

Praxis Note No. 67

# Survival is not enough: Building capacity of a thriving civil society in West Africa



Network and Alliance Building Training for IBIS Grant Partners in Sierra Leone – Photo by WACSI

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## Introduction

West Africa's flourishing civil society has had a direct impact on reducing deplorable levels of poverty in the region. A process where skills, institutions and knowledge are built, utilised, retained and nurtured to respond to a development challenge shapes the region's lively civil society. Capacity building is like a fertiliser necessary to encourage the healthy growth of civil society. It also helps civil society withstand the threats from unpredictable governance and instability in the region.

Post-2015, we predict the civil society environment may change considerably due to the shift from a focus on the millennium development goals to a new development agenda. The relationship between civil society and other development stakeholders may change based on emerging donor trends.

Capacity building has a vital contribution to make, but it needs to be done well. We have learnt that key ingredients of this effective fertilizer are ownership; use of local knowledge; an organisation-focused approach; and cultivating new leaders. Such quality capacity building requires quality support from far-sighted funders and increasingly from working in partnership with the private sector.

Civil society survival is not enough. The needs in West Africa are too great. We need to cultivate civil society capacity in such a way that it develops into a healthy, resilient sector that makes a sustainable contribution to development in the region.

## Civil society in West Africa: scope and constraints

Civil society in West Africa has evolved from a rich history of associational interactions and engagements with decision-makers. At different periods, community-based organisations, trade unions, professional associations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been the most influential.

Civil society<sup>1</sup> is not isolated from the state. The state provides the legal structure for civil society organisations (CSOs) and assures rules of engagement and procedures for consultations. Conversely, over the past two decades, civil society has increasingly filled gaps in state service delivery. It is no exaggeration to contend that without the efforts of civil society, the suffering of the poor, the marginalised, and the sick would be significantly more acute in the region. In addition, civil society provides a vital link between state and citizens, promoting democratic values, strengthening institutions, producing information and ideas, and building social capital. People expect a lot from civil society.

While expectations abound, many CSOs in West Africa suffer from a number of common challenges:

- *Inadequate capacity of CSOs to develop sustainable programmes:* Many CSOs do not have staff with sufficient technical and financial skills to effectively implement programmes. Capacity building opportunities are few and limited. In the face of recurring staff turnover, CSOs find themselves continually in need of capacity building.
- *Limited capacity to influence and conduct policy engagement:* Many CSOs do not have capacity to engage effectively in public policy conversations.<sup>2</sup> They lack research skills, credible platforms to express their views, and connections within government machineries.
- *Absence of a leadership culture that promotes performance and succession planning:* On the whole, leadership within CSOs is not adequately results-oriented. There are

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of this paper, the writer will use the phrases civil society and civil society organisations interchangeably

<sup>2</sup> There are clearly exceptions - some CSOs in the region are involved in exemplary initiatives

also not enough efforts by existing leaders to mentor and nurture leadership within the sector.

- *Insufficient organisational, technical and financial sustainability:* A rapid needs assessment conducted by CIVICUS and WACSI revealed that CSOs in West Africa do not have adequate skills and assets to sustain their organisations. Many organisations lack the organisational, technical, and financial muscle to thrive without project-based donor funding.

There are also wider issues arising from:

- *Dis-enabling political, legal and social environment:* in certain countries in the region, legal, political and social barriers have eroded civil society liberties. For example, in Liberia, the CSO Policy restricts the activities of CSOs by refusing to give in writing the reasons for denial of registration.

West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) began operations in 2007 as a direct response to these challenges plaguing CSOs.

### **WACSI: An Essential Civil Society Resource**

WACSI has implemented more than 90 capacity building programmes that have benefited over 2,158 practitioners from 2,015 organisations across Africa. These programmes equip civil society practitioners to competently play critical roles in promoting transformation in West Africa. These programmes have made significant strides in empowering civil society practitioners to strengthen internal governance systems of CSOs. CSOs have responded to society's challenges through achieving concrete project goals with the skills gained from these trainings.

