Democratic Institutions Section

Democratic Institutions Section contributes to UNPSIL's peace mandate by building on the consolidation of democracy and good governance through the strengthening of democratic institutions as stated in the applicable Security Council Resolutions and provided for by the UN Joint Vision, of 2009.

Consequently, the main areas of focus are:

1. Media - supporting media institutions to perform in accordance with established professional and ethical standards, including playing a role to ensure peaceful, non-violent elections. To achieve this objective, we support the following: Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation, (SLBC) Guild of Editors, Independent Media Commission (IMC), Community Radios, Independent Radio Network (IRN) and Cotton Tree News (CTN), Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), and Allies for Peace.

2. Democratic Governance and Extractives - engaging with key actors in the natural resources sector to ensure transparency and accountability in natural resource governance. Specifically, we examine the extent to which state and non-state actors in the sector, adhere to norms and standards espoused by UN, AU and ECOWAS on natural resource management and peace building.

3. Civil Society Organizations - recognizing the need to work with democratic institutions within both state and society, DI section supports CSOs in their role of ensuring accountability from state actors, donors, UN system and themselves. A CSO policy forum has been created by national CSOs, called the National CSO platform, which works on all policy issues in seven thematic areas. The Platform holds a monthly meeting with the ER16 and matters of national policy and work of the UN are discussed.

4. Audit of Democratic Institutions - supporting an audit of the main democratic institutions in the country created by statute since the TNC report of 2004, with the view to identifying their contribution to the peace consolidation and governance, and making policy recommendations.

5. Support to National Constitutional Review Process - supporting organizations within state and society working on constitutional review.

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March 2012
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The Platform should therefore guarantee that certain tasks and roles stay at agency and cluster levels. In addition, member groups should uphold principles of inclusivity and participation, gender, sensitivity and respect for cultural diversity. At all times, the Platform should proceed along democratic lines and work according to national interests.

5.0 Recommendations

- All CSOs are encouraged to be part of the cluster arrangement although membership is voluntary
- The CSO Platform should be apolitical and free from any form of political interference or manipulation
- The relationship between government and civil society should be transformed with regular consultations a priority
- State actors should work with the CSO Platform on all projects requiring the active participation of civil society
- The entire donor community should engage with the Platform and avoid creating other structures
- The UN family needs to adopt a common approach to CSOs. All commitments in the Joint Water policy should work with civil society should be monitored and evaluated
- The UN to sponsor donor conferences in support of the CSO Platform. Aid channelled through CSOs should be aligned to national priorities and coordinated to avoid duplication
- CSOs should help develop political space at the local level to support communication between local authorities and the population and encourage accountability and participation
- The CSO platform should set up think tanks to research and regularly publish its findings on topical issues affecting civil society
- The CSOs should better conceptualize and execute programs in a sustainable fashion
- The CSOs need greater communication, sharing of information and collaboration
- The CSOs need to strengthen and democratize their internal decision making structures
- There is need for close link between local organizations and their international counterparts

This paper is the first in a series on the operations of the Civil Society Organisation Platform in Sierra Leone information has been collected from a number of reports, meetings/workshops and retreats over several months.
Executive Summary

This policy paper outlines the efforts made by civil society organizations (CSOs) in planning a 'cluster arrangement' for their future contributions to the development of the country. CSOs in Sierra Leone include umbrella/alliance organisations, community-based organizations, social movements and sectoral organisations, i.e. groups work in specific areas such as health, environment, youth etc. CSOs constitute the third sector alongside the state and private sector. They often have deep local roots and enjoy the trust of the communities in which they operate.

The challenge facing CSOs has always been how best to implement policy? In order to meet this challenge, CSOs have put in place mechanisms for effective delivery through 'professionalizing' their organisations. They have also realized that there are fledging CSOs that need the guidance and capacity if they are to achieve the best outcome for their communities. CSOs have therefore come together to create a CSO Platform and 'clusters' around key themes.

The UN and other organisations, both national and international, should be seen as helping CSOs fulfill their mandate of advocating on behalf of citizens and helping resolve issues they face on a daily basis. Although CSOs have encountered a number of hurdles, they have contributed enormously to consolidating the peace in Sierra Leone. It is hoped that these new organisational arrangements will enable them to continue such positive and valuable work.

Recommendations

Civil Society

- All CSOs should be part of the cluster arrangement although membership is voluntary.
- The CSO Platform should be apolitical and free from any form of political interference or manipulation.
- CSOs should help develop political space at the local level to support communication between local authorities and the population and encourage accountability and participation.
- The CSO platform should set up think tanks to research and regularly publish its findings on topical issues affecting civil society.
United Nations and International Community

- The UN family needs to adopt a common approach to CSOs. All commitments in the Joint Vision policy to work with civil society should be monitored and evaluated.
- The UN to sponsor donor conferences in support of the CSO Platform. Aid channelled through CSOs should be aligned to national priorities and coordinated to avoid duplication.
- The entire donor community should engage with the Platform and avoid creating other structures.

