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Conflict and Civil Society – For Tripoli Workshop

## **The Role of Civil Society Organisations in African Conflicts**

### **Introduction**

In this paper I will describe the broad features of African civil society, differentiate between long established civil society organisations and the new non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs) and community based organisations (CSOs). Furthermore I will differentiate between the larger armed conflicts – civil wars – and the smaller communal types of armed conflicts which are to be found in most African countries. And while the armed civil wars affect the entire civil society, the communal conflicts affect only a section of civil society – directly and indirectly. I will also argue that both long established CSOs and the new NGOs/CSOs have not played any significant role in preventing or resolving armed conflicts (of whatever type) because governments would not allow them and also because of the nature of African civil society and the middle class which lead and manage these CSOs. Finally I will point out that the situation is evolving, and that all the major actors – governments, the donor community, the middle class and the CSOs – are also changing, hopefully for the better. As an optimist one hopes that the CSOs will, in future, play a more active and positive role in the preventing and resolving conflicts as well as in peace building activities.

### **Armed Conflicts and Civil Society**

African armed conflicts, and there are many throughout the continent, vary in scale and magnitude. They can be categorised in terms of their scale and in terms of the identities and objectives of the conflicting parties. They are a complex phenomenon with their own internal dynamics and are ever evolving. They vary from the large armed civil wars – in which armed groups are fighting to overthrow the state, to small inter-communal/ethnic groups intermittently fighting over land/cattle or water resources. Whatever the type or scale of the armed conflict, civil society is always deeply involved – either directly in the

**conflict/war or as affected victim of the conflict. In most armed conflicts, only a section of civil society is mobilised to directly take part in the conflict and often only a small part of the country's civil society is affected by the conflict. And most of these conflicts take place in remote (from the capital) rural areas. However, in large scale civil wars where the state has either been weakened to the extent of becoming one of the many parties to the conflict or it has completely collapsed, in these situation almost the entire civil society is affected by the conflict or civil war. Examples of these situations are Sierra Leon, Liberia, Somalia, DRC, Congo Brazzaville etc. But there are some examples – Angola, Burundi etc – in which the civil war is extensive throughout the country but the state becomes highly militarised, strong and is able to fight in different parts of the country without collapsing. In these cases also, a significant section of civil society is directly involved in the conflict and the rest of civil society directly affected by the conflict.**

**In this paper, I will focus on those armed conflicts which takes place in countries which are considered stable and peaceful, but within which conflicts takes place between communities – generally in remote areas from the capital. However such conflicts do not threatens the survival and functioning of the state. In this situation only a small section of civil society is involved in the conflict – some directly and some affected by the conflicts. There are many countries which fall in this category – Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania – to name only a few. What role does civil society play in these small scale conflicts taking place in the so called stable and peaceful countries.**

**I will argue in this paper that it is that part of civil society which is directly involved and affected which normally plays a critical role in the eventual resolution of the conflicts and the maintenance of peace thereafter. In most cases indigenous i.e. African civil society organisations have played an insignificant and ineffective role in these types of conflicts. More importantly there are very few CSOs that are based in the rural areas and which have as their objective the resolution of conflicts and peace building.**

## **African Civil Society: Its Characteristics and its Organisations**

**What is the nature of African civil society in these countries and how is it organised?**

**From the above introduction, a basic and simple definition of civil society is that part of the society of a given country which is not part of the State and its institutions. The civil society in these countries is organised in many ways based on different principles. In most countries, civil society is divided between those who live in rural areas and those in urban areas – the capital and a few large towns. Those in the rural areas are generally organised on the bases of the family and beyond the family on the basis of ethnic, religious or village identity. In some rural areas people are also organised as part of cooperatives and as part of farmers and peasants associations. Indeed some rural people may be part of urban based organisations. Most rural people are generally poorer and less educated than those living in the urban areas.**

