



**ISSUES AND CHALLENGES
FACING THE CIVIL SOCIETY SECTOR IN LIBERIA**

Working Paper

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I. Introduction

Burgeoning but effective civil society organizations (CSOs) are catalyst for change, healthy for enhancing good governance and critical for a post-conflict country like Liberia. CSOs perform a plethora of roles in health, justice, education, politics and other general governance issues that contribute substantially to societal stability and development. However, CSOs are confronted with challenges that impede their effectiveness and keep them rooted in mundane initiatives that often lead to their premature demise. The qualitative and quantitative growth of CSOs in Liberia in the last twenty years have been stupendous, but this growth has been punctuated by different interests and actors that have used civil society as a platform to project varied and diametrically polarized interests. Nonetheless, whatever the basis for CSOs existence, it is clear and that is they have contributed substantially to the democratization of Liberia and the fight for human and civil rights.

Liberia's nascent democracy places CSOs in the limelight, obligating them to help fight for and maintain a pluralistic system that provides ample space for impacting national growth, development and democracy. Historically, the stage has been populated by unpatriotic Liberians who have weakened public systems and controls for personal pecuniary benefits. To effectively engage a system of conflicting values, CSOs have to develop the competence, tenacity and governance structures that would allow them to be a functional player in creating a wholesome functional state. This working paper emerges out of the compelling aspiration for a better governance system for CSOs that would make them productive, aggressive and responsive to their beneficiaries and benefactors. This paper will look at the historical perspective of CSOs in Liberia, their legal and institutional framework and the issues and challenges they face. A final viewpoint should allow for the proffering of ideas that would help CSOs mitigate some of the many challenges they face. . How does the existing environment limit CSOs' operating space? Subsequent analysis will attempt to examine the challenges CSOs face while interacting with varied influences and environmental factors.

II. CSO Defined

This paper is meant to be discussed by Liberian CSOs focused on civil liberties, human rights and general good governance issues. It is important for us to have a working definition of what is civil society. We reference the definition proffered by the Center for Civil Society at the London School of Economics which states, "Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy group."

III. Brief History of Civil Society Organizations

It is difficult to enumerate and define CSOs' role in the first half of Liberia's one hundred and sixty two years of existence, but it is comprehensible that a governance structure that sanctioned political and economic marginalization of majority of its citizens fertilized the environment for a societal awakening that led to advocacy for better governance and then political struggles that culminated into years of violent conflict. Freedom of movement and assemblage enshrined in the Constitution crystallized the establishment of various movements. But early civil movements that advocated change had a veneer of political leanings that blurred their objectivity and made them instrument of power-seeking leaders. Individual advocates like Albert Porte captured the soul of the nation in their writings, but sustained impact on governance required consolidated efforts from groups perceived by government and other stakeholders as being neutral, reform-focused and well organized. Many of the CSOs that advocated change in

the period between 1960 and 1990 were politically aligned and not trusted by government as credible partners for change. Civil movements such as the Movement for Justice in Africa, SUSUKU, Progress Alliance of Liberia (PAL) exploited the space and commingle the people thirst for change with a spice of political adventurism and civil action.

All of these considered, CSOs in Liberia, as agents of policy reform advocacy and good governance are a product of the nineties – a period when civil and human rights were abrogated by internecine conflict that allowed dictatorship and mayhem to flourish. During this period CSOs grew in number and stature to engage issues directly aligned with the public good. Issues that claimed center-stage and remain relevant today transcend political advocacy to more research and policy issues in areas related to health, education, human rights and civil liberty, corruption, environment, et cetera. As the new CSO dispensation is more issue-based and clearer, it is now possible to pinpoint political activists from actual CSO practitioners. This dichotomy requires that CSO practitioners lead by example and development the intellectual strength to withstand the shifting patterns in governance.

IV. Legal and Institutional Framework

Civil society in Liberia takes its motivation from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 which in Article 20 declares “everyone has the right to peaceful assembly and association”, and many other existing global rights instruments that underscore freedom of speech as a fundamental human right issue. In addition, the Liberian Constitution buttresses these provisions by indicating several rights for the freedom and human rights of Liberian under Chapter 3 – Fundamental Rights Article 11 to 26.