WACSI's programmes continue to benefit practitioners from all over Africa. The

institute's programmes team works with CSOs to identify knowledge gaps to enhance effectiveness and efficiency through participatory and interactive methods. The institute also creates space for policy reflection and dialogue providing CSOs with the requisite skills to influence policies. An important component of this is its direct policy influencing work focused on promoting an enabling environment for civil society activity.

In 2007, WACSI began its journey by conducting capacity needs assessments of civil society in West Africa to identify capacity gaps. It was a participatory process, which involved the organisation of regional dialogue sessions among civil society actors from all 15 Economic Community Of West African States (ECOWAS) countries, plus Chad and Cameroon. This formed the basis of its capacity building programming and methodology.

<http://www.wacsi.org/>

## What have we learnt about strengthening civil society?

Over the years WACSI has learnt five key lessons for civil society strengthening and sustainability. This learning has become the foundation of our programming, underpins the institute's values and culture, and informs its operations.

### **Ownership and participation**

In 2008, we began developing training to strengthen the organisational structures of CSOs, specifically looking at their governance and management. We had extensive discussions with the project beneficiaries to determine what they perceived as their challenges and capacity gaps. At the end of the process, we realised that involving them from the initial phases made the training successful and relevant. It also encouraged the beneficiaries to commit and participate actively in the post-training change processes.

Since then, we always ensure that change processes resulting from learning are driven by the organisation itself and not imposed. We are currently mentoring and coaching 26 organisations from Niger, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Benin. The mentoring programme is designed to strengthen their existing structures and programmes. This programme has increased the consciousness of all participating organisations about the need to infuse their passion with professionalism. A number of the organisations have made significant changes by developing long-term strategic plans, financial and administrative policies, and clearly defined roles and responsibilities for their governance boards.

### **Local knowledge and learning**

We use local knowledge and learning methods to cultivate capacity. An example is the development of training modules for community policing groups in Nigeria, which was done in Hausa (one of the major local languages) and is delivered using indigenous methods like storytelling and experience sharing.

### **Organisation-focused capacity building**

We know that capacity strengthening usually proceeds from work with the individual practitioner. However, from experience, strategies based purely on skills, detached from the systems of practice and thought that constitute a functional organisation, will have little impact. This is reflected in the work WACSI has done with organisations across the region.

Most West African civil society organisations are structured with an emphasis on programme delivery at the expense of governance and management mostly due to the limited scope and focus of resources obtained. The focus has been on 'doing' and not 'being'.

Donor funding has and still is provided for programmes without taking into consideration the health and sustainability of the organisation. It is, however, evident

that the organisations that continue to invest in strengthening their organisational capacity to support their programme delivery are stronger, more robust and more influential.

Therefore, we have realised that the missing ingredient in a programme-centred narrative is organisational capacity. This has influenced WACSI's development of a long-term capacity building approach that responds to programming and organisational capacity gaps. This approach involves training, technical assistance, feedback sessions, documentation of impact stories, and monitoring and evaluation.

### **Preparing the next generation of leaders**

Leaders who are not prepared for change negatively affect the growth and influence of civil society. Many of the CSOs that were in the trenches in the fight for democratic development now have ageing founder-leaders. There is a need to cultivate a crop of new leaders who will take over from these champions of freedom and justice in the region. The mode of engagement has also changed, and though different countries are at different stages of democratic development, civil society does not necessarily have to have an antagonistic relationship with government and other development actors.

The region needs an open-minded crop of young leaders ready to engage with different actors and sectors, create partnerships and work together for common goals. WACSI is focused on strengthening the capacity of the next generation through a professional six-month internship experience and an annual civil society leadership programme.

The idea is to build a critical mass of leaders that would lead change in organisations within the region. This initiative has already started bearing fruit. Graduates from the programme are already making significant contributions within the region.

## Domestic resource mobilisation

Most CSOs rely on donor funding from external sources. We cannot assume this will continue. The funding climate looks set for drastic change. WACSI is currently developing a civil society sustainability programme that includes a section on domestic resource mobilisation to strengthen CSOs' capacity to obtain funding from domestic sources within the region and the continent. This is critical as international donor funding continues to diminish.