**People living in urban areas have been traditionally, wealthier, better educated and better organised. The entire range of infrastructure – physical and institutional – is far more developed than in the rural areas. The major and longer established organisations in the urban areas have been and still are, labour unions, professional organisations/associations, political parties, religious organisations, and where they are allowed, ethnic associations. In some countries, guild or craft associations are numerous and strong (e.g. Nigeria). During the one party or military rule, these organisations such as trade unions, women's, youth and some professional organisations were co-opted by the Governments (often becoming part of the structure of the one ruling party). During the last twenty five years and more recently since the return of multi-party system in most countries, there have emerged single interests groups known as Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). I differentiate these new latter organisations – the NGOs and the CSOs, CBOs etc – from the longer established and long standing organisations – the trade unions, the women, youth, religious, professional and even political organisations most of which took active part in the nationalist struggles and which continued to play an important role after independence. However a common feature of all these organisations is that almost all of them**

are based in urban areas – mainly the capital, the larger ones with a few branches in smaller towns. Exceptions are what are known as Community Based Organisations (CBOs) – most of these are based in rural areas and their constituencies are the rural communities.

Finally, and perhaps very important, civil society in these countries has developed into broad “class” divisions – still in the stage of formation rather than “formed classes in themselves”. At the top is the “elite” – those at the top of the state structure holding political power and their counterpart in the private sector – the wealthy people (industrialist, those in the estate industry and in commerce etc); below the elite is the broad middle class – almost entirely in the urban areas; these are the educated middle and lower ranks public employees, the professionals, and mid-level traders etc. Below the middle class are the employed working people in industry, commerce, domestic employment and also the unemployed poor. In the rural areas the differentiation is less complex – there are the emerging rich and not so rich farmers, the peasant farmers, landless peasants.

Amongst the elite, political power and wealth are the bases of their interaction, internal conflicts and competition as well as solidarity. Amongst the middle class, competition for accumulation is fierce, and is part of the struggle to stay in the class or move upwards; insecurity is a major problem.

Amongst both the elite and the middle class, family ties and ethnicity play a very important role as principles of interaction. However Western cultural values and life style, derived mainly from the educational system and the prevalence if not dominance of Western culture through the mass media, play an important role in the behaviour pattern and ambitions of individuals in these classes.

External actors – both political and economic - play an important role in the dynamics of the elite class, in both the political and economic arenas.

The modern African elite, as a class, has not been much complimented by their own people or internationally (there are of course exception of individual leaders – Mandela etc – but such individuals are a great exception. However as a “class”, the African elite have been called by many names, such as the “Predator Elite” the “Rent Seeking Elite”, and the “Bureaucratic Bourgeoisie”. But it

was Fanon, who was deeply involved in the nationalist struggle, and who had the harshest characterisation of the elite. He considers the elite as part of the middle class and he describes them as ... “..... “. However, if this description was too harsh because it was made at the time when the modern African elite was at the point of taking power in 1960, and therefore Fanon was simply speculating about their future behaviour, one should therefore ask as to what are they like 50 years later after being power? Here is one answer from an insider – the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zinazwi – who describe their role within the African state and private sector.

He says:

*‘African states have been given names such as neopatrimonial, prebendial, vampire and various other exotic names. The underlying fact is that African states are systems of patronage and are closely associated with rent-seeking activities. Their external relationship is designed to generate funds that oil this network of patronage. Their trading system is designed to collect revenue to oil the system. Much of the productive activity is mired in a system of irrational licenses and protection that is designed to augment the possibilities of rent collection. Much of the private sector in the continent is an active and central element of this network of patronage and rent-seeking activity’.*

Thus both Fanon and Zinawi do not have kind words of the African elite. Given Zinawi’s description of the elite, it is not surprising that they would consider any armed conflict in their country, however small or remote, a threat to their interest and possible survival, and would therefore react strongly with military force.

In the rural areas traditional culture and values still predominates, and land ownership is a critical criteria for survival. In some countries the number of landless has and is still growing. Since they depend very much on employment, they often become an important source of recruitment into armed conflict(with the state or other groups) over the land issue.

