



Strengthening National Institutions and Civil Society Organizations for Effective Conflict Prevention and Peace-Building

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The paradox of the African continent is this: At independence in the 1960s, the governance process was characterized by effective leadership armed with vision, strategic planning but crippled by the poverty of a human resource base to transform vision into reality — leaders, such as Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure, Gamal Nasser, Nyerere, Houphouet-Boigny ... had to recreate institutions from the ruins of colonialism and to try to beat a poor human resource base at home into shape, often complemented, as was the case in Nkrumah's Ghana, by human resource from the Diaspora, to run the state machine. Civil society was single-minded and political because the immediate goal was simple — nation building and continental solidarity.

Fast-forward to the 1970s and particularly after the end of the Cold War. No one can question the preponderance of a sophisticated and diverse human resource base and a plethora of communities and organizations referred to collectively as civil society; the African Diaspora is heavily pregnant with new migrants from the Mainland. But Africans are still searching for the emergence of a leadership capable of galvanizing this rich resource into action with vision and strategy.

Somewhere in this dilemma is anchored the crisis of governance — the incapacity of the post-Cold War State, through its institutions, and civil society, collectively and individually, to transform political, economic, corporate, social, cultural and environmental realities of the continent for the benefit of our peoples. Ask any person in the street about the manifestations of the African crisis and the answers will pour out without second thought — political paralysis, anemic leadership, food insecurity, poor competitiveness in the world market, institutional corruption, gender inequality, youth crisis, environmental degradation, hate media, impunity, hemorrhage of human and financial capital... Mix this shopping list of misery with state repression, land/religious/ethnic/chieftaincy disputes, increasing cross-border crime, human trafficking, child labor, proliferation of SALW, mercenaries, vigilante and other armed non-state groups, and the perfect improvised Molotov cocktail is assembled, waiting for a trigger.

And in many instances, the trigger has been pulled — the Congo Basin, Somalia, Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, Cote d'Ivoire... and Africa has been reaping the rewards — containing violence instead of developing. Elsewhere, the fingers are inching towards the trigger — Zimbabwe, Guinea, Togo and, indeed, almost every other country on the continent. The efficacy of African-led solutions to the unfolding

tragedies in Cote d'Ivoire, Somalia and Darfur is being questioned internationally even as these efforts continue to suffer from international indifference with regard to resources.

The term conflict prevention refers broadly to strategies and activities designed to reduce tensions or 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). In this sense, classical conflict prevention strategies are more appropriate for the so-called peaceful countries and those on the precipice. Peace-building, on the other hand, is conventionally used to refer to measures that are adopted in immediate post-conflict societies. In as much as the objective of peace-building is to rebuild institutions and norms, promote reconciliation and prevent the relapse of these societies into violence, peace-building is also conflict prevention. Furthermore, nominally 'peaceful' countries are often wracked by local violence with the potential to spiral into civil war, such as the chieftaincy disputes in northern Ghana, the Niger Delta crisis, the pastoralist-sedentary farmers' disputes in the Sahel regions as well as the Casamance and Sarahwi self-determination questions. Hence, peace-building strategies are required in these instances. In all instances, strategies and activities must be geared towards assuring human security.

What is causing the paralysis of the State in the face of the looming crisis? Why is the State, and also civil society, seemingly incapable of action to stop the rot and propel the African society to a higher level of resilience to violent conflict? What needs to be done to strengthen their capacities to undertake or accompany Track I and Track II conflict prevention and peace-building initiatives? The reasons are many and more complex than meet the eye. This author does not claim to know them all, nor does he pretend to proffer a magic wand for their resolution. By thinking aloud on the issues, however, he hopes to stimulate debate that would lead to the emergence of practical options for action.

Conflict prevention at the regional level

The African Union and its Regional Economic Communities have made appreciable progress in containing violence, particularly in Burundi and the Mano River Basin. They have often successfully combined military intervention with the use of influential mediators as high-level trouble-shooters to good effect in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Burundi and the Congo. Civil society also played critical roles in these efforts. What is less known is the discreet deployment of members of special organs for behind-the-scene mediation efforts. The AU deploys the Council of the Wise and ECOWAS uses the Council of Elders for fact-finding missions, election monitoring and local dispute resolution. Members of these councils are selected based on their social standing and vast experience acquired over the years as statesmen and women, ministers, ambassadors and traditional/religious leaders. As is often the case, most of them are retired with limited resources. This limits their impact. They require assistance by way of stipends in-between missions, secretarial support, the provision and use of basic modern information technology as well as regular briefings on developments on the continent and modern mediation techniques. This is an area for collaborative efforts between the RECs, donors and civil society organizations.

But the AU and its RECs are a mirror of the Member-States that constitute them, and can

only be efficient and effective to the degree that the political will for constitutional convergence and solidarity among the constituent States will allow them. They are yet to attain the degree of supranationality similar to that of the European Union. At best, therefore, they can only set norms and standards for national behavior and hope that the Member-States adherence to them would be achieved through persuasion and increasing rate of constitutional convergence. It is logical, therefore, to begin our discourse at the national level.