State actors

- The relationship between government and civil society should be transformed with regular consultations.
- State actors should work with the CSO Platform on all projects requiring the active participation of civil society.

For the purposes of accountability, the UN now regularly updates CSOs on its own work and national issues generally.

Despite these creditable moves, there remains a need for the UN, its international partners and donors to re-examine their support to CSOs and to deepen their understanding of the dynamics of civil society in Sierra Leone. With a clearer insight into the core values of CSOs, the international community would be able to offer more meaningful support. The UN family, in particular, needs to adopt a common approach in dealing with CSOs. Steps have been taken in this direction with most of the 21 programmes in the Joint Vision policy committing to strengthen CSOs as effective watch dogs. The UN family has also agreed to provide them with space in their regional field offices and internet access.

In addition, in the last 12 months, UNIPSIL has facilitated the coordinated mechanism or ‘platform’ for civil society in Sierra Leone. Almost 100 CSOs are members of this ‘Platform’ which consists of seven clusters:

- Governance
- Natural resource management
- Peace, security and human rights
- Social movement and social change
- Vulnerability and exclusion
- Elections
- Information, education and communication

Echoing the aspirations of the 2006 National Social Forum, the CSO Platform is the foremost civil society grouping in Sierra Leone. It is headed by a Steering Committee which includes the leaders and co-leads of the clusters. The Committee is headed by John Caulker, Director, Fanstul Tok. The CSO Secretariat is housed at the Fanstul Tok Office, 4/ Robert Street, Freetown. Fanstul Tok is the host organisation and all matters relating to the Steering Committee are channelled through them.

The Platform has institutionalised monthly cluster meetings, monthly cluster feedback sessions and quarterly coordination engagement meetings. Related to the foregoing, is the institutionalized monthly meeting between the ERS9 and members of the Platform which discusses matters of policy. During the monthly meetings the various clusters share with the ERS9 issues of interest and concern. In some cases the ERS9 is called upon to use its good offices to intercede in a given situation. The ERS9, in turn, as head of the entire UN system, reports to the platform members any developments within the UN system and major activities embarked upon by UNIPSIL and the other agencies.

The CSO Platform has recently been awarded its first project—an election support programme—with funding from UNIPSIL/UNDP. The Project Implementing Partner (P) is Action Aid International Sierra Leone.

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1 Joint Letter of Cooperation on the subject Civil Society Collaboration on Electoral Processes signed by CSERF and CSWPR, 22 December 2011
2 Cluster Leaders and Co-leads: Governance: Campaign for Good Governance (CG9)
In addition the report drew attention to some of the shortcomings amongst CSOs including:

- Poor participation in the implementation and monitoring of development projects
- Weak reporting systems
- Lack of accountability coupled with poor community relations
- Inability of communities to demand accountability;
- Fragmentation of CSOs and duplication of effort
- Little proactivity
- Marginalization of vulnerable groups
- Negative cultural beliefs and practices
- Open to political manipulation

The report also stressed the need for CSOs to come together to speak with one voice, free from the taint of partisan politics.

Following this, CSOs in Sierra Leone took the initiative to adopt the "cluster" arrangement of working in which groups of local organizations come together as a "cluster" under a common vision and with common objectives. Benefits include:

- Joint programming
- Information sharing
- Knowledge sharing and management
- Leveraging resources
- Integrated thematic response

The hallmark of the latest civil society initiative is sustained engagement coordination and collaboration. The general feeling is that such cooperation is critical for national ownership of development processes, democratic governance, and the quality and relevance of programmes.

3.0 The UN System and Civil Society Organizations

In Article 71 the UN Charter accords recognition to the work of NGOs within the UN system. This relationship was reaffirmed in Resolution 1296 (XLI) of 23 May 1998. The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) makes arrangement for consultations with NGOs. The Council adopted resolution 1965/1 after a thorough review which created varying categories and status of NGOs. The role of NGOs within the UN normative legal system had therefore been recognised as far back as 1946.

For the UN, CSOs bring valuable links to civil society and communities beyond its reach. However, in the past, the UN has been accused of being one of the main outputs responsible for fragmenting civil society by creating parallel CSOs rather than working with previously established groups. These days the UN is committed to improving its relationship with CSOs and enhancing their capacity as mandated by the Member States of the General Assembly.

1.0 Introduction

Civil society studies any precise definition. It is generally accepted though that such "social" organizations should not represent any faction of the political elite. The early European political philosophers defined civil society in the context of its position between the state and community. For the modern political theorist Larry Diamond civil society is "the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, non-hierarchical, self-supporting and autonomous from the state". John Keane views it as "a complex and dynamic assembly of legally protected non-governmental institutions..."

