means that civil society's formalized prevention activities are often unwelcome or undermined. Furthermore, many governments in West Africa are suspicious of civil society and see its activities as being tantamount to opposition. CSOs' ability to mobilize funds from foreign governments and donors also means they can be direct rivals to states in the competition for resources.

- *Narrow focus on NGOs:* the growth of NGOs within civil society has resulted in the tendency for NGOs to be seen as representing CSOs in general. This narrow categorization of civil society often sidelines the contributions of important actors such as CBOs and traditional rulers.
- *Weak and underfunded coordination mechanisms:* there is weak collaboration among civil society. While there are networks and umbrella organizations functional in the region, competition over donor funding among network members fosters adversarial relationships rather than cooperation and sharing of information. This results in duplication of efforts and initiatives.
- *Limited conflict prevention skills:* though there has been an impressive increase in the number of conflict prevention and peacebuilding practitioners in the region, there is still a shortage of skilled human resources. CSOs can—and do—intervene in conflict situations without the requisite skills, worsening tensions.
- *Lack of policy influence:* though a number of CSOs in the region are involved in exemplary initiatives, the extent to which these initiatives inform or influence conflict prevention policy is intangible and in many cases not measured. Due to limited resources, most CSO activities are ad hoc and not strategically aimed at influencing policy.
- *Lack of documentation:* the contribution of civil society to conflict prevention remains largely unknown due to the absence of a documentation culture among CSOs. CSOs are mainly activity driven and rarely take time to reflect and document their achievements and challenges.

## Conclusion

The above experiences illustrate the important roles civil society plays in conflict prevention in West Africa. Though this not an exhaustive list, it provides a snapshot of the diversity and breadth of civil society's involvement.

A recent regional directory of civil CSOs developed by the West Africa Civil Society Institute lists over 3,000 organizations, associations and groups working within the civil society sector at different levels in the region. Organizations work on various aspects of conflict prevention including human rights, civic education, conflict resolution, promoting dialogue, security sector reform, conflict-sensitive development, election monitoring, policy monitoring and advocacy, gender equality, post-conflict reconstruction efforts (working with refugees, internally displaced persons, or on the disarmament and reintegration of ex-combatants), etc. Though a number of CSOs have been involved in formal conflict prevention initiatives, such as those illustrated above, a larger number remain underutilized in activities carried out by ECOWAS and national governments. The recently adopted ECPF aims to bridge this gap, by calling for civil society to be “bona fide partners to bear principal responsibility” in the implementation of the framework.<sup>9</sup>

It is important that national governments domesticate the ECPF and in particular its calls for civil society's involvement in conflict prevention. Efforts by governments to establish institutionalized conflict prevention frameworks and to implement structural and operational prevention initiatives

should incorporate CSOs working at community, national and regional levels as partners. The future of effective conflict prevention hinges on the success of such partnerships. It is important that governments and civil society view themselves as complementary collaborators, showing appreciation for the roles both sectors play and the contributions they make.

However, as the challenges above outline, the civil society sector itself needs to be strengthened.

More emphasis needs to be placed on organizing the sector, making it more professional. Training and knowledge generation on all aspects of conflict prevention should be enhanced. CSOs should incorporate reflection and documentation into their core activities. A functional and effective civil society sector will be essential to West Africa's attempts to consolidate peace and democratization.

#### Notes

1. See ECOSOCC's web site, at <[www.africa-union.org/ECOSOC/home.htm](http://www.africa-union.org/ECOSOC/home.htm)>
2. See Nkwachukwu Orji, 2003, 'Conventional' Notion of Civil Society, *International Civil Society Organisations and the Development of Civil Society in Africa*, Ebonyi State University Press, at <[www.gdnet.org/fulltext/orji.pdf](http://www.gdnet.org/fulltext/orji.pdf)>.
3. *An Agenda for Peace : Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-keeping*, UN document A/47/277—S/24111, 17 June 1992, paragraph 20.
4. See paragraph 18, ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF). The ECPF was enacted by Regulation MSC/REG.1/01/08 of the Mediation and Security Council of ECOWAS on 16 January 2008.
5. Adedeji Ebo and Laura Mazal, 2003, *Small Arms Control in West Africa*, West Africa Series no. 1 , p. 10.
6. For more details on these documents, see the ECOWAS Small Arms Control Programme web site, at <[www.ecosap.ecowas.int](http://www.ecosap.ecowas.int)>.
7. Signed at Lomé, available at <[www.sec.ecowas.int/sitecedea0/english/ap101299.htm](http://www.sec.ecowas.int/sitecedea0/english/ap101299.htm)>.
8. Protocol A/SP1/12/01 on Democracy and Good Governance Supplementary to the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, signed at Dakar, 21 December 2001.
9. ECPF, op. cit., paragraph 114 (a-c).