



CIVICUS

**CIVICUS CIVIL SOCIETY
INDEX-RAPID ASSESSMENT**

WEST AFRICA REGIONAL REPORT

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation

MARCH 2014

CIVICUS

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation is an international alliance of civil society organisations and activists working to strengthen citizen action and civil society throughout the world, especially in areas where participatory democracy and citizens' freedom of association are challenged.

CIVICUS has a vision of a global community of active, engaged citizens committed to the creation of a more just and equitable world. This is based on the belief that the health of societies exists in direct proportion to the degree of balance between the state, the private sector and civil society, and that governance is improved when there are multiple means for people to have a say in decision-making. CIVICUS seeks to amplify the voices and opinions of people and their organisations, share knowledge about and promote the value and contribution of citizen participation and civil society, and help give expression to the enormous creative energy of a diverse civil society.

CIVICUS, with its numerous partners, works by bringing together and connecting different civil society actors and other stakeholders in civil society; researching into and publishing on the health, state and challenges of civil society; and developing policy positions and advocating for the greater inclusion of and a more enabling environment for civil society. CIVICUS was founded in 1993 and is headquartered in Johannesburg, South Africa.

We warmly welcome new members and partners. To join us or find out more please visit www.civicus.org

THE WEST AFRICAN CIVIL SOCIETY INDEX – RAPID ASSESSMENT WAS UNDERTAKEN BY CIVICUS: WORLD ALLIANCE FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION, WITH THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF THE OPEN SOCIETY INITIATIVE FOR WEST AFRICA (OSIWA) AND THE TECHNICAL SUPPORT OF THE WEST AFRICA CIVIL SOCIETY INSTITUTE (WACSI).

THE ACTION RESEARCH WAS LED BY SIX NATIONAL PARTNERS:

BENIN: LA MAISON DE LA SOCIÉTÉ CIVILE
GHANA: GHANA ANTI-CORRUPTION COMMISSION
LIBERIA: SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND – LIBERIA
NIGERIA: NIGERIAN NETWORK OF NGOS
SENEGAL: FORUM CIVIL
SIERRA LEONE: CAMPAIGN FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE

THIS REPORT WAS PREPARED BY ANDREW FIRMIN FOR CIVICUS, WITH THE COLLABORATION OF PATRICIA DENIZ.



CIVICUS CIVIL SOCIETY INDEX-RAPID ASSESSMENT

WEST AFRICA REGIONAL SUMMARY

Introduction

In 2013, civil society in six West African countries - Benin, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone - undertook an assessment of the health and conditions of civil society. They applied the CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation Civil Society Index-Rapid Assessment (CSI-RA) tool, with the support of the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) and the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSWIA).

This summary report draws from the six country reports to present key common findings, particularly as they relate to the health of and conditions for civil society organisations (CSOs). The six country reports, published separately, each contain a great deal more information and insights on the state of civil society in each of the six countries.

The CSI-RA, developed from CIVICUS' long-running civil society self-assessment methodology, the Civil Society Index (CSI), was launched in 2012 as a new, flexible tool enabling more adaptable, contextualised assessments of civil society. The CSI-RA is designed to be shaped to the particular needs and capabilities of civil society in each country where it is applied, and to be led by that country's civil society. Through inclusive processes, participants are encouraged to identify the aspects of civil society that they consider most need to be examined in the national context, and the mix of methods they want to apply to make the assessment. Key dimensions can include the perceived impact of CSOs, the health of civil society's governance mechanisms, the levels of cooperation and networking between CSOs and the political and legal space within which civil society operates. Methods employed to undertake the assessment can include surveys of CSO representatives and the public, interviews with CSO leaders and others, such as government officials, with a perspective on civil society, and focus group discussions. The CSI-RA places emphasis on bringing different civil society actors together, partly because the CSI-RA's convening role is an important output of the process in its own right, and partly because by consulting a broad range of civil society, including advisory structures created for the process, the results can be verified and widely endorsed, and civil society can take ownership of them. The process concludes with the development of actionable recommendations to help address some of the key challenges identified, and to capitalise on assessed strengths and opportunities.

In five of the six countries, the CSI-RA built on previous CSI studies, conducted in Ghana (2003-2006), Liberia (2008-2010), Nigeria (2005-2007), Senegal (2008-2010) and Sierra Leone (2004-2006). In these countries, the 2013 CSI-RA provided a valuable opportunity to assess what progress, if any, had been achieved since those earlier assessments, something explored further in the national reports.

Each of the six countries in which the assessment was conducted is of course quite different, including in terms of population size, cultures, democratic history and economic performance. For example, in terms of its population, Nigeria is more than twice the size of all the other countries combined, while Ghana's gross national income (GNI) is over four times that of Liberia.

Table 1: basic facts on the six countries

| Country | Population (World Bank 2012 data, rounded) | Capital | Official languages | GNI per capita (World Bank 2012 data, US\$) |
|--------------|--|------------|--------------------|---|
| Benin | 10.1m | Porto-Novo | French | \$750 |
| Ghana | 25.4m | Accra | English | \$1,550 |
| Liberia | 4.2m | Monrovia | English | \$370 |
| Nigeria | 168.8m | Abuja | English | \$1,440 |
| Senegal | 13.7m | Dakar | French | \$1,030 |
| Sierra Leone | 6.0m | Freetown | English | \$580 |

Consistent with the CSI-RA's intention of being nationally adaptable and specific, civil society in the six countries each decided to look at a slightly different set of issues. For example, in Benin it was considered particularly important to assess the internal governance and financial viability of CSOs, whereas in Sierra Leone, networking and collaboration was determined as an important issue to focus on. Further, different mixes of methods were applied, with some studies emphasising mass surveys and others placing more importance on interviews with CSO leaders and focus groups. This mix of methods makes it difficult to directly compare quantitative data from the six studies.

Nevertheless, across the six countries, when taken as a whole, some striking similarities emerge from the analysis that suggest that, despite national differences, West African CSOs face a common set of challenges. It is on these common points that this regional overview focuses, in the key areas of the financial, human and technical resource challenges of CSOs, their internal governance and practice of values, the level of networking and cooperation between them, the perceived impact of CSOs, and the political and legal space for CSOs, including their relations with government.

It should be said that the CSI-RA is principally and necessarily an internally focused exercise. While some assessments also consider the larger political, social and economic challenges that shape the context in which CSOs work, primarily CSOs are encouraged to look inwards, to identify the challenges that civil society itself can act on, and to be self-critical. This is consistent with the idea that civil society should be an arena that generates and models good practice and innovation, and that CSOs therefore need to be exemplary organisations, in order to be able to encourage actors in other spheres, such as government and the private sector, to adhere to equally high standards. Most of the recommendations made at the conclusion of this report are therefore focused on actions CSOs can take.

2

KEY FINDINGS

a. Financial resources

Across all six of the countries, the inadequate financial resourcing of CSOs appears as a systemic and entrenched challenge. For example, resource mobilisation is identified as a key challenge by almost all, 95%, of CSOs surveyed in Benin. In Sierra Leone, virtually all CSOs are assessed as being financially weak. Only a handful of CSOs in Senegal, generally large CSOs that have international connections, are considered to have a sustainable resource base. In Nigeria, 69% of CSOs surveyed believe their organisation is not adequately funded, and 55% report having to change plans due to financial constraints.