In order to legitimize their existence and functionality, CSOs must follow an incorporation process at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and acquire a certificate of registration from the Ministry of Planning and Economics Affairs (MPEA). CSOs are subject to regulatory oversight and yearly registration with the government (MPEA). However, this regulatory oversight has not always been performed in line with case merit and legality. CSOs active in human rights and governance have faced substantial scrutiny and harassment from government as they become more critical in scrutinizing public policy and bad laws. The Doe Administration did not allow the space for effective CSOs grounding; student movements which were the popular voice were persistently silenced by brute force. Also, abuses to CSOs were pronounced during the regime of Charles Taylor. Some cases of reference was the arrest and detention of rights advocate Aloysius Toe of the Foundation for Human Rights and Democracy (FORHD), current Solicitor General Tiawon Gongloe, and several members of the media who were victimized for their unwavering stance against abuses perpetrated by the government. Post Taylor Liberia has witness the registration and mushrooming of new CSOs. Unfortunately, the survivor of many of these organizations is questionable; weak resource mobilization regimes, limited donor funding and intense competition rule many out.

V. Problems faced by CSO in Liberia

The operations of CSOs in Liberia are impeded by several factors - both external and internal. External influences include influences from foreign sources within and outside our borders, government and local political forces. Internal influences are those factors internal that affect CSOs but are within their control to change. There is insouciance to reform and ensure structural transformation. Also external and internal environments impinge upon CSO's output and performance.

a. Financial Dependency

Approximately ninety-five percent of CSOs funding are from external sources. The dependence on external sources for subsistence though helpful can also be a source of major uncertainty in the delivery of CSOs programs and projects. The lack of predictability of funding undermines CSOs hold on

professional staff and sustainability of projects. CSOs long-term survival and effective implementation of programs is linked to the availability of funds. When CSOs are in a state of dependence, their independence to make program decisions and ensure that the right programs are pursued for beneficiaries, is diluted. Reliance on external funding may lead donors to control the agenda of the CSOs; this control in many instances run counter to the objectives of CSOs.

CSOs caught in the web of reliance on external donors lead an unpredictable existence. There is the propensity that an imbalance in allegiance to external donors and local beneficiaries will exist and there is the tendency to lend credence to the perception that CSOs tied to external donors have less autonomy and their accountability is indeterminable - "CSOs are tied to the hands that feed them".

The lure of funds linked to donors that have agendas that are pro or anti-government is a challenge. Many of the funds received by local institutions are channeled through proxy organizations that receive substantial funding through government agencies and multilateral organizations. External donors may target pro-government groups at some point and when there is a policy shift because of disagreement with the government these donors revert to "anti-government" organizations. Organizations are in a quagmire when they have to change their posture to meet changing donor posture.

b. Human Resource Challenges

"The number-one resource for a great social sector organization is having enough of the right people willing to commit themselves to the mission." The resource constraints of CSOs are often underestimated. These constraints also have human resources implications. Often, the number of people with the capacity, critical perspective and inclination to be activists and CSO administrators are in short supply. Becoming an activist weighs much on compassion and conviction rather than prospects of wealth— it has a great deal to do with an understanding of, and deep concern about, injustice and a dedication to working for substantive reforms. In a small country like Liberia, it takes a lot of guts to sustain advocacy work, and often entails considerable personal costs. Today as the issues CSOs deal with are mostly policy driven and requires knowledge of key issues, professionalism tagged to activism is needed. The area is plagued with massive brain-drain as leading CSO intellectuals and activists are being co-opted to government, the United Nations system, international non-governmental organizations and the private business sector. The pool of professionals is small and CSOs are unable to attract talented individuals and issue-based professionals because of financial constraints.

CSOs are challenged through human resource constraints to deal with leadership, recruiting and retaining talent, and managing and developing people that help them meet the demands of an every changing policy environment. Short-term earmarked funding leaves CSOs vulnerable as professionals are caught waiting for the next project that may just never come. The "brain drain and strain" associated with CSOs is a major challenge to effective analysis and impact on key policy matters. The burden of fewer professional and a cadre of trainees who get trained and leaves for greener pastures is a great barrier to CSOs' productivity. Economic downturns in donor countries do not help as reduction in funding by key donors leave many CSOs competing for small packets of fund.

c. Sustainability

Achieving sustainability for projects and programs that stakeholders' especially local people take and own is a challenge. To gain the trust of communities within which they work, sustained engagement is useful. Besides, as CSOs move from radical approaches that promote sit-ins, strikes and constant confrontation with government, the onus is on them to build creditable and professional organizations that constantly engage and are capable of sustained engagement with communities, donors and the government. Lack of sustained engagement undermines CSOs effectiveness overtime. There is the propensity for CSOs to move from one project area to another without building long-term relationships with benefi-

ciaries of their programs.

