The Role Of Civil Society Organizations In Conflict Resolution And Maintenance Of Peace In Africa

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Introduction

Just the mentioning of civil society a few years ago with regards to governance, peace and security on the continent would raise eyebrows. However, a perusal of the African Peace and Security Agenda would reveal that increasingly, civil society is being look upon as an important institution to support and complement the work of the African Union as the custodian of peace and security on the continent. This is evidence of a theoretical and policy acceptance on the value added role of civil society in the APSA. Thus, one could argue that the debate of the role of civil society in peace and security on the continent has been settled with regards to rational. This acceptance has however not settled the conceptual battle that rages about what really is civil society? Who do they work for and who do they account to? The bright spot of this conceptual battle I must stress is the continuous need for Africans and African institutions to own their agenda with regards to conflict prevention, resolution and maintenance of peace.

In an attempt to interrogate the role of civil society organisations in conflict resolution and maintenance of peace, it is my belief there are four critical questions to address. Where do civil society derive their mandate to play a role in the conflict prevention resolution and peacebuilding or rather what gives them the right to make any pronouncement on peace and security on the continent, what role can civil society play in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, how can they play this role, and what challenges do civil society face?
Where do civil society organisations derive their mandate to play a role in conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding?

From a conceptual and theoretical perspective, the paradigmatic shift from state to human security as the corner stone for the security discourse in Africa and the world implies the state is not the sole custodian of peace. The AU Common African Defence and Security Policy (CADSP), explains that the new notion of human security is a "multi-dimensional notion of security which embraces such issues as human rights; the right to participate fully in the process of governance; the right to equal development as well as the right to have access to resources and the basic necessities of life; the right to protection against poverty; the right to conducive education and health conditions; the right to protection against marginalization on the basis of gender; protection against natural disasters, as well as ecological and environmental degradation. Thus, from the definition of human security one can denote that security is not within the exclusive competence of the state as was the case before.

It is against this backdrop that the AU has made some policy pronouncements on the importance of civil society in conflict prevention, resolution and management.

- The AU’s foundational documents, especially the Constitutive Act of the African Union (2001), the Protocol Relating to the Establishment the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the African Union (2002) and the Statutes of the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC), provide ample space for the meaningful participation by African civil society organizations in conflict prevention. For instance, the Protocol Establishing the Peace and Security Council and the associated rules of procedure of the PSC envisage a greater role of African civil society in supplementing its capacity in the field of conflict prevention.

- The Constitutive Act of the African Union (2001) argues for the participation of the African peoples in the activities of the Union; the need to build a partnership between governments and all segments of civil society...[and promote] participation of the African peoples in the activities of the Union”.

- The Protocol Establishing the Peace and Security Council of the African Union (2002) article 20: The Peace and Security Council shall encourage non-governmental organizations, community-based and other civil society organizations, particularly women’s organizations, to participate actively in the efforts aimed at promoting peace, security and stability in Africa. When required, such organizations may be invited to address the Peace and Security Council.
• Decisions of the Assembly of the Heads of State and Government relating to participation of the African people in the African Union generally and in peace and security specifically; and

• Instruments regulating the peace and security mechanisms of the RECs as well as the decisions of the relevant authorities.

Institutionally the Economic, Social and Cultural Council of the African Union (ECOSOCC) it the most glaring example of how much the continent appreciate the role of civil society in human security.

Within this context, it is but logical to argue that the APSA envisage a critical role civil society can play in conflict prevention, management and resolution. However, this role is more of a support role.

What role can civil society play in conflict Prevention resolution and peacebuilding?

CSO's emerged as key players in the effort to prevent, mitigate and resolve conflicts in Africa since the late 1980s. This importance of civil society organisations in Africa has come about largely as a result of grassroots pressure that the continent has witnessed (coinciding with, and partly in reaction to, changes taking place in other parts of the world as a result of end of Cold War) and which led to a significant opening up of the political space in many parts of the continent. Consequently, a number of civil society organisations have distinguished themselves in critical areas of peacemaking and peacebuilding, through research on conflict and security or through grassroots peace advocacy and conflict resolution activities. They make a valuable contribution at every stage of the evolution of conflicts in Africa.

Factors that made CSO's practically well suited in the conflict resolution and maintenance of peace processes in Africa are:

- CSO's can be powerful advocates to meet constituent's needs-and therefore address sources of conflict
- CSO's often mobilise global, regional and national networks for support and resources
- CSO's can often use its unique position and legitimacy to facilitate processes or mediate conflict
- CSO's are not inhibited by internal bureaucracies therefore making it possible to move faster and do things on the ground.
- CSOs close proximity to conflict situations allows them to respond in a timely manner
CSOs have deep knowledge of regional and local issues, cultures, and relationships, and the ability to function in adverse circumstances even where governments cannot.