“In general, CSOs in every category in Sierra Leone have very weak resource bases, cannot function efficiently as a result, and are susceptible to collapse.” – Sierra Leone

It appears no progress has been made since the earlier assessments carried out in most of the countries, when similar issues were identified. Funding remains a key limiting factor on making progress across the range of challenges explored in this report.

“While there are many suggestions on how the effectiveness of CSOs can be improved, they come up against the reality of a difficult funding situation for many CSOs. Unless the funding situation can be addressed in more sustainable ways, many of these other issues will not be tackled.” – Nigeria

CHALLENGES IN SEEKING FUNDING

One key issue that emerges is a lack of fundraising knowledge, expertise and capacity within CSOs. For example, many CSOs in Benin are simply not aware of what funding sources may be available to support them. In Liberia, lack of knowledge about funding opportunities is raised as the most significant resource challenge for CSOs based outside the capital, Monrovia. It is suggested that there is an absence of intermediary organisations that could link CSOs with donors and distribute information to CSOs on funding opportunities and how to apply.

A related challenge is that CSOs may not know enough about the criteria by which funding proposals are assessed: almost a third of CSOs in Benin report this, and a third also believe that assessment criteria are too strict.

However, in many cases, even when CSOs are aware of funding sources, CSOs lack the technical expertise to make strong applications, such as skills in writing project proposals and putting together plausible budgets, and to report on funding received. In Nigeria, only 55% of CSOs surveyed believe their organisation has adequate capacity to seek funds, and only 56% that they have the capacity to respond to donor requirements. Weak proposal writing skills are identified as a challenge in Benin and Liberia: almost all CSOs surveyed in Benin state that they need training in how to write project proposals, including in writing in the correct style and putting together realistic budgets. In Liberia, CSOs also raise the issue that funding applications require information that they find difficult to provide, such as detailed records of past projects, with many CSOs being weak at documenting past activities and capturing success stories and lessons learned. Weakness in proposal writing and reporting has long been acknowledged as challenges in Sierra Leone, including by donors, but little progress seems to have been made in addressing them.

Divisions may be seen between those CSOs, usually larger, urban-based CSOs with higher capacities, which are more adept in attracting and maintaining support from donors, and the rest, which may be rurally-based, smaller CSOs with lower capacities. This seems to be the case in Ghana and Liberia, where only a small

number of larger CSOs based in capital cities are able to attract several donors at once, although this then raises a challenge in the lack of harmony in their approaches.

CHALLENGES IN DONOR RELATIONS

“Implementation through local partners is often attractive to international donors because of the low overhead costs entailed. However, this can be at the expense of the institutional development of local CSOs.” – Liberia

Even when CSOs obtain funding, challenges arise. One challenge comes from the short timeframe for which most funding is available. Most funding provided to CSOs in Benin and Sierra Leone is reported as being for one year, and it is likely that this is common across the region.

In Ghana, this is identified as encouraging the hurried implementation of projects to meet donor deadlines, and the closing down of projects once the funding period has passed. This is not sustainable and inhibits longer term impact, which ultimately can have the effect of eroding public trust in CSOs.

“A consistent challenge identified in interviews was a lack of access to sustained, long-term funding.” – Liberia

A related challenge is that most funding provided by donors is for projects, with very little core funding, and often, inadequate provision to support the organisational costs resulting from implementation. It is an indicator of enduring unequal power relations between donors, which can include international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and national and local CSOs, that CSOs tend to be contracted on a need by need basis to deliver projects and disburse funds, with narrow provision for their overheads or development needs. A common complaint, as seen in Liberia, is that international donors' support to local CSOs to implement projects does not help to build the capacity of those CSOs. Lack of sustained funding contributes to human resource (HR) challenges such as high staff turnover, as discussed further below. For example, some Liberian CSOs report having to retrench staff when funding runs out, and rehire them when funding becomes available again, which cannot be considered helpful from the point of view of the continuity of CSO operations and the development of expertise.

These challenges are particularly pressing because there is a high level of donor dependency, and apparently limited alternatives to donor funding. In Liberia, most CSOs surveyed, 69%, say that they rely on a single donor, and only 5% have three donors, with no CSO surveyed having more than three. This makes them vulnerable to changes in donor priorities or donor withdrawal. The risks of single donor dependency have been exposed in Liberia by the recent devolution of some central government functions to local authorities, meaning that established CSO funding relationships with central government for service delivery have come to an end. CSOs that did not obtain alternative funding sources have become dormant or closed as a result.

Fresh challenges may be approaching in Ghana: as it has attained the status of a middle-income country, some donors have announced plans to withdraw to focus their attention on low-income countries, which could be expected to cause new difficulties for CSOs reliant on donors. Something similar could be in prospect in Liberia, as the years since its conflict pass and the international spotlight that focused on post-conflict efforts drifts elsewhere.

“The bulk of CSOs are mostly influenced by money when they are choosing the areas they want to operate in.” – Donor official in Ghana

In Senegal, it is identified that a high level of donor dependency raises questions about the autonomy of CSOs, if their capacity to act is seen as essentially dependent on donors. The question that arises is, who then sets the agenda for CSOs? When asked what prompted movement into new thematic areas in Ghana, 65% of CSOs surveyed state that they do so in order to develop partnerships, but 24% say they are motivated to work on a new issue because of the availability of funds. To some extent, partnerships may be a euphemism for funding opportunities here as well.

The related challenge of what donor dependency means for the accountability of CSOs, when CSOs are seen as more accountable upwardly, to their donors, than downwardly, to their constituencies, also emerges in Ghana. This means that CSOs often undertake projects without seeking inputs from the people who are intended to benefit. Dependency on external donors in Ghana is exacerbated by a lack of government support to CSOs, which in turn implies that CSOs feel little accountability responsibility towards government.

“Ghanaian CSOs are mainly accountable upwards, to their donors. There is a lack of downward accountability to citizens.” – Ghana

Two more positive potential trends can be discerned. In Sierra Leone, while short-term funding still predominates, a new tendency is seen for some INGOs to enter into multi-year implementation partnerships with local CSOs, which is felt to be having capacity-building spin-offs for CSOs' administrative and financial practices, and for enabling local CSOs to keep to more cohesive mandates.

MULTI YEAR PARTNERSHIPS IN SIERRA LEONE

In an example of the new approach to multi-year partnerships in Sierra Leone, from 2008 to 2011 the Irish Catholic development CSO Trócaire partnered with five local CSOs to implement its Good Governance and Democratisation project. Trócaire provided technical support to the partners in the process of implementing the project, including coaching and mentoring partners on project design, monitoring and evaluation, and report writing. As part of supporting partners to strengthen their organisational efficiency, Trócaire undertook a systems review of partners in 2010 to identify areas of weaknesses in their financial management systems for remedial action, to ensure that systems of control become operational and effective.

However, a challenge for some CSOs is that such multi-year schemes tend to be targeted at CSOs working on issues of governance and human rights; CSOs working in other areas may find it hard to obtain such funding, unless they significantly distort their missions.

Secondly, in Liberia and Nigeria, it is felt that the focus on the post 2015 development goals agenda is opening up opportunities for national CSOs to have more of a say on what kind of aid arrangements are needed, and driving greater willingness by international donors and INGOs to work with local and national CSOs.