Amongst the farmers, there are gradations – from a small one acre peasant farmer to owners of large farms and large livestock owners and traders. In some

**countries cattle keeping people – the Pastoralists - are a significant section of the country's population. And they are often far removed from the centre of economic and political power and thus are generally a marginalized section of the population – of civil society. Family ties, kinship and ethnic identities are the organising principles of interaction in the rural areas.**

**The interaction between the classes in formation and the established as well as the newer civil organisations, is not clear and need urgent study. And the history and role of the older civil organisations in contrast to that of the newer NGOs, CSOs etc. is interesting and it also need to be carefully studied. But this is not the part of this paper.**

**Any kind of armed conflict will immediately affect the parties involved and their respective sections of their civil society. At the same time such armed conflicts will be of serious concern to both the elite and middle class, even if it is taking place in a remote rural farming or pastoral areas. Hence the political elite in particular tend to react rather violently to such conflicts, interpreting them in terms of law and order, as affecting foreign investment as well as or their very political survival. Hence the gut reactions of governments (which are run by the elite) are - to use force to stop any conflict that starts – often after the violence has subsided. In such circumstances conflicts subsides for a while and then starts again later. Sometimes the governments intensify such conflicts by taking side – supporting one faction against another.**

**But what role do the different organisations of civil society (both the new and the older ones) play either directly in the conflict itself or in trying to resolve the conflict?**

**To answer this question we need to understand the nature and characteristics of these organisations.**

## **Civil Society Organisations (CSOs): Nature, Types and Characteristics.**

As stated earlier, broadly there are two types of civil society organisations:-

### **(i) The long established organisations:**

These organisations some of which were established during the colonial period and some of which participated in the anti-colonial struggles – political parties, labour unions, some professional organisations (e.g. teachers), women, youth and the peasants who were less organised nationally but strongly organised ethnically. Many of these organisations were banned and often operated clandestinely etc. But solidarity, organisational experience, and the vision of freedom and democratic society kept them going during the difficult period before independence. After independence the struggle of these organisations began to focus on the specific interest of their constituencies – workers, peasants/farmers, teachers, women, youth etc. After the first decade of independence came the one party system whose rationale was the maintenance of national unity and nation-building. During this period, it became government policy to co-opt these organisations as part of the political structure of the government, directly or indirectly. Their leadership was totally captured by the government and their support of government policies was obligatory and automatic. Almost all these organisations were urban based and specifically in the capital. Exception are peasant associations of various types – mainly in the agriculturally more developed areas. In the marginalized arid zones which are occupied mainly by Pastoralists, civil society was and still is organised along purely traditional principles. Pastoralists were not part of or involved in any of these organisations.

Despite the shortcomings of these long established organisations, their respective constituencies provide them with a strong social base. They were thus feared by governments, the private sector and recently by donors.

If any armed conflict (between two communities over some resource) takes place, however small and however remote from the capital, it was considered by the government as being anti-state and dangerous to the unity of the nation. All the organisations were thus obliged to support this government stand which then

justified the government in taking police/military action against the parties in the conflict. Sometimes religious leaders and leaders of other organisations would be sent to discuss with the conflicting parties and to convince them to settle their fights through negotiations. Often such “civil” intervention takes place after the government had intervened militarily. If however a group of people – in urban or rural area – makes political demands, then the law and order reaction from government is immediate and police/military intervention was often very strong. The situation was considered of high security risk and dangerous to the very survival of the state. Civilian leaders were not allowed to play any role in this kind of situation.

Under military regime, civilian leaders (whether of organisations or independent) were not allowed to play any role in such conflict, unless as intermediaries appointed by the state.

Hence the long established civil organisations played little, if any, role in resolving conflicts or peace building – whether under one party civilian rule or under military regimes.

Today most of these organisations (except for the Women and some religious organisations) have been weakened either by legislation (labour unions) or by various government manoeuvres against strikes or the continuation of strong civil associations with an important constituency or social base. More importantly these organisations are ignored by donors and therefore starved of resources for their activities especially for collective bargaining. During the last twenty years, Governments and donors have shifted their attention to NGOs, CSOs, CBOs – the civil organisations which have emerged during this period. To a large extent, this situation continues in the present.