## Donor support for capacity building and organisational strengthening

The institute's work has shown that the quest for CSO sustainability in West Africa cannot be achieved without partnership with other key development stakeholders. Donor organisations and the private sector have a role to play to contribute to a thriving civil society by supporting effective capacity building.

## The role of donors

Funders seem to have a love-hate relationship with capacity building. A few donor organisations<sup>3</sup> continue to support civil society strengthening programmes. They have produced outcomes showing increased efficiency and longevity when combining capacity strengthening with capital infusion.

For example, The Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) was established in 2000 and forms part of the global Open Society Foundations Network of autonomous foundations. The foundation seeks to promote inclusive democratic governance, transparent and accountable institutions, and active citizenship in West Africa. OSIWA played a leading role in recognising the importance of civil society strengthening and initiated the creation of WACSI.

<sup>3</sup> Including the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA), STAR-Ghana, IBIS West Africa, Ford Foundation, GIZ, Trust Africa, the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) and the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF)

However, there are still a significant number of donor organisations not supporting capacity building as a key strategic objective. There is a growing reluctance of donor organisations to fund capacity building because of their dissatisfaction about its impact. This threatens the survival of CSO projects. Donor organisations that do not fund capacity building programmes continue to undermine the success of their projects. If donors want to see a project evolve, replicate and expand, they need to invest in capacity building.

Arguably, a donor organisation's interest in capacity building should be derived from the desire for leverage that involves increasing the impact of resources invested in CSOs.

### **Strategic Donor Support**

An article in *Harvard Business Review* by Michael Porter and Mark Kramer<sup>4</sup> identifies four distinct assets of donor organisations: (1) financial resources, (2) expertise, (3) independence, and a (4) long time horizon. How can these assets be leveraged?

Porter and Kramer highlight four strategies that are used by most donor organisations:

- *Selecting a wider choice of grant partners*, which is a process made stronger by capacity building;
- *Signalling other funders about how to conduct their work more effectively*, which involves promoting capacity building;
- *Improving the performance of grant recipients*, which involves organisational and operational capacity building; and
- *Advancing the overall state of knowledge and practice*, which comprises research and dissemination of knowledge through capacity building.

<sup>4</sup> Porter, Michael and Mark Kramer (Nov-Dec 1999), '[Philanthropy's new agenda: Creating value.](#)' *Harvard Business Review*.

The funders that accept that capacity building is essential to the sustainability of the civil society sector tend to use one of three approaches:

1. *Donor organisations directly providing capacity building services:* Some donor organisations oversee capacity building by hiring professionals and implementing programmes directly with their own staff. The biggest challenge with this approach is the inherent imbalance of power between donors and CSOs. This manifests in many ways, for instance, where donor organisations that also operate capacity building programmes are not careful to distinguish between those functions and their core grant-making activities. There may be ethical and practical reluctance of CSOs to use their capacity building service, which typically requires them to be candid about their organisational shortcomings. There is a strong temptation to reduce capacity building from what the CSO needs as an organisation, to what it needs to manage a grant accountably. In addition, donor organisations that handle capacity building in-house have higher operating expenses.
2. *Donor organisations using the services of consultants:* Some donor organisations use the services of local and foreign resource persons who they hire to train and provide consulting services for CSOs. This approach may require extensive oversight, resulting in higher overheads and fees. It is also not holistic and very often is piecemeal – hence the results may not be sustainable.
3. *Donor organisations partnering with non-profit capacity building providers:* Some donor organisations partner with capacity building institutions that exist for such a purpose. The non-profit make-up of these organisations and separation from funding decisions allows CSOs to be candid and open about their challenges and

weaknesses, ensuring the best possible outcomes. They also have a more holistic programme that takes an organisation from needs assessment to impact and follows through with the organisation's progress.