ALTERNATIVES TO DONORS

“CSOs can never be effective if they rely on a narrow range of revenue sources.” – Sierra Leone

Across the six countries, there seem to be minimal efforts by CSOs to raise funding from sources other than international donors and governments. It is noteworthy that relations with the private sector were little discussed, which suggests that there are few attempts to build relationships from either side, and corporate giving may be rare. In Sierra Leone, it is assessed that CSOs make very limited attempts to make money from the sale of services and products, or to fundraise from local sources. This connects with what is seen to be a weak culture of individual giving towards CSOs, with most personal philanthropy directed towards individual schools, churches and mosques, something other countries in the region have in common. But even when practices of individual giving are reported as stronger, for example in Ghana, where 55% of community members surveyed say they have donated to charity in the last six months, there seems to be a lack of CSO connection with, and ability to leverage, sources of individual giving. In Nigeria, a perception among some members of the public that CSOs are well funded by foreign donors may also deter individual giving to CSOs.

A distinction is made in Senegal between membership-based CSOs, which have some measure of income security from subscriptions and fundraising from members, and CSOs that do not have a membership base, which tend to be reliant on grants from international donors, INGOs and the government. These demonstrate a common tendency in donor-dependent CSOs, of closing or becoming dormant once grants come to an end.

Also in Senegal, it is noted as rare for CSOs to obtain funding from membership subscriptions, but new social movements, such as the Y'en a Marre youth mobilisation movement, which first rose to prominence in 2011, are seen as having made some breakthroughs in the model of raising small amounts of money from many people, for example through t-shirt sales. In Sierra Leone, it was also noted that a UK-based charity had raised significant funding by staging a marathon run in the country, provoking the question of why a domestic CSO had not pursued such an idea.

The question is whether CSOs that have been long established are able to learn from such innovations and adapt them to their own needs, and also whether they are able to find novel ways of reducing running costs, such as using new technologies and find cost-saving synergies through increased cooperation.

b. Human and technical resources

Financial resource challenges clearly connect with two other challenges commonly cited by CSOs in the six countries: human resource shortages, which include lacks of basic skills, and limited capacity in technology, equipment and other physical resources.

SKILLS AND EQUIPMENT CHALLENGES

“The technical capacity of staff was a challenge that was almost universally identified by CSOs.” – Liberia

Weak capacity in even basic skills is acknowledged in several countries. For example, in Liberia, limited writing and computer skills are identified as a challenge. This is felt to be a contributory factor in Liberian CSOs generally offering a narrow range of activities, typically training or capacity building projects: they rarely offer activities that would require specialist training or particular equipment, such as activities that use the media or art-based methods. A similar tendency is noted in Ghana, where a deficit is identified in CSOs working on technical issues, such as policy analysis and budget tracking, due to lack of trained staff and difficulties in retaining trained staff. Lack of technical skills is the single biggest challenge identified, by 44% of CSOs, in Benin.

Further, a lack of capacity in planning and strategic skills hinders CSOs’ ability to perform their roles effectively. In Nigeria, only 53% of CSOs surveyed believe they have the capacity to prepare and report financial records adequately, which creates an accountability deficit and causes fundraising challenges. CSOs in Ghana identify scant capacity to conduct proper research into key social issues, and to present findings convincingly in order to propose alternatives. This hampers attempts at advocacy, and affects key civil society roles, such as informing and mobilising the public and holding the government to account.

Equipment and infrastructure gaps also hamper CSOs. In Sierra Leone, a lack of basic office space is identified as a challenge, while in Nigeria, 55% of CSOs surveyed do not consider that they have adequate access to computers and 58% that they do not have adequate internet access. Poor access to information and communication technology (ICT) and out-dated technology and software are raised as limiting factors in Liberia. These are felt to inhibit CSOs’ ability to communicate and collaborate, and to access funding, creating a negative cycle. Improving on these challenges could therefore unlock improvements in CSOs’ financial health and networking with other CSOs.

In Sierra Leone, it is rare for donors to provide direct support to obtain and update equipment, unless these are deemed necessary for the implementation of a funded project.

As in Liberia, this limitation not only affects CSOs’ capacities to reach out to funding opportunities, but also their ability to access information, keep on top of emerging trends, and network and communicate with other CSOs to realise synergies and undertake joint action.

“With poor transportation infrastructure and weak mobile and internet access, it is a major challenge for CSOs based outside Monrovia to communicate with donors, which are almost all based in Monrovia.” - Liberia

Public infrastructure, such as poor roads and limited mobile phone networks, offer a further challenge in Liberia. These make it harder and more expensive to reach rural populations, even though the greatest community need is often in rural areas. Yet in the main, donors do not provide funding for the purchase and maintenance of suitable vehicles, suggesting that donor practices and community needs are out of step.

HUMAN RESOURCE CHALLENGES

In several countries the lack of sufficient staff members qualified to an adequate standard is highlighted as a key weakness. Some CSO heads in Liberia express concern about their staff being unable to complete tasks on time and to sufficient quality. In Ghana the absence of proper HR functions within CSOs is noted as an issue. For CSOs in Sierra Leone, it is difficult to have paid staff, and most CSOs are unable to provide their staff with internal training opportunities; the availability of training depends on what others provide and fund.

Strained financial capacity, limited opportunities for staff development and a lack of HR functions contribute to high staff turnover, identified as a challenge by 38% of CSOs surveyed in Benin. CSOs lose staff members to other types of organisations that can pay better and offer more professional development opportunities, including government, donors and international CSOs. Local CSOs can effectively become a talent pool for

others. A further interaction of these challenges is that low financial capacity and high staff turnover make it more difficult for CSOs to invest in capacity-building initiatives such as staff training, and to achieve impact.

“A lack of core funding means that CSOs are unable to attract and retain high calibre staff. High staff attrition levels affect the quality of CSO outputs.” - Ghana

The loss of CSO staff can also be a challenge when civil society leaders move into government or political positions following political change, as happened in Senegal following the 2012 presidential elections, and before then in Liberia after the 2005 elections. In Liberia, this loss of leadership was seen to undermine the capacity of CSOs.

“The loss of charismatic leaders who formed the CSOs, and possessed the ability to raise funds and manage organisations, created institutional challenges for CSOs, which tended to have weak middle management teams.” - Liberia

The movement of Senegalese CSO leaders into government caused the credibility of civil society to be called into question, given expectations about its political neutrality; this points to a larger question in Senegal of how civil society interacts with the political sphere, and how it is able to take on political issues of importance to Senegal’s citizens, without becoming partisan.

“Since the last presidential elections in 2012, Senegalese civil society has become more assertive as a key player in the democratic process.... However, confusion remains, as some civil society actors have become allied with political parties or particular civic movements. This has helped blur the concept, particularly on the question of where it is distinct from political parties and the state.” - Senegal

A further HR issue is the lack of formal labour rights of CSO staff members, including an absence of labour rights policies and trade union memberships of staff members, as is reported, for example, in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, where it is also noted that, as in the case of Liberia above, funding cycles cause CSOs to rely on contract-based hiring procedures where staff members can be laid off quickly, without entitlements to termination benefits.

“Staff can be relieved without termination benefits when an organisation’s project portfolio reduces. Most staff members don’t belong to unions that could help them seek improved conditions.” – Sierra Leone

This is important because as well as capacity issues, it begs the question of whether CSOs are sufficiently modelling internally the values they are often associated with, posing a credibility challenge to CSOs.

c. Good governance and the practice of values

In all six countries, assessments were made of various aspects of the internal governance of CSOs. Good governance matters because the public, as well as donors and government, expect high standards of CSOs, which implies that CSOs should apply and embody strong norms of democracy, transparency, accountability and inclusion. If they do not, they risk losing credibility and public trust. Doing so enables CSOs to demonstrate their legitimacy, and gives them leverage to seek improvements in the governance of other actors, such as those in government and the private sector.