The State as the weakest link

If there is one strength that may be identified in the evolving post-Berlin Wall State in Africa, it may well be the increasing rejection of unconstitutional accession to power across the continent. In a way, the civil wars that are unfolding today may well be the death throes of coups d'état, authoritarian rule and other unconstitutional forms of government that were a la mode in the 1970s. The Development before Democracy paradigm of those years is giving way to a Democracy before Development model. However, in this inverted logic lies the fly in the ointment. As evidenced by the waning enthusiasm for elections and the 'democratization' processes, the people do not eat 'democracy'. The task before us is to shift gears to the 'Democracy AND Development' paradigm. And the State does not appear to be equipped for that transition.

The structural adjustment programs of the 1980s have done their utmost to turn the educational system in several countries into conveyer belts that churn out crippled graduates across the continent — Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal and elsewhere. They have devastated the agricultural sector, downgraded infrastructure development, crowded out the indigenous small and medium-scale producer and placed ever greater emphasis on the exploitation of non-renewable natural resources (oil, gas and solid minerals) to feed the Oliver Twist industries of the West and the emerging giant economies of Asia, notably China and India. If strategies are not adopted to reverse this trend, the structural causes of instability will persist.

The States have all but abandoned medium to long-term strategic planning in favor of short-term cash-and-carry projects designed to win votes in the next elections and earn pats on the back from 'development' partners. The domestication of regional and international strategic frameworks, such as NEPAD and the MDGs has since lost steam before it has had time to begin for a lack of promised financial inflow from guarantors from the G-7 nations. Therefore, national budgetary and development programs of the 'democratizing' nations on the continent have focused on short-term initiatives, such as the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act and the Millennium Challenge Account, that place overwhelming emphasis on the external trappings of democracy and human rights, as well as the war on terror, as defining indicators, much to the detriment of the productive sectors. Thus, the continent finds itself burning energy to fight the effects, rather than the causes, of underdevelopment and instability.

Consequently, the State machine and bureaucracy have not been positioned, mentally and physically, to meet the challenges of sustainable peace. Those concerned with strengthening the resilience of pre-conflict African societies to violence must focus on remolding the constitutive parts of the State, beginning with the political parties, which

provide the human resource base for the non-military arms of the State machine in a democracy — the executive, legislature and judiciary. The archetypal African political party is by essence undemocratic. Often owned by one person or a clique of 'well to do' /influential patrons, this party stifles internal debate and criminalizes democratic dissent. Worse, it is often built around ethnicity — a major accelerator of conflict. Women and youth are often not tolerated beyond the mobilization and campaign phases of party activity. In parliament, which must pass important national legislation and act as a check on executive, neither the majority party nor the opposition distinguishes between the national and the partisan. Parliamentarians are poorly equipped. A Deputy Speaker in a West African parliament recently lamented to me that most of her colleagues had no access to basic computers, many were not familiar with ICT and five parliamentarians shared one secretary!

This problem is magnified at the delivery end of the State bureaucracy — the ministries and the civil service. Poorly paid, behind the curve in modern technology and new ways of doing business, the civil service is steeped in petty corruption, stalls progress and encourages impunity. It is a job for life — no monitoring, evaluation and no sanctions. It is imperative that enhancement training, incentives and sanctions are applied in equal measure to instill professionalism, non-partisanship and the infusion of new better-equipped blood into the system.

How focused is civil society?

Far away from the capitals, the districts and rural areas of Africa have become the crucible in which violence is brewed on the continent. It is here that all the ills of the African society converge — infrastructure collapse, food insecurity, environmental degradation, mass exodus of the youth, gender inequality and gender-based exploitation, as well as land, water and chieftaincy disputes. It is a convenient point to begin our discourse on civil society. Analysts rightly classify traditional and religious groups under civil society and many have identified these institutions as agents par excellence for alternative dispute resolution. While this may be true, without sanitizing these structures from partisan politics, the traditional set-up may well supply the spark for civil wars. To ensure harmony in the periphery, traditional governance, dispute resolution and resource distribution must complement central government programs, and not be an extension of partisan politics. The reality, however, is different. Much has been written about the role of traditional/religious leaders in the genocide in Rwanda, Mobutu's divide-and-rule policies in the Congo and Ivorité in Cote d'Ivoire. In the Gambia, the Executive appoints and fires village chiefs and heads. The Dagbon crisis in northern Ghana owes much to the uncompromising attachment of the two main Gates (alternating chieftaincy clans) in Yendi to opposing political traditions in the country. Consequently, alternation of power at the top between the two main parties often provokes similar alternation in the traditional set-up, usually accompanied by bloodshed. In Senegal, the intrinsic links between the religious hierarchy and central government interrogates the role of traditional structures in governance and dispute resolution.

Thus, local land and water disputes often escalate into national crises. Several African countries share common river sources (the Gambia, Niger, Congo, Volta and Nile Rivers, to mention but a few). The overexploitation and pollution of these common assets could

well spark the next wave of violence across the continent. Cross-border community groups and environmental organizations need to be engaged resource and advocacy-wise to bring these issues to the fore of national and regional dialogue before they spiral out of control.