WACSI has found this third option to be effective as it allows donor organisations to concentrate on their core grant-giving activities. An indigenous capacity building provider with a non-profit character helps in building trust and long-term relationships with local CSOs. Such an organisation has the opportunity to invest heavily in local knowledge and research. This would then shape a customised curriculum for civil society. Capacity building providers such as WACSI have the specificity and capacity to respond to civil society's existing realities, having experienced it ourselves.

Capacity building takes place in the context of a partnership. This relationship has a profound influence on the success or otherwise of the capacity building. There are inherent challenges to address. These tensions manifest especially as capacity building programmes grow in scope. These can best be handled if roles are clearly defined from the outset, including providing mechanisms for the discussion and resolution of role conflicts.

We have found the following questions useful to explore with both funders and CSOs in developing any capacity building programme:

- Should a capacity assessment be required before CSOs can apply for a grant?
- How much information from a capacity assessment should be provided to the donor organisation?
- Will the donor organisation provide capacity building grants, or only fund capacity building as a part of a programme grant?
- Should capacity building programmes offered to grant partners be compulsory or voluntary?
- What about capacity building programmes that directly impact the

- donor organisation's grant?
- Should donors be required to pay for the capacity building related to their grants?
- Should a non-profit capacity building provider that has a partnership with a donor organisation be funded by an annual administrative grant or by project grants?
- Should CSOs receiving donor support be required to receive technical assistance from the capacity building provider?

We recognise the continuous change in the traditional aid system. We cannot assume the aid business will continue as usual. We believe that in West Africa it is vital for civil society to also build strategic partnerships with the private sector.

## The private sector's role in supporting CSO sustainability

The era where the private sector existed merely to maximise *shareholders'* profits is hopefully at an end. The private sector's impact on its *stakeholders* is an emerging standard of corporate performance. Today, stakeholders seek to know what companies can do for communities, not what communities can do for companies. The dynamics are changing and businesses are now beginning to assess the depth of their social value. This development presents opportunities for CSOs; there are a growing number of innovative and exciting new models and partnerships between companies and civil society that promote mutual benefits.

For example, in Ghana, the Vodafone Ghana Foundation provides volunteers to strengthen the managerial structures and systems of CSOs. The organisations that benefit from these capacity building services are provided the platform to publicise their work and their value to society. In addition, the MTN Ghana Foundation has started recognising and supporting programmes that have produced qualitative change in the lives of citizens. Through the platform dubbed 'MTN Heroes for Change,' up to

GH¢10,000 is given to each category winner and the overall winner receives project support of up to GH¢50,000 as a reward for good work.

So despite major differences between CSOs and the private sector in the region, there is evidence of increased engagement. CSOs are beginning to see a place for marketplace strategies in development work. An increasing number of companies are becoming acutely aware that the success of a business is directly linked to improved socio-economic conditions within the communities where it operates. As a result, a growing number of businesses and CSOs are beginning to discover common ground. The challenge for CSOs has been to approach companies with proposals that strengthen their brand and expand their market.

But it is clear that funding from the private sector is not a like-for-like replacement of 'aid' funding. The private sector provides funding for different reasons and access and management may be different as well. The private sector clearly has its own agenda and needs in engaging with civil society. It is therefore vital to learn from existing experiences. Sharing good practices as well as not-so-good ones can support a broader change in attitudes and create a more conducive environment for effective private sector and civil society partnerships.

## Conclusion

To overcome the enduring challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment, a thriving civil society needs to play a sustainable and effective role. They need to help ensure that West African governments actively and purposefully intervene in the economy.

As Hillary Clinton, former US Secretary of State, stated: "A genuine democracy is like a three-legged stool. One leg is responsive, accountable government; the second leg a dynamic, job-creating private sector; and the third leg is a robust and vibrant civil society."

Capacity building programmes and strategic partnerships between civil society and other key sectors are essential to nurture the performance and sustainability of civil society. The time has come for

governments, donors and the private sector to support civil society capacity building as a core strategic theme instead of an add-on to ensure the sector not only survives but also thrives.

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