Two areas in particular are considered here. The first relates to the formal governance mechanisms of CSOs, and the degree to which they are applied in practice, where capacity issues present a particular challenge. The second aspect is the extent to which CSOs internalise values such as transparency and fighting corruption.

GOOD GOVERNANCE

CSOs report a high adherence to formal governance mechanisms, such as having a board of governors that meets regularly and producing annual reports to share with donors and their constituency. For example in Benin, 82% of CSOs surveyed report that they hold annual assemblies on time, and 88% that they produce annual reports. Only 4% of CSOs surveyed in Liberia have a board that does not meet at least annually. In Nigeria, 94% responded that they have constitutions or some sort of foundational text.

However, these findings should be treated with caution. In some contexts, a sense emerges that there was an element of telling the researcher what was understood to be the appropriate answer, rather than necessarily

an accurate answer. Focus group discussions and interviews with key informants revealed real challenges about how good governance measures are applied in practice. The existence of founding documents or a governing body does not guarantee good internal governance, as practices might contravene what is stipulated on paper. It is suspected that in Sierra Leone, for example, there is widespread divergence between the text of governing instruments and reality. In Benin, 38% of CSOs surveyed identify poor governance as a key internal challenge for CSOs.

A gap between paper and practice can be observed in Liberia, where most CSOs surveyed, 82%, report having a monitoring and evaluation plan, an indicator of good governance, but many of them then also state that they do not have a staff member trained in monitoring and evaluation skills: only 34% of CSOs based outside the capital do, which implies that monitoring and evaluation plans are not going to be adequately applied, and will remain a largely paper exercise. Only 47% of CSOs surveyed in Nigeria make their annual reports and other key accountability documents available, calling into question why the documents are produced. An absence of external audits of CSOs is recognised as another weakness in Nigeria.

Some governance challenges relate to the capacity issues identified above. Opaque financial management is identified as a particular challenge for smaller CSOs in Senegal, partly because of skills gaps. This is influenced by and helps to perpetuate the problem that donors mostly give to larger CSOs. Across CSOs of all types in Sierra Leone, there is an absence of strategic planning and organisational assessment, which means that decisions are made on a largely ad hoc basis. Less than 5% of Sierra Leonean CSOs surveyed have a strategic plan or have carried out some kind of organisational assessment or check on progress in the last five years. Many say they would like to improve on current practices, but inhibiting factors identified include a lack of financial and technical capacity to undertake these; however it was also noted that some have a desire to stay flexible in order to seek grants as they become available. A lack of strategic planning is also identified as an issue in Benin, while in Liberia, governance and management weaknesses mean that CSOs often lack a strategic approach to their work, and so implement an erratic series of activities. In Ghana, almost all CSOs surveyed have vision and mission statements and strategic plans, but then 40% say that their strategic plan is not up to date, calling into question its utility as a management tool.

“CSOs frequently lack a clear vision of their purpose. As a result, they implement a range of interventions that do not fit within any larger vision or framework.” – Liberia

There is confusion among Liberian CSOs even about the meaning of terms such as vision, mission, outputs and outcomes. This suggests there is a need for some quite basic training in strategic planning and programme design.

Dangers here include those of an accountability deficit – it is harder to assess a CSO’s effectiveness if there are not benchmarks such as strategic plans to measure them against – and corresponding lack of opportunities for feedback to inform future programme design from those expected to benefit from CSO activities. Further, donors may be deterred from supporting CSOs they perceive as poorly governed. These challenges of limited oversight can also have the effect of concentrating power in the hands of directors of CSOs.

Weakly functioning boards are another factor in limited oversight over CSO leaders. It is suggested in Nigeria that boards of directors often exist largely as formalities. They may consist of prestigious names or friends of CSO leaders, and rarely meet in practice, meaning that decision-making power is concentrated in the directors of CSOs.

“Board members are busy people who hardly have the time to commit to their roles.” – Respondent in Nigeria

In several contexts particular concerns are raised about leadership, including CSOs being dominated by their founding leaders, and poor succession of leaders. In Benin, 32% of CSOs surveyed highlight problems of leadership as a major challenge. Women and young people cite leadership problems more still, indicating that they may feel excluded. A lack of transparency over the selection of CSO leaders, and long terms of office of leaders, were identified as challenges in Senegal.

“The most significant challenge for CSOs is to establish a democratic culture and good internal governance. There are also challenges of non-democratic selection of leaders, lengthy leadership terms and limited functionality of some leaders.” – Senegal

This raises questions of transparency and accountability, if a CSO is seen as something effectively at the disposal of its founding leaders, particularly when boards are weakly functioning.

“The lack of a practice of periodic organisational assessment and strategic planning means that heads of CSOs hold the greatest decision making power over what their organisations seek to do.” – Sierra Leone

Weaknesses in leadership selection, poorly functioning boards and weak oversight over leaders were seen in Sierra Leone, but a distinction was noted between membership-based CSOs and those that do not have membership. In non-membership-based CSOs, there is little oversight over leaders, suggesting that CSOs that lack a membership to hold leaders to account need to develop alternative mechanisms.

“It is extremely rare for the heads of civic and service delivery/development CSOs to be recruited through competitive processes. Most such CSOs remain headed by their founders, and boards of directors largely exist to meet formal requirements.” – Sierra Leone

SELF-REGULATION AND THE INTERNAL PRACTICE OF VALUES

“The most significant challenge for CSOs is to establish a democratic culture and good internal governance.” – Senegal

Government regulation of CSOs is discussed further below, but one way in which CSOs can seize the initiative, raise the standard of their internal governance and prove they are living their values is by developing, implementing and adhering to codes of conduct and good practice.

However, limited self-regulation initiatives are reported by CSOs in the six countries. Only 4% of Senegalese CSOs surveyed assess that they have adequate and effective self-regulation mechanisms, and correspondingly, the impact of self-regulation is seen to be limited. An absence of internal policies within CSOs is identified in Nigeria: only 41% surveyed report that they have clear, documented administrative policies and guidelines, only 53% have a gender policy and only 37% have a staff code of conduct. There is no overall code of conduct for CSOs in Ghana, but a view commonly expressed is that if there was one, it would not be applied. There is a CSO Charter in Benin, but not all CSOs are aware of it, and some who know about it have not been able to obtain it.

“We have heard of it, but I have never received a copy.” – Respondent in Benin

While there is a sense in Sierra Leone that CSOs are now responding to earlier criticisms of poor governance and accountability, if partly driven by a desire to make themselves more attractive to donors, there still seems to be little by way of codes of conduct for individual CSOs or CSO networks – none were found amongst those surveyed – reflecting an apparent lack of enthusiasm for self-regulation. There is a sense that in at least some cases, internal governance weaknesses persist because leaders of CSOs benefit from weak oversight. For smaller CSOs, lack of capacity to apply codes of conduct is also assessed as an issue: if they do have guidelines, they are often not well articulated and hard to apply.