## **(ii) Enter the new CSOs/NGOs.**

After the Nationalist struggle, the then existing CSOs did not play any noteworthy role in preventing or resolving internal armed conflicts which took place in their respective countries. And during the last twenty years, they have been restricted in their activities, ignored by both governments and donors, have become starved of resources and generally disorganised and stagnating.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> South Africa is a partial exception

During this same period however – since the early eighties – two types of organisations conducted the struggle for democracy. Firstly some of the long established organisations, especially religious and women organisation, which had been under tight control of the governments during the 70s and 80s. Secondly there emerged the new CSOs which also fought for democratisations – human rights and multi party system. By the early 1990s when most African countries opened up to multi-party system, the number of these new CSOs had increased and attention of both government and the donor community was focussed on these new CSOs.

These new CSOs were and still are distinctly different from the older CSOs. In order to find out if these new CSOs have or are playing any role in preventing or resolving armed conflicts, it is important that we looked carefully at their nature and characteristics.

In an introduction to a recent study of CSOs in four East African countries, I characterised the CSOs based on the finding of the research as follows.<sup>2</sup> (I will quote extensively from the introduction, since what I said there is very appropriate to this part of this paper).

### **Civil Society and the Range of CSOs**

Most of the CSOs in the countries studied came into being after the multi-party system started to operate in the countries. Thus the history of CSOs in these countries is very short. And yet they flourished in large numbers. In Uganda for example, between 1986 and April 2001, an incredible number of CSOs/NGOs were established – a total of 4200. This is at the rate of 280 a year! And the story is roughly similar – though the exact numbers may vary – in all the countries. Hence this phenomenal growth of CSOs is an important pointer at the nature of state-society relation in these countries. And since most of these recent CSOs are largely funded by external donors, it is also an indication of the extensive role foreign donors play in their attempt to influence or shape civil society. Needless to say, this role has significant political implications.

This high-speed growth of CSOs, also has other serious implications. Firstly CSOs have become a big and an important industry in these countries. They are

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<sup>2</sup> “Introduction” p viii & ix, in Leadership, Civil Society and Democratisation in Africa: Case Studies from Eastern Africa, DPMF Publication, 2002, Addis Ababa.

an industry in terms of employing a substantial section of the urban middle class; but they are also an industry in terms of creating an important space for discourse and activities. Secondly, given the rapidity in which CSOs are established, they are obviously too recent, as institutions, to build up capacity to manage themselves properly and professionally. Thirdly, given the limited time these CSOs have been in existence, they are unlikely to have accomplished much of their objectives and missions. Fourthly, most of the significant CSOs are urban based and are run by members of the educated middle class. Finally, the CSOs vary (a) in their location (rural/urban) (b) in their history (some are old, but most are new), (c) their size (some have mass support, some are large umbrella organisations while most are small) (d) in their mission (some defend the political rights and economic interests of their members, others advocate for respect of human rights, while most are simply developmental oriented), (e) they vary greatly in their organisational structures and achievements, and (f) in their relations with the state (cooperative, co-opted, hostile and confrontational).

In Kenya for example (and this is replicated in the other countries), CSOs have been described in the following terms: -

*Kenya has a varied and dense network of voluntary and civic associations. Urban civil society appears to be quantitatively different from that found in rural areas. Rural associations are oriented essentially towards improving the material quality of life; a large proportion of rural voluntary organisations are credit unions, cooperatives and labour pools. Student and professional groups are concentrated in urban civil society and played a major role in pressing the government to reinstate multi-party politics in the period 1990-92 and to accede to at least minimal constitutional reforms prior to the operatives 1997 General Elections. (Jamhuri ya Kenya of June 2000).*

Several important matters have been raised and which cut across all types of CSOs and apply to the majority of them. We list these below without any order of importance: -

- (a) many CSO officials and leaders lack skills and capacity to administer and manage the organisations

- (b) there are many CSOs which have very narrow social base or constituency – some are simply tribally based; this is in contrast to some which have wide and national membership/constituency;
- (c) most CSOs are faced with serious problems of financial mismanagement
- (d) many CSOs do not practice democratic governance; they generally have undemocratic power struggles for leadership, particularly during succession;
- (e) many CSOs have agendas and priorities which do not reflect the needs of their constituencies;
- (f) most are totally dependent on external donor funding, which raises questions on their sustainability, and the impact of donors on the CSOs agenda and leadership;
- (g) relationship with governments varies from cooperation, cooption, to confrontation and hostility;

These are serious weaknesses which reflect the nature of the particular sector of civil societies from which the CSOs have emerged, despite the differences in the histories and experiences of African countries. These weaknesses also reflect the environment within which these CSOs have been operating such as the short period during which the CSOs have been operating, the very rapid and massive growth rate of CSOs, the inexperience of the middle class in running these types of voluntary organisations, the absence of a culture of accountability and transparency in the middle class section of civil societies, the role of the donor community and the suspicious attitude of the governments towards CSOs and whose gut reaction is either to co-opt the CSOs or to oppose them.