In effect, the most important civil society organizations in low-level conflict prevention and peace-building are the weak, resource-starved community, women, environmental and youth organizations in the rural areas. Paradoxically, they lack the capacity to attract donor support because they are too far from the capitals and lack the professional techniques in sourcing funding. They are either condemned to being appendages to central government politics or, at best, the feeder organizations of the well-placed, better-resourced NGOs in the capitals.

The big Non-Governmental Organizations in the capitals are much a part of the problems afflicting Africa as they are a part of the solution. Typically, the most well-known NGOs are the groups that focus on advocacy on the external trappings of democracy and human rights. Very few venture into developmental areas. Just like the State, they are organized as clan businesses; many shop around for the latest donor priorities and tailor professional funding requests to donor needs. Often, they are very small and close-knit but profess to undertake interventions from Archeology to Zoology. Like the State machine, they lack long-term planning. They are often at their best when the battle lines are drawn, such as fighting a dictator or other cause célèbre. Because they often focus on immediate threats, they are often ineffectual in peacetime and tend to drift into partisan politics, where they strategically place themselves as gatekeeper for in-flowing funds and plum outsourced government contracts. While this is the general picture, a few of them, particularly those operating in development and environment sectors have remained professional and critically independent in peacetime.

Similarly the media, which constitutes a critical advocacy tool in conflict prevention, often loses its way once the 'bogey man' is eliminated. Serious journalism, during the transition, gives way to partisan politics, entertainment, sports and rumor peddling. Not adhering to responsibility and ethical codes of serious journalism, many of these opinion-shaping organs descend into the role of cheerleaders in the campaigns of ethnic hatred and repression, as evidenced in Rwanda and Cote d'Ivoire among others.

Engaging post-conflict societies

Scoping of local and international efforts to return war-torn countries to a state of 'normalcy' points to one observation. Often, these efforts wind down considerably after the ritualistic elections that only elevate the societies to the point just before the outbreak of the just-resolved conflict. The DDRRR programs end without effective reconstruction, reintegration and reconciliation. The elections rarely produce consensual governments and national reconciliation is shoved into the back burner. Thus, no sooner do these societies emerge from conflict than they find themselves facing a relapse. Starved of resources because of competing demands elsewhere, the new dispensation is orphaned as soon as it is born and the tendency is to revert to the practices that led to the wars in the first place.

These observations might have informed the UN to establish the new Peace-building Commission, whose objective is to accompany post-conflict societies in the full

implementation of the RRR programs. It is critically important that capacity enhancement assistance is extended to critical stakeholders to enable them to play a decisive role in this new project. And for good reasons. The UNPBC has just chosen Sierra Leone and Burundi as the first beneficiaries of the sustained peace-building assistance. However, the framework being developed to implement the strategy leaves much to be desired. The UN has apparently requested the Governments of these countries to present their own strategic plan to serve as the blueprint for setting up the Country PBC and implementing the strategy.

Against the backdrop of the fact that the elections in these countries resulted in a return to partisan politics and incomplete reconciliation, any national strategic plan will only be partisan. It is critical that genuine national forums and expert meetings are held in these countries, with the active participation of all internal actors and the respective RECs with the view to developing an inclusive strategy. The importance of identifying and extending adequate financial and technical support to these critical actors — the political parties, specialist NGOs, women's groups, traditional groups, the media, regional experts and the RECs — are critical if the exercise is to culminate in developing a comprehensive plan of action and identifying groups that must constitute the Country Peace-building Commission. This will strengthen local ownership and sustainability of the exercise.

In lieu of a conclusion

This unstructured and at times provocative piece has been written with the author thinking on his feet. As pointed out, its objective is to provoke a debate on critical issues of our time as a prelude to the TrustAfrica brainstorming exercise. Even in its unstructured forms, it is the hope of the author that possible areas of intervention can be identified. These include the following:

- i. At all levels, to promote the emergence of new, responsible and responsive leadership that thinks regionally and globally, and acts locally for the benefits of society; and to actively support the mainstreaming of ICT in governance at all levels.
- ii. At the regional level, assistance to RECs to enhance their impacts in norm/standard setting, encouraging national adherence; equipping mediation organs with technical, information and financial support to make them more proactive not only on national issues but also on local issues with the potential to spiral out of control.
- iii. At the national level, to support long term planning, improve decision-making and program implementation through the infusion of modern technology and encouraging M&E culture within the bureaucracy.
- iv. To engage political parties as a strategy for structural conflict prevention.
- v. At the local level, to promote non-partisan dispute resolution, identify and groom community, women and traditional organizations that may normally not be able to access external resources, to make them more productive.
- vi. To identify chieftaincy/land/water disputes as critical areas for focused attention and support.
- vii. To encourage the established NGOs and media to develop long-term focus and accompany genuine efforts at all levels to carry out structural and operational conflict prevention.