“The suggestion is that many heads of CSOs benefit materially from internal governance weaknesses in their organisations.” – Sierra Leone

Without these, attention turns to the extent to which CSOs can prove that they practise their values. West Africa is a region where public concern about corruption is high. Benin, Nigeria and Sierra Leone are, for example, ranked in the bottom half of Transparency International’s 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index. Given public concern, CSOs need to be able to show that they are taking steps to eliminate corruption in their own ranks. CSOs recognise that there is a reality of corruption within civil society. In Benin, 84% of CSOs surveyed say that there is corruption in civil society. Sixty-two per cent of CSOs surveyed in Senegal believe there is some level of corruption among CSOs, although most, 52%, think examples of corruption are occasional or rare. In Nigeria, 34% of CSOs surveyed perceive that CSO corruption is frequent and a further 25% that it is occasional, making it a majority of CSOs that feel there is corruption. CSOs in Benin see a clear link between poor and erratic remuneration levels of CSO staff members and corruption temptations; accordingly key strategies identified to fight CSO corruption revolve around paying regular and adequate salaries, and allowances and bonuses.

“While CSOs criticise government for transparency and accountability issues, CSOs have transparency issues of their own.” - Liberia

In Ghana, it is stated that perceptions of corruption, particularly the fact that CSOs are not using donor funds well, has lowered public trust in CSOs. There is also awareness that there exist illegitimate front CSOs that have the purpose of attracting donor funds without attempting serious work. One-person enterprises that cannot be considered legitimate, because they exist solely for the purpose of attracting aid, are also observed in Sierra Leone. These have frequently changing mandates, in response to new funding opportunities, and a lack of a membership base, which enables them to make sudden switches without having to be accountable to any constituency.

TRANSPARENCY AND CORRUPTION IN SENEGALESE CSOS

Senegalese CSOs believe they play a positive role in the promotion of transparency by government and the private sector, and that their activities in this area enjoy broad support and public visibility. However, their performance in addressing these issues within civil society itself is acknowledged to be mixed. Question marks linger over the transparency of some CSOs, to the extent that a perceived lack of transparency enabled the government to accuse CSOs of abusing tax exemptions. This contributed to the government taking a unilateral decision to suspend agreements with many CSOs and foundations for a period, putting at risk their work and funding bases.

This indicates the need for CSOs to take seriously issues of transparency, and to prioritise being able to demonstrate that they are free from corruption. It also points to a need to further develop relations with the government, with the aim of growing government trust in CSOs, such that next time there are accusations about civil society probity, government and CSOs can enter into dialogue rather than see drastic actions taken.

Donors have a role to play here as well; inadvertently, donors sometimes support CSOs that are known within countries to be poorly governed or not to have the relevant expertise, as is assessed to be the case in Sierra Leone. The danger here is that the credibility of donors can be called into question, and of civil society as a whole, when inappropriate and poorly governed CSOs fail to deliver.

“International organisations still give funds to CSOs that openly have dubious legitimacy and elastic mandates.”
– Sierra Leone

In some contexts, it is clear that CSOs are also falling short on the inclusion of people from marginalised and vulnerable groups, another area which opens CSOs up to challenge about whether they are internalising values. In Liberia, only 41% of CSO staff members are women, which falls to only 32% for CSOs based in the capital. To some extent this reflects enduring societal problems with female education, and widespread social perceptions on the role of women, although it should of course be expected of CSOs that they model better practice than that found in their surroundings.

“Gender equality, and inclusion of ethnic minorities and rural populations, do not seem to be significant realities in the composition and leadership of CSOs.” – Senegal

This challenge seems to be shared across the region: the Senegal assessment found that levels of participation in CSOs by women, young people and rural populations are lower than might be expected, while the research in Benin also indicates that women are under-represented in the leadership of CSOs. This suggests a need to improve strategies that actively target outreach to and engagement with marginalised and vulnerable groups.

d. Networking and collaboration between CSOs

Most assessments explored the levels of networking and cooperation between different CSOs, whether that be participation in formal CSO networks, platforms, umbrellas and coalitions (for shorthand, the diversity of these forms are simply referred to here as CSO networks), or cooperation between different CSOs, which can cover a spectrum from exchanging information to collaborating in joint projects. What lies behind this question is an implicit assumption that civil society should be an arena of cooperation, and that synergies can be realised when different CSOs work together.

CSO NETWORKS

There is widespread membership of CSO networks. For example, in Ghana, 68% of CSOs surveyed report that they belong to a network, and 69% of these belong to at least three, hinting at a multiplicity of thematic groups. In Sierra Leone, 60% of CSOs surveyed state that they belong to a network, while in Benin, this figure stands at 67%. The value that networks can offer is recognised in Nigeria, where 69% of CSOs surveyed believe that being a member of a network benefits their organisation.

However, in most contexts, widespread membership of networks exists alongside doubts about their effectiveness and efficiency. Notwithstanding recognition of the benefits of networks in Nigeria, only 58% of CSOs surveyed believe networks have the capacity to address the needs of their members. Among CSOs surveyed in Senegal, 40% classify CSO networks as ineffective or not very effective.

“Many civil society leaders are disillusioned with CSO networks and coalitions.” - Sierra Leone

CSO networks are characterised in Sierra Leone as having challenges of low leadership turnover, poor internal governance, limited levels of engagement with their member organisations and weak advocacy capacity. Most have not changed leaders since their establishment and rarely meet, making them vulnerable to capture by the organisation that founded them or that provides their secretariat. Sierra Leonean networks rely on grants from donors, but these are not core grants; they are grants for implementation of projects. In Ghana as well, there is little funding specifically to support networks, particularly core support, meaning that it is difficult to sustain them.

These funding challenges for networks can drive competition between networks and their members, which is identified as an issue in Ghana, where many networks are seen as self-serving, and as offering little benefit to their members. Given the lack of both core funding and funds coming from their member organisations, many networks have little choice but to seek grants to implement projects, which means they receive funding to undertake work that might otherwise have gone to their member organisations. A similar situation is reported in Sierra Leone, where there are examples of CSOs that host networks in effect using the network’s brand to win funds that they then hold onto to implement projects on their own, without involving their members. A further challenge in Sierra Leone is that donor attempts to create networks for projects have cut across the coalition-building attempts being made by domestic CSOs.

Many CSOs, in Ghana and Sierra Leone, take the view that the role of networks should be to mobilise resources for their members, offer members training, conduct research, and coordinate advocacy and campaigning that individual CSOs cannot do as well on their own. In Sierra Leone, it is felt that networks could in particular play a large role in lobbying and advocacy, but they are mostly not meeting this role. In some cases, they are even failing to fulfil the convening role they were established for.

A further issue identified in Sierra Leone is overlapping networks, which duplicate memberships and mandates, while in Senegal, the lack of a single, overarching CSO umbrella, compared to a range of thematic groupings, is seen as a key weakness when it comes to offering civil society a platform for unity and the identification of common objectives.

COOPERATION BETWEEN CSOs

In many contexts, while a high level of information sharing and collaboration between CSOs is reported, it is still assessed as unsystematised, and in some countries, such as Senegal, insufficient. There are also critiques that much cooperation tends to be for instrumental, self-interested reasons, for example, to seek funding, or when collaboration is a funding requirement.

In Nigeria, 74% of CSOs consulted rate overall collaboration between CSOs as low, and 65% believe CSOs can do more to promote cooperation and harmony within civil society. Further, 62% state that they share information with other CSOs only occasionally. Only 35% of CSOs surveyed in Ghana report that they exchange documents with other CSOs. In Sierra Leone, networking and collaboration are assessed as poor, with low interaction between individual CSOs outside formal networks. It is rare for CSOs to initiate joint projects or make joint funding applications.