CSOs have a range of different approaches and roles to secure lasting conflict transformation and sustainable peace.

The need for structured mechanisms to prevent and mitigate conflicts is critical to achieving Africa’s peace and development agenda. In this regard, the roles of CSO’s in structural prevention (addressing the root causes) are:

- Addressing structural violence and promoting human security through development, human rights monitoring and promotion, prevention environmental degradation.

- Making governments and state structures more responsive - (through participation in political processes, policy dialogue, monitoring, advocacy campaigns, protests)

- Alleviating social tensions and conflict-through challenging xenophobia and discrimination, facilitating dialogue, and promoting tolerance and a culture of peace.

- Strengthening capacities to mediate conflict and manage differences through conflict resolution training, mediation services, education, promoting rule of law.

Early-warning systems for the early detection and mitigation of potentially violent conflicts are priority for Africa's emerging security architecture. Within these new security arrangements, CSOs roles in the early crisis phase are:

- Early warning of emerging crises - (monitoring, analysis, and communication strategies to raise awareness and generate attention)

- Developing options and strategies for response- (formulating recommendations, engaging in policy dialogue)

- Mobilising political will for response - (lobbying and campaigning)

- Taking action - (Unofficial 'diplomacy', social dialogue, public protests.)

CSO's role during conflict

- providing humanitarian relief to war-affected communities

- facilitating communication and generating alternatives -Track II dialogue processes
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- strengthening local CSO capacities for conflict transformation & peace bringing through public dialogues
- developing and strengthening 'constituencies for peace' and public awareness work

CSO's role in conflict resolution
- support (both technical and resource) for political negotiators and confidence building initiatives
- shaping the negotiating agenda to ensure addressing root causes
- direct or indirect participation in negotiation processes,
- helping 'behind the scenes': continuing to facilitate social dialogue and Track II dialogue & good offices.

CSO's roles in peacebuilding - (preventing recurrence):
- public education and awareness-raising on the peace agreement and consolidating support
- facilitating the rehabilitation of war-affected communities and relationships - (laying the ground for reconciliation)
- contributing to transitional justice processes
- resumption of initiatives contributing to structural prevention-encour-aging good governance, reconstruction and development, mediating social conflict, promoting human rights.

However, it is in conflict resolution and maintenance of peace areas that Africans urgently require support. Regional Organization's current involvement in African peace and security largely emphasizes conflict management rather than conflict prevention, and their activities are characterized by significant gaps in capacity at both analytical and operational levels. Collaboration with CSOs constitutes one of the most effective and sustainable ways of meeting these internal capacity challenges and at the same time enhancing the role and legitimacy of CSOs.

How can Civil Society Play this role?

1) Track Two Diplomacy

- The Panel of the Wise needs a robust mediation support unit within the African Union Commission. Institutionally, it might be a good idea for the AU to create a mediation unit within the AU Conflict Management Division to
work closely with the Panel. A civil society representative might be appointed to work in this unit.

- Civil society can help facilitate and enhance communication between the Panel and players in a conflict especially in cases where the belligerents have lost confidence in each other. As such civil society can play a critical role in confidence building during negotiations or during post conflict situation.

- In other to enhance the mediation effort of the APSA, civil society can help in carrying out fact finding missions;
  - Assist and advice mediation teams.

2) Conflict Mapping and Analysis

- Civil Society should assist to enhance the research and analysis capacity of the Panel. Considering the proximity of civil society to conflict areas, in a timely and efficient manner civil society can enhance the capacity of the Panel of the Wise through analysing and mapping conflicts and determining who the key parties, secondary actors and spoilers are in a given situation

- Civil society should participate in some of the meetings of the Panel of the Wise so as to make inputs in its deliberations

3) Participate in Governance at the National level

What are some of the Challenges Civil Society Face?

- Suspicion about the motive of civil society. Some have seen civil society as competitors rather than institutions that are aimed at complementing the work of the AU. There are some pocket suspicion and resistance about the motive of civil society organisation in issues of governance and security. These suspicions are not entirely groundless. However, generalisation would do no good though I must stress that these suspicions are in the minority and they are neither informed institutionally nor by any policy pronouncement.

- lack of appropriate training (and often few skills beyond a sense of commitment to peacemaking) and

- lack of appropriate division of labour (both between themselves and between them and governments),
  - a slender resource base,
  - donor dependency,
  - obstruction and even hostility from governments (particularly in relation to CSOs involvement in sensitive political situations)