Many CSOs executives point to the number of projects undertaken say within a year as key achievements, but looking closely at project impact, one wonders what impact these projects have had on its beneficiaries. What were their inputs in program formulation? Was the problem addressed critical to the beneficiaries? What is the state of the projects since completion? Are the beneficiaries utilizing skills acquired? Are there mechanisms for post program engagement with target community? The timeframe of project, funding and the effectiveness of governing structure of CSOs are factors that impact sustainability. It is difficult for project beneficiaries to commit themselves to post program engagement with CSOs if they do not find the operational values and goals of the organization credible. Beneficiaries are inclined to sustain engagement with CSOs that are knowledgeable and passionate about the projects they implement.

d. Transparency, Accountability and Ethics

The demands for transparency, accountability and ethical standards should not only be ascribed to public agencies and corporate entities, but should also serve as defining principles for the operation of all entities in a functional democracy. Inculcating values of transparency, accountability and ethical standards is a major challenge for CSOs. Moreover, there is the question that resonates today “to whom are CSOs/NGOs accountable - to the public or donor agencies? Accountability should encompass both financial and administrative information and records. But the fundamental question remains should CSOs only demonstrate fiscal and administrative accountability to their donors? What about the people (beneficiaries) whose concerns were used as a problem that needed to be addressed? Also, what about the government that is often plastered with accusations of corruption and being a pursuer of bad policies? Does not government have the right to know about CSO fiscal and administrative management? There is today increased demands emerging from government and other stakeholders for transparency and accountability on the part of CSOs, in order to legitimize the quest to inculcate similar values into others.

Maintaining transparent, accountable and sound ethical standards are useful for cementing the standing of CSOs in Liberia. This is significant because CSOs as watchdogs of society need to set good example in their endeavor to safeguard society from inimical influences.

e. Decentralization

The entrench centralization of key CSOs activities making in Monrovia weakens their ability to appraise the full extend of challenges that exist at the sub-national level. It is important that CSOs in a bid to increase their relevance decentralize their activities and rendezvous with actors both at the national and sub-national. This is significant as it allows them the opportunity to benefit from the rewarding collaboration that helps give their vision greater momentum for national success. The failure to collaborate substantively with communities at the sub-national level leaves CSOs disconnected from the real issues that face rural communities. CSOs scattered engagement with sub-national communities on various issues leave a trail of distrust as there is no sustain interaction and communities realize that CSOs are unable to deal with their problems.

The challenges that CSOs with limited financial capacity face in opening offices at the sub-national level is Herculean, but the benefits in terms of reach and impact on policies and governance once this done can be awesome. The ownership of activities conducted by CSOs at the sub-national level is critical in pursuance of a national strategy for decentralization of political and fiscal affairs. For CSOs to impact policies specifically tied to poverty reduction strategy and the “popular” County Development Fund, then CSOs must also decentralize so that they understand the issue and cultivate advocates at the grassroots level who can address local policy matters.

f. Collaboration between Groups/Coalitions

There is a Krio proverb that says “One finger can’t pick up a palm kernel.” Effective coalitions are a quintessence of CSOs and actors with shared values and convictions. CSOs collaboration through coalitions provides an important instrument to engage policymakers and advocates against unfavorable policies. Effective and results oriented coalitions can be intricate to organize, fund and sustain. Many coalitions have been formed in Liberia, but funding, effective leadership and sustainability has been a problem. Individual egos characterized by an engrained fancy for the limelight subordinates coalition interest to personal interest. Many times, heads of coalitions relegate the interest of member organizations and objectives and elevate the interest of their own organizations and themselves to the fore. Many of the challenges that face CSOs individually are faced by the CSOs coalitions.

g. Policy Advocacy

The formulation of policies is no longer preserved for government. The democratization of countries comes with demands for better governance and these demands require that CSOs create or demand the space for participation at various levels of a government development agenda. The rhetoric of good governance preached by government themselves and multilateral institutions place the onus on CSOs to understand the nexus of issues that confronts the collective desire for good governance. CSOs actors understanding of the critical issues that involves simple yet complex policy matters and requires expert scrutiny determine whether CS contribution can help effect change.

The adequacy and depth of CSOs contribution to policy issues in Liberia is limited. There is a serious lack of intellectual capacity to deal with the complex socio-economic and political issues that populate the national agenda. Many CS practitioners lack the experience and there are limited financial resources to attract and retain experienced professionals. CSOs have to compete with government and international organizations for staff that have the adequacy to navigate the diverse issue-based policy implementation terrain. The lack of technical and intellectual depth of CSOs to sufficiently engage government on major policy issue leave them overlooked and weakened. Under these challenges and constrains, CSOs tend to do limited research on policy matters and contribution is limited to rhetoric bordered on generalities. Governments are sensitive to the incompetence of its Civil Society (CS) and responsive when they know they are dealing with a CS that is informed and a valuable partner. The imbalance that comes with a CS weak on policy matters can manifest itself in constant confusion and failure of constructive engagement between CSOs and government.