“CSOs are not enthusiastic about attending each other’s meetings unless there are opportunities for resource sharing.” - Sierra Leone

The quality of partnerships is called into question in Liberia, and it is also noted that competition for funding cuts across collaboration, making it difficult for different CSOs to compromise, something that is also cited as an issue in Ghana, where 75% of CSOs surveyed state that conflict exists between CSOs.

“Liberia has an extensive universe of CSOs and there are limited donor funds. As such, CSOs frequently view each other as potential competitors, rather than as organisations that could substantially add to the overall impact of CSOs’ work.” - Liberia

In Nigeria, only 27% of CSOs surveyed cannot cite examples of rivalries between CSOs.

“Coordination has been almost impossible.” - Nigeria

One of the dangers of lack of coordination is that CSOs will duplicate each other’s activities, and CSO actions will cut across each other.

“The result of this weak and at times disjointed coordination and collaboration is duplication of efforts and initiatives.” - Liberia

DONORS, VISIBILITY AND COMPETITION IN GHANA

“The main obstacle to harmonious cooperation is competition over funding.” - Ghana

The role played by donors in stoking competition, however inadvertently, needs to be realised. In Ghana, it is noted that CSOs want recognition from donors, and they also want to be seen as efficiently implementing projects in order to make repeat funding likelier, but this can inhibit collaboration with other CSOs. Collaboration can take time and energy, and so CSOs may prefer to go it alone, not least to focus on hitting donor deadlines. Collaboration can also make it harder for an individual CSO to win visibility, claim credit, build brand recognition and increase the possibility of repeat funding from a donor.

“Competition can be subtle but damaging, because it can lead to a duplication of efforts and an attendant waste of resources.” - Ghana

CIVIL SOCIETY DISCONNECT

One of the major findings of the last phase of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI), drawing from data gathered in 35 countries between 2008 and 2011, is that civil society is characterised by multiple disconnects, including between urban and rural CSOs, advocacy and service delivery CSOs, CSOs and citizens, and established CSOs and new social movements. It is not surprising to see these issues surface in West Africa. Competition and lack of common voice is identified in Ghana as one of the key challenges for CSOs as a whole. There is seen to be little connection between national and grassroots CSOs: this matters to both ends of the relationship, because national level CSOs may be seen to lack credibility if they cannot demonstrate that they are informed by grassroots voices, while for smaller CSOs, the benefits of capacity-building and amplification of their issues that could result from connection with larger CSOs are not being realised.

“There is need for national level CSOs to link with those at the grassroots level to increase impact of civil society as a whole.” – Ghana

A more general challenge, particularly when dealing with governments, is that a civil society that is seen to be divided and disconnected is vulnerable to divide and rule tactics. Governments, and others that engage with national and local level CSOs, such as donors and INGOs, generally show a tendency to want to deal with unified and combined civil society voices, because this simplifies consultation. While the diversity of civil society and the value of the civil society arena as a source of multiple critiques, ideas and solutions needs to be upheld and made more clearly understood, the danger to an evidently divided civil society is that simplifying filters will be applied from above, if they are not developed, owned and offered from within civil society itself.

By this measure, there is considerable room for improvement. For example, in Liberia, the lowest level of cooperation reported by national-level CSOs is with other national-level CSOs (52%), compared to 62% that partner with international CSOs and 72% with local CSOs. This would seem to reflect a level of competition between CSOs, particularly for limited funding opportunities. Communications infrastructure challenges, as identified earlier, are also suggested as a factor here.

In Sierra Leone, it is reported that there is little connection between different kinds of CSOs, such as between CSOs that focus on service delivery and those that prioritise advocacy. Also it is assessed that international linkages to improve advocacy and lobbying are not being explored. Disconnect between some CSOs and citizens is noted in Nigeria.

“There are a great many CSOs that seek change without attempting strategies of mass mobilisation and growing large-scale support.” - Nigeria

The dangers of citizen-CSO disconnect, as outlined in the report of the 2008-2011 CSI, Bridging the Gaps, is that CSOs may not be well informed by citizens’ voices in the development of their priorities and activities, which therefore may inadequately address needs or achieve impact. Ultimately this raises the risk that citizens may reject CSOs, as may be the case with some CSOs in Senegal.

“CSOs themselves may also be seen as an imported design, if one that is currently en vogue, but not one that is yet understood by the grassroots. Some CSOs can be seen as having emerged in a top down rather than bottom up manner, with projects disconnected from citizens, and some opportunistic behaviour to seek funding.” - Senegal

Disconnect is seen, in Senegal, between the new social movements that burgeoned in 2011 and established CSOs. These new movements may have challenged the complacency of some established CSOs that are used to receiving funding, and may have shed light on disconnects between citizens and CSOs. However there is now also concern about whether and how the new social movements can be sustained, as well as the question of how other parts of civil society interact with them.

CSOs are also perceived as being highly skewed towards urban areas in Senegal. Poor communication between urban and rural CSOs is further identified as a challenge in Ghana, exacerbated by a tendency for donors to direct funding towards urban-based CSOs.

TWO CIVIL SOCIETY CAMPS IN LIBERIA

“The difference between Montserrado based CSOs and CSOs based elsewhere in Liberia is striking.” – Liberia

Divides between urban and rural CSOs emerge as a significant issue in Liberia, to the extent that CSOs can be classified into two camps: those based in Monrovia, and the rest. This disconnect manifests itself in many of issues identified in the assessments: CSOs in the capital tend to have more ability to employ staff members on regular salaries, have more highly trained staff, greater access to financial resources and correspondingly greater capacity to implement programmes and monitor and evaluate them. Those based outside the capital perform less well on all these indicators, and also have a lower level of networking and partnerships, particularly with national level and international CSOs.

The downside is that capital-based CSOs have much higher dependency on international donors, having had access to international funding streams since peace was declared in 2003. This makes them more vulnerable to donor withdrawal. CSOs based outside the capital have more of a mix of funding sources, including membership subscriptions and internally generated revenue, suggesting that their funding may be more sustainable in the long run.

e. Impact of CSOs

If CSOs are to know whether they are achieving on their missions and serving their constituencies, and if they are to improve their funding base, then they need to be able to demonstrate that they are achieving impact. Some of the assessments explored the perceived impact CSOs have made, both on the communities they serve and in advocating for changed policies.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

The picture here is mixed. There is a sense that CSOs feel they are making an impact at the community level, but to some extent, they grasp this instinctively rather than being able to prove it.

For example, many CSOs in Senegal believe their work helps to address poverty, but when asked, most CSOs surveyed, 53%, can offer no examples of specific CSO initiatives to eradicate poverty, and only 24% can offer more than one or two examples. They were also mostly unable to give evidence of impact. Overall,

activity on poverty was assessed as limited, and visibility of CSO work on the issue as low. It was also assessed that there is a low level of work to promote democracy by CSOs in Senegal.

In Ghana, 46% of respondents in a public survey stated that CSOs had achieved an impact in their communities, for example, through basic service provision and microfinance schemes, but this is almost matched by 40% who said they had not seen an impact.

When measures of public trust are assessed, CSOs are consistently rated higher than state institutions, which can be understood as a proxy indicator of impact; citizens would not express trust in CSOs if they saw them as consistently failing to deliver some kind of benefit. Accordingly, it can be seen as encouraging that 49% of the public surveyed in Senegal assessed CSOs as more effective than the government in the provision of services to vulnerable and marginalised groups, compared to only 9% who rated government as more effective. Seventy per cent of respondents also reported a high or quite high level of trust in CSOs. Community groups in Ghana expressed the view that CSOs were more active and effective than the government in key areas such as education service provision.