Civil Society in general and the middle class in particular are evolving in most African countries. At the same time the role of the donor community in targeting and supporting these CSOs is increasing, while governments are slowly changing its hostile attitude to an acceptance and sometime cooption of these CSOs. Clearly therefore these new CSOs are evolving and are possibly destined to play a more active role in the civil society – state relations in the future. This I hope will include their involvement in preventing and resolving such armed communal conflicts in their countries as well as playing an even more important role of peace building.

### **Concluding Remarks**

**In addition to the four Eastern African countries, DPMF also conducted a similar study of civil society in six southern African countries (South Africa, Namibia, Zambia, Lesotho, Botswana and Swaziland). Both these studies clearly indicates that most of the CSOs focus on issues of Democracy and Human Rights, special single interest (e.g. women's rights and advancement) and development issues – mainly small organisations focusing on credit/micro-finance and cooperatives in the rural areas. Resolving conflicts is not an objective in any of these organisation. However, very recently, (in Kenya and South Africa) there have emerged several NGOs which are concerned with conflict, peace and security not only within their borders but beyond. These NGOS carry our research and some training for the larger armed civil war types of conflicts rather than getting involved in negotiations or in active programmes in post conflict situation. Also there are hardly any African NGOs/CSOs which are involved humanitarian assistance (exception in some of the critical civil war countries – DRC, Burundi, Liberia etc – and in these cases the African NGOs are in partnership with International NGOs). There are of course many Africans working in International NGOs.**

**An encouraging development is the recent AU focus on Peace and Security. Here the AU is almost entirely concerned with the large civil war conflicts – facilitating negotiations and keeping the peace at the end of the conflict. Also encouraging is the AU's recent support for a Programme of training in Disaster .....Management to be carried out by the Tripoli based ACARTSOD. But the AU plays no role in the smaller armed conflicts of which this paper has focussed, leaving such conflicts to the exclusive domain and monopoly of the governments in each country. And as we have argued earlier, most governments treat such conflicts as issue of security and law and order, using the police and military to put down the fighting or to attempt to prevent the continuation of the fighting. Invariably, governments fail in these situations and the fighting continues after some months etc. It is encouraging however to note that governments under intense pressure from important African CSOs, are beginning to accept the approach that such armed conflicts need to be treated through (a) traditional leaders of the parties concerned and of their neighbours, and (b) to tackle the root causes of the conflict. This does not mean that governments have abandoned**

**the use of the police and the military approach – as witnessed in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Nigeria to mention some examples.**

**It is also encouraging to note that there have been some reports of some indigenous organisations in rural areas which sprang up in the heat of civil war (in DRC, Sierra Leon) to try to diffuse the war and failing which they tried to help those affected with humanitarian assistance despite their lack of resources and no contact with either donors, foreign NGOs (which are normally absent in the heat of civil wars in rural areas) or whatever government that existed in the capital. It has also been recently reported from the North Western region of Kenya (especially amongst the Somali), that women have organised themselves to pressurising the elders and the young men not to support fights or to intervene and start negotiation as well as organising humanitarian assistance. Also in Angola, towards the end of that brutal and extensive civil war, the Churches began to be active in supporting and encouraging peace moves and negotiations between UNITA and the Government. But these are rare examples.**

**Altogether however the majority of CSOs do not play any role in preventing and resolving armed conflicts or in peace building programmes. But this is an evolving situation and there are signs that rural civil society is slowly realising that by organising their own CSOs, they can play a more active and positive role in preventing and resolving conflicts as well as in peace building activities.**

**Unfortunately the large urban based CSOs are mainly concerned with their own single interests, criticising government or more recently actually joining governments.**