VI. Conclusions and proposal for reforms

The challenges and issues that face CSOs are manifold; we have addressed some in this paper and are well aware that CSOs practitioners’ faithful to the cause can enumerate several challenges and issues that keep CSOs complacent and ineffective. While we have elaborated on the challenges and issues it is equally important that we proffer some ideas on how these issues can be mitigated.

a. Financial dependency

The challenges that come with financial reliance on donor is difficult to mitigate but it is not impossible for CSOs to minimize their dependence on donor such that they can preserve their independence when required. CSOs independence rest on the effectiveness of their internal governance structures and the methodology used to implement their projects. Sound governance structures are a sine quo non to a healthy CSO and a healthy CSO should have the ability to attract resources that are untied to conditionalities. CSOs can also mitigate the reliance on donor by amalgamate their strength and pursuing shared

vision and objectives. Liberian CSOs are yet to tap local mobilization of resources. Membership fees, local corporate sponsorship and quantification of expertise to provide consultancy to other CSOs are ways that organizations can generate funding. Investment in real estate that could be utilized by other CSOs for meetings and conferences can contribute to CSO independence. There is nothing that stops a well grounded CSO from accessing bank loans.

b. Dealing with Human Resource Challenges

An effective CSO is just as good as the staff it has. An attractive CSO that people want to work for is clearly articulated in the quality of work. CSO quality of work attracts funding and funding is linked to attraction and retention of professionals. Here are some points that should help to mitigate the human resource challenges faced by CSOs:

- CSOs should seek to pursue a path of transparency and objectivity in recruitment – this should stem the practice of CSOs leaders employing relations and friends.
- CSOs must sell themselves in the market place so that young graduates from the universities see them as initial point of entry in building a career.
- Be sincere to benefactors and beneficiaries about the human resource constraints the organization faces.
- Seek pro bono assistance from professionals in the private sector who can lend skills set during vacation to help build the capacity of staff and share experience. Professionals want to affiliate with great organizations.

c. Decentralization and Sustainability

Decentralization of program activities comes with a cost. The impact of being closer to the beneficiaries can be amazing as it builds confidence and allows the CSO to deal with challenges nationally while understanding the temperature of the various stakeholders. Decentralization is also linked to sustainability. Some of the work national CSOs do can be sustained if they diversified their activities and open branch offices in local government areas. Sustainability is critical to the success of programs that are meant to transform the lives of people with long-term impact. CSOs are advised to include in their funding proposals activities linked to sustainability. Donors must be convinced that sustainable an action is more important than short-term showboating projects.

d. Transparency, Accountability and Ethics

CSOs must commit themselves to openness as they require of government and other organizations. Strong internal measures and procedures expressed through clearly defined instruments such as Code of conduct, personnel manuals, procurement manuals, accounting manual and other articulated internal policy documents can assist an organization function effectively. Effective CSOs must subscribe to an internal system that enhances confidence amongst staff. This is manifest when there is transparency and equity in the utilization of organizational resources. Documents that guide the organization are relevant if there are constantly reviewed and assessed by the CSO board of directors and external and internal auditors. External review mechanisms can be very useful.

e. Collaboration between Groups/Coalitions

Collaboration for effective CS engagement with the government and communities can take many forms. CSOs can collaborate through coalitions, advisory committees, commissions, consortia and alliances, networks and task forces. Whatever the form of collaboration, CSOs coalesce to impact government policy formulation and implementation. In collaboration, CSO can achieve more widespread reach

within a community than any single organization could attain. It is important that coalitions are not just formed because of the numbers and signatures that would sign petitions. Members in collaboration must have shared interest in the policies issues at hand. Capacity must be available for substantive contribution or the bulk of work falls to few persons and the collaboration is bound to fail.

f. Policy Advocacy

Effective policy advocacy is achieved when CSOs are staff by professionals who are not only convicted about their service to humanity, but are prepared to engage other professionals in government with counter proposal on policy issues. For CSOs to deal with and understand policies formulated by government they would have to build their internal capacity and learn to engage government actors constructively. Governments are not always willing to provide the space for CSOs to participate in policy formulation. It behooves CSOs to develop a posture that quashes the notion that CSOs are anti-government and only thrives on fueling conflicts. CSOs policy stance must be seen as an alternative that is good for the society. Policy advocacy should be supported by substantive research and information.

Finally, rising above issues of the myriad issues and challenges to understand the operational dynamics that drive CSOs interaction with their environment is a conundrum that needs to be unraveled. Trust Africa's support for the convening of CSO actors emphasizes their commendable thrust to enhance Liberian CSOs' interaction and preparedness to deal with external and internal issues and challenges.