POLICY IMPACT

It is harder still to demonstrate impact at the policy level, where change may be slower and have many contributing factors. Limited success is noted here, but this may be related to low levels of activity. In Ghana, around 80% of CSOs are identified as focusing on service provision, suggesting that limited attention is given to attempts to influence policy. Nonetheless, 70% of Ghanaian CSO surveyed believe they have achieved some kind of impact on government policy, although most of these assess the level of success as only average. Lack of local ownership and the short duration of funded programmes are identified as constraining factors.

“The short-term nature of programmes mean that many are hurried and impacts may not be sustained, which could eventually erode trust in CSOs.” - Ghana

Similarly, CSO activity to influence policies seems rare in Nigeria: 63% of CSOs surveyed stated that they have not advocated for any policies in the past two years. Most respondents, 47%, also believe CSOs' impact has been limited. A connection is made here with the failure of CSOs to develop effective strategies to mobilise citizens.

In Senegal, most CSOs surveyed assess the impact of CSOs on public policy related to three key issues (land, good governance and decentralisation) as moderate to limited (56%, 64% and 64% respectively), compared to an average of only 9% over the three issues that perceive significant impact.

The limited evidence offered by CSOs suggests that they need to become better at measuring, demonstrating and reporting impact. Part of the challenge here is the weakness of monitoring and evaluation capacities identified earlier; these need to be targeted for improvement. Investment in these mechanisms will not only improve CSOs' capacity to report back to citizens and donors on their achievements, but also help them improve their ways of working based on feedback and learning.

In addition, the findings suggest a need to develop the ability of CSOs to make sustained policy demands, which may be difficult to make over time given high staff turnover, the preponderance of short-term funding and tendencies for agendas to shift in response to the availability of funding. To overcome some of these challenges, and those caused by competition for visibility between CSOs, there may be a particular need to support the ability of civil society networks to make focused and sustained demands that are seen to have widespread civil society support.

f. Civil society-government relations

Lack of impact on public policies may of course also be an indicator of constrained relations between CSOs and governments, limited political space for CSOs or the lack of an enabling legal and regulatory framework that allows CSOs to carry out their mandates and responsibilities fully. This final section therefore examines state influence on the environment for CSOs, and relations between CSOs and their governments.

Table 2: key indicators on the political space for CSOs

| Country | Population Enabling Environment Index ranking, 2013 (109 countries) | Ibrahim Index of African Governance ranking, 2013 (52 countries) | USAID CSO Sustainability Index ranking, 2012 (25 countries) | Freedom House Freedom in the World assessment, 2014 |
|--------------|---|--|---|---|
| Benin | 69th | 13th | - | Free |
| Ghana | 48th | 7th | 6th | Free |
| Liberia | 88th | 29th | 13th | Partly free |
| Nigeria | 98th | 41st | 10th | Partly free |
| Senegal | 82nd | 10th | 4th | Free |
| Sierra Leone | 92nd | 31st | 14th | Partly free |

The above table highlights where the six countries fall short of the average (defined as the halfway point) on some key governance indicators of relevance to civil society. Shaded areas indicate rankings that place the six in the bottom half of countries assessed. Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone perform badly on all four indicators, suggesting a particular need to focus attention on improving the conditions for civil society in those countries.

LEGAL AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

There is assessed to be a lack of an adequate legal framework for CSO activities in Ghana, and this sometimes leads to challenges for CSOs in obtaining registration, which can be a lengthy and bureaucratic process. In Sierra Leone the regulatory framework is assessed as minimal, largely limited to the granting of registration to CSOs, doing little positively to encourage CSOs' good governance and accountability. Nor does the legal framework help to overcome funding challenges, as it makes no provision for preferential treatment of CSOs or taxation breaks to promote individual philanthropy. Further, there are multiple registration and reporting agencies for CSOs, which poses a difficulty, both for CSOs' understanding of the regulatory environment, and for the exercise of accountability.

On a related issue, 53% of CSOs surveyed in Nigeria say they do not understand the tax regime for civil society. Further, registration requirements mean that the identities and contact details of any people who donate to CSOs need to be disclosed, which is likely to deter some people from contributing, as will new anti-money laundering reporting requirements. Laws that make it harder to receive funding from other countries exacerbate funding challenges.

RELATIONS WITH GOVERNMENTS AND THE POLITICAL SPACE

Senegalese CSOs see relations with the government in a broadly positive light, but dialogue is assessed as still largely ad hoc. Further, only 20% of CSOs interviewed believe that the government abstains from interference in the activity of CSOs. In Benin, the political environment for CSOs is assessed as not conducive, while in Sierra Leone, some CSO leaders admit that they apply a policy of supporting whoever is in government, to seek favour and deter interference in their activities. This amounts to a self-imposed constraint on a CSO's advocacy and watchdog capacities, and has the effect of devolving these tasks to a small number of CSOs.

Sixty-one per cent of Nigerian CSOs surveyed see the legal environment as moderately enabling, and only 11% report they have been the victims of illegitimate restriction, but there are also examples of CSOs facing difficulties in registering if their organisation's name refers to human rights issues, or contested areas such as the Niger Delta.

MIXED OPINIONS ON THE STATE OF RELATIONS IN NIGERIA

Opinions from Nigerian CSOs are mixed when it comes to the question of their relations with government. There is recognition that the consultative space, and the space for playing an oversight role, have expanded since the country's return to democracy. However, it is also noted that to some extent this space has been externally defined and is policed by donors and international organisations, which makes it potentially vulnerable and volatile.

Some CSOs feel that understanding and collaboration has grown, but others believe the relationship is still poor. The government is accused of trying to shield information from CSOs to hinder their watchdog role, but the oppositional strategies of some CSOs are also called into question. Further, a lower level of interactions is seen at the sub-national level, even though sub-national governance is important, given the scale of Nigeria. This suggests a need to prioritise the development of more constructive spaces at these different levels for participation and engagement between civil society and government, in the areas of policy development, implementation and monitoring and evaluation.

“As time has passed since the end of conflict, the relationship between CSOs and government has become increasingly confrontational.” – Liberia

Most CSOs in Liberia report having had some kind of collaboration with government, and political space is assessed to be improving, but the picture is mixed. Government and CSOs collaborate on some issues, such as decentralisation, tackling corruption and natural resource management, to the extent that CSOs are able to contribute to the development of policies and laws, but on other areas there more hostility. The development of a greater critical capacity on the part of CSOs is seen as a positive step forward, but a challenge comes in poor understandings, by the government and citizens, of civil society's role, which can lead to strained relationships. Many Liberian CSOs find themselves caught in a dilemma between being responsible but risking being ignored, or seeking to cause a stir to attract attention, but then facing the danger of being labelled as troublemakers. When CSOs engage in criticisms without raising plausible alternatives, they risk playing to negative stereotypes of civil society.

“There are also some civil society groups that adopt positions that are implacably opposed to the government, which risks credibility.” - Ghana

In Ghana, a high level of mistrust is reported between the government and CSOs. Many CSOs see state agencies as opaque, inconsistent and disconnected from poor people. Meanwhile, a concern of government seems to be that civil society is not a coherent actor because it does not speak with one voice, suggesting a need both to prioritise CSO networking, but also to sensitise government on the importance of listening a diversity of voices. This lack of trust may be one of the factors behind an absence of government support for CSOs, but it has the effect of making CSOs reliant on foreign funding, which in turn makes it harder for government to trust them and improve its comfort levels about supporting them, implying a negative spiral.

