

Regional Workshop on Civil Society Sustainability in West Africa

Date: Thursday, November 17, 2015

Venue: WACSI Secretariat

Executive Summary

The issue of the sustainability of civil society in West Africa is becoming increasingly important with the gradual decline in significant funding from donors in the coming years. Globally, civil society has initiated discussions on the implications of this on their status and functioning in years to come. A workshop organised by the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) in partnership with the International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC) with support from Plan Sweden, Wilde Ganzen, Broederlijk Delen and CBM International, sought to create a platform for discussion and learning on the way forward. The meeting brought together 37 participants from nine (9) countries across Africa and beyond on November 17, 2015 at the WACSI Conference Hall in Accra, Ghana. The workshop provided the platform for WACSI to launch a research on the “Status of Civil Society Organisations Sustainability in Ghana”. The research was undertaken with the support from STAR Ghana. The overall objectives of the meeting were to:

- Take stock of issues and initiatives around sustainability in Ghana and the West Africa region;
- Enable dialogue between different stakeholders on sustainability;
- Present examples of how CSOs are responding to sustainability challenges;
- Explore mechanisms for supporting sustainability; and
- Identify priorities and develop initiatives for action on training, organisational development and research in the region and in other parts of the world.

Ms. Afadzinu, Executive Director of WACSI, welcomed participants to the workshop and introduced Ambassador Elkanah Odembo, Country director of Care International in Ghana, who delivered the opening remarks and launched the report.

Two presentations highlighting the findings of the research in Ghana as well as a more global perspective of sustainability in Africa and beyond were also delivered. Key to the research was the definition of sustainability, which was described as a generic concept defined more by the context of its application than by any settled meaning. The research also emphasised that sustainability goes beyond the availability of funds to the strong ability and capacity to maintain independence, continually generate expected funds to pursue planned operations, command strong recognition and legitimacy, and wield influential power in its mission and the sector in which it operates. The research’s major findings reveal that civil society in Ghana is under intense pressure to operate, survive and thrive in an increasingly competitive funding environment. The report also reveals that civil society is struggling to thrive in its bid to continue its operations. However, despite the challenging nature of resource mobilisation and operations, civil society continues to exist and thrive to contribute towards socio-economic development in Ghana. With respect to the quality of their interventions, CSOs in Ghana are generally in a state where the likelihood of beneficiaries continuing programmes and projects after donors exit looks less than satisfactory. Overall, the picture of sustainability in Ghana appears challenging and requires immediate work to ensure positive outcomes in and for the near future.

On the global front, civil society across the world faces some similar challenges such as persistent poverty, marginalisation and inequality; conflict and humanitarian crises; restrictions in the operating and political space for civil society; and shifts in official aid patterns caused by political and/or economic change. Identified trends however show some positive developments, which could be capitalised on to advance civil society sustainability. These include an increase in new donors and philanthropic giving in multiple forms; the spread of new technologies, which enable people to organise in different ways; economic growth that offers potential for change in people lives; and improved political governance, accountability and transparency in many places. Civil society organisations should therefore reposition themselves to take advantage of the current opportunities for self-sustenance.

In light of the findings of the research and presentations, civil society organisations who have shown themselves sustainable in one way or the other were invited to share their experiences and best practice to promote sharing and peer learning. INADES-Formation International, the Kenyan Community Development Foundation, CBM International and AfriKids shared their organisational experiences. Some measures taken to ensure sustainability in these organisations included diversification of funding through annual membership dues, implementation of social enterprise models, creation of endowment funds, the submission of proposals and tenders, and building staff capacity to raise funds. Others were institutional restructuring and branding, good internal governance, acquisition and development of organisational property, renting out of organisational property, partnership building and ‘friend raising’, mainstreaming of interventions, strategic long-term planning, eschewing wasteful habits, among others.

Discussions among participants after the presentations brought out some key issues facing civil society. Some identified challenges to civil society’s sustainability in West Africa were good leadership or the lack thereof, the weak institutional capacity of many CSOs, the unfriendly legislative framework within some countries, lack of legitimacy with stakeholders, lack of accountability of some CSOs causing a further lack of legitimacy with stakeholders, human crises and conflicts, and increased poverty and marginalisation in spite of the increased economic growth on the African continent among others. In proposing the way forward, participants proffered recommendations on what needs to change to ensure a truly sustainable sub-region in the near future. They mentioned the need for:

- A change in perceptions of both donors and civil society;
- A shift from donor dependency to citizen dependency;
- A shift from competition to cooperation among CSOs;
- Documentation and sharing of best practice amongst CSOs;
- Better coordination and networking using existent agenda such as the SDGs as a platform;
- Building strong relationships with new donors e.g. the private sector and philanthropists; and
- Capitalizing on new technologies to enhance networking and other opportunities;

The workshop served as a starting point of the discourse and work on sustainability in West Africa.

WACSI and INTRAC emphasised their commitment to work together to implement a series of programmes aimed at building up the evidence base on how organisations are adapting to change, exploring some issues around policy and regulatory frameworks and raising awareness of sustainability issues through dialogues at the sub-national, national and regional level.

Several partners pledged their support in moving the sustainability agenda further in the months and years to come. Others were encouraged to come on board to ensure a concerted drive in efforts to push the sustainability agenda forward.