According to Schmidt, civil society is a set or system of self-organized intermediating groups. Mannist such as Gramsci identify civil society with the realm outside the power of the state. CUCUS sees civil society as the space between the family, state and market, where people come together to pursue their interests. The CODESRIA school of African and Africanist scholars prefer to use the concept of social movements, by which they refer to different associations and organizations within society that stands between the state and the family, within an interest pursuing a group interest or an interest of general national good.

All these definitions have three features in common:

- Independence from the state and private capital
- Self-organization
- Deliberation and respect for civil society
- Institutionalization

The formation of civil society is a process that is conscious and deliberate. The establishment and development of CSOs should be based on the need to strengthen civil society to address the concerns of the communities they serve.
Economic development can also be a motivation. As a nation becomes more economically developed, changes will naturally occur. The reasons behind groups coming together become more complex. CSOs may also be formed on the basis of independently expressed interests and goals.

A number of activities are expected of civil society:
- Communicating citizens' demands to the state leadership
- Mobilising the population on issues of concern
- Enabling citizens to exert influence over government
- Ensuring the principle of vertical accountability: rulers answering to the ruled
- Preventing democratic backsliding
- Bringing political leaders to account.

2.0 Background

The conflict in Sierra Leone spurred civil society to work hard in the pursuit of peace, leading to an increase in CSOs throughout the 1990s. CSOs are important actors in conflict situations: they can either fuel conflict or make significant and positive contributions to peacebuilding and development in a post-conflict country like Sierra Leone. Despite the challenges and their own shortcomings, CSOs undeniably made their mark on peace consolidation in the country. Most CSOs focused on social welfare and community development, areas in which they have the potential to design and implement policy. Some have a specific and closely defined mandate while most have mandates that are much broader.

Nevertheless, CSOs in Sierra Leone faced tremendous hurdles that continue to hamper operations. There is insufficient capacity to advocate for the communities they represent and to mobilise members for effective and sustained collective action. There is often no effective coordinating mechanism for networking and collaborating. This means there is no concerted effort to collectively engage government. CSOs have also failed to build synergies, resulting in duplication and waste.

The lack of resources results in the formation of what is referred to as "catch all" CSOs; meaning CSOs claiming to work in areas and sectors where it has no expertise or knowledge because that is the only way it can get funding from donors. The majority operate from a limited resource base and the need to attract funding has led them to tailor their primary goals and principles to suit the requirements of donors. As a result, such CSOs can claim to be working on diverse themes as rights of gifted child, micro credit, environment, election monitoring, etc just to catch attention of a donor with funds. In the end no one is developed.

There are others too who do good work but because of their focus on communities and not a professionalized NGO, they may not fit the criteria for grants. This leaves them without the resources they desperately need for programmes, for improving structures and their organisational capacity. In some cases where funding is granted to CSOs, programmes conforming to the requirements of external donors may have untouched the needs of the client communities.

Some CSOs are faced with issues running from absence of defined goals and objectives and at times spread too thinly, short-term and reactive nature of planning; do not monitor or evaluate the effectiveness of their operations in order to integrate these lessons into the next stage of their operation and development; duplication and overlap among groups and a significant lack of coordination in their activities; competition and a desire to dominate rather than cooperate; lack of internal staff processes; one man show; head of organization notable dominated; lack of money for day-to-day operations; donor dependency programs directed by donor agencies; unaware of the various donor organizations; relationship between local and international organizations has been largely exploitive; and limited or no investment in training professional staff. Partisan politics often reduce the effectiveness of CSOs. There is rampant tribalism, nepotism, regionalism and an emphasis on "who you know" rather than "what you know". Some CSOs at times reflect a north-south divide in their response to national issues. Others have grown too close to government which has cost them their independence of opinion and autonomy.

There is a strong view among observers that CSOs have failed in their original aim as they no longer speak for the voiceless; neither do they advocate for ordinary citizens. CSOs have also been weighed down by their inability to differentiate between their role and their thematic focus. Some CSOs have become heavily centralised, built around individuals and lacking democratic principles.

All these issues have served to minimize the impact of some CSOs programmes. Though CSOs are undeniably important agents of social resilience who can work outside existing social boundaries, questions remain about how truly democratic they are in practice. Doubts in this regard have eroded the credibility of some CSOs, while others are seen to lack basic capacity. Although this may not be true of CSOs everywhere, it is widely held view that has profoundly impacted the ability of CSOs to deliver.

In 2006, civil society held a National Social Forum to kickstart the process of setting up a Social Forum. The report recommended setting up a centralised structure with six petals or thematic areas:
- Civil governance
- Peace, security and human rights
- Natural resources and environmental justice
- Vulnerability and exclusion
- Regional reintegration
- Social movements and social change

"Civil Society Dialogue organized by Civil Society Forum Building Engage Forum (CSFBE) on 9th and 10th October 2006 at "Staff House, New Street, Freetown". "National Social Forum held in Bo, 10th - 11th July 2006 organized by the Civil Society Alternative Process of Sierra Leone (CSAPSL)."