Generally, some positive signs can be seen in CSO-government relations, but there remains a clear need to improve the depth and range of consultation, and to work on initiatives that develop trust between governments and CSOs.

3

Conclusions

Clearly, high expectations are placed on CSOs in West Africa, but in the main, they assess that they lack adequate capacity to deliver fully on these.

CSOs in the six countries, through applying the CSI-RA, have shown a willingness to be self-critical about the challenges and weaknesses they face, which is a welcome first step towards addressing them. CSOs have identified measures to address challenges that they can take themselves. For example, they have recognised that they should try to improve their cooperation with other CSOs, and play a more active role in CSO networks. They have acknowledged that they must do more to abide by their governance rules, and improve their accountability practices. They understand that they need to demonstrate they are achieving impact, and to change what they do and how they work if they find out they are not achieving impact.

There are also some areas where there is less shared understanding about how to change old habits. Novel solutions may be needed here. For example, entrenched funding challenges suggest a need to be more imaginative, to think beyond 'donor first' responses to fundraising, and to explore possibilities such as community philanthropy and crowdsourcing. There is also a need to address issues of disconnect, including from new social movements, where these exist, and for different types of CSOs to improve their connections with each other.

But there is also much that CSOs cannot do alone. CSOs know they need to strengthen their capacities for critical but constructive engagement with governments, but governments need to meet them part way to build healthier relationships. Governments in most contexts need to improve the legal and regulatory environment for CSOs to make it more enabling for the full range of CSO roles, and they may need to be supported by donors to do so. Spaces need to be strengthened where governments and CSOs can work together and build up routines of collaboration. At all times, the key civil society rights, of freedom of assembly, association and expression, need to be upheld.

Donors, whether these be internal, state donors, or bilateral and multilateral donors, have a part to play. They need to take more responsibility for the funding decisions they make, be aware that they are distributing legitimacy as well as funds, and bear in mind their distorting effect on patterns of accountability. Donors should take pains to become more consistent and predictable, but should also reorient some of their funding lines to address the weaknesses identified here. They need to recognise the development effectiveness gains of actively investing in improving the capacities of CSOs they support. Otherwise, given entrenched weaknesses, CSOs may disappoint. Some donors still seem to see West African CSOs as remote delivery mechanisms. Those attitudes should be challenged.

Finally, in this exercise, the willingness of CSOs to be self-critical has been a welcome feature. This should be seen as a strength and not a weakness, and as part of the unique contribution to a culture of values of civil society. It is hard to think of many actors in government or the private sector who would not only be self-critical to the extent outlined above, but also then take pains to publish and disseminate their analysis. This is a mind-set that should be encouraged, and continued after the end of this project.

4

Recommendations

It is in the nature of this self-assessment exercise that most of the recommendations that emerge relate to what CSOs themselves can do to address the common challenges identified. In addition, the assessments addressed some recommendations to governments and donors, in the recognition that CSOs need an enabling environment if they are to realise their potentials. Improving the conditions for CSOs should be a shared responsibility; it is not something CSOs can do alone.

TAKING THE NEXT STEPS IN BENIN

In Benin, the CSI-RA processes culminated in the agreement of detailed, four-year action plan to improving the internal governance of CSOs, strengthen their resource positions and capacities, and enhance their operating environment. Steps to be taken to improve governance including raising CSOs' awareness of anti-corruption laws and initiating recognition and reward schemes for CSOs seen to be exemplary in achieving standards of good governance. On resourcing, a new directory of fundraising sources is planned, along with training on proposal writing and budget preparation. To strengthen the enabling environment for CSOs, the aim is to develop the lobbying and advocacy of CSOs. There is now a need to mobilise the necessary resources and buy-in to achieve the plan.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES

More training should be provided to develop fundraising skills, such as proposal writing and budgeting. There is also a need to raise awareness of different sources of funding, and strengthen capacities in searching for funding sources and building relationships with donors.

Support should be given towards developing CSOs' experimentation capacities with new fundraising approaches, such as social media-based and crowdsourcing approaches. CSOs need to development their local resource mobilisation skills, including through developing individual and community philanthropy techniques and building relations with local businesses and corporate social responsibility programmes. Capacities to develop nationally specific fundraising strategies appropriate to the different range of assets in each context should be developed.

Donors need to work in collaboration, with each other and with the CSOs that they support, to build in efforts to improve the governance and capacities of CSOs they provide with funding.

More medium-term, multi-year partnerships with capacity-strengthening components are needed, along the lines of those identified in Sierra Leone, although they should be based on evaluations of the strengths and weaknesses of the Sierra Leone model.

HUMAN AND TECHNICAL RESOURCES

CSOs need to build their HR management capacities, including developing a dedicated HR function to drive staff training, encourage staff development and staff retention, and enable more adequate in-house replacement of staff who leave. CSOs need to be supported to develop these capacities CSO networks could play a role in helping here, through such means as peer learning and the sharing of good practice.

Donors should consider providing more support to obtain basic equipment and for updating ICT hardware and software, particularly when it enables better communication between CSOs, improved fundraising and enhanced access to rural communities. CSOs should make more use of open source rather than proprietary software to enable inexpensive updating.

GOOD GOVERNANCE

CSO codes of conduct should be developed, in inclusive processes led by a wide range of CSOs, where these do not exist. CSO networks could lead on developing these, and members of academia could make a

valuable contribution. Where they do exist, there is a need for stronger scrutiny mechanisms over adherence to these. Existing accountability tools such as the Istanbul Principles for CSO Development Effectiveness should be adopted, applied and internalised. Codes of conduct and CSO charters need to state in clear and simple terms, and in multiple relevant languages, what the duties, responsibilities and roles of being involved in a CSO should entail.

CSOs should make systematic attempts to be transparent, including through the regular publication and accessible dissemination of annual and financial reports.

CSOs should set mutually agreed benchmarks for assessing their governance performance. Examples of good practice should be shared, and oversight mechanisms such as peer review, supplying of peer references and recognition and reward schemes should be explored. Donors could work with CSOs to set governance indicators as a factor in funding allocation decisions, but only if funding decisions are themselves made transparent and accountable.

Donors should support the development of the strategic planning and monitoring and evaluation capacities of CSOs.

CSOs should take steps to be more inclusive, including active outreach to marginalised and vulnerable groups.

NETWORKS AND COOPERATION

Collaboration needs to be actively supported, including between CSOs that work on similar issues, to alleviate competition between CSOs, and between different types of CSOs, including new civil society forms, to address issues of civil society disconnect. Urban-rural divides between CSOs also need to be bridged. There is a need for activities that bring together different types of CSOs in practical cooperation, as well as for networks to target bringing a wider range of CSOs into membership.

Stronger CSO networks are needed to help build credibility with the government and public by channelling diverse civil society voices more effectively. CSO networks should however avoid competition with their members, and should focus only on strengths that individual CSOs cannot offer, such as undertaking civil society-wide research, advocacy and capacity strengthening, and building up routines of dialogue and collaboration with governments to expand civil society space. Networks also need to focus on reducing competition between members. The remits of networks should be made clear and their mandates adhered to; where key challenges have been identified in a national context, networks should try to address them through approaches that unlock advantages of economies of scale.

Where civil society-wide networks, that bring together existing thematic networks or networks of particular CSO types, do not exist, the possibility of creating them should be investigated.

Donors should provide networks with distinct, core support, such that the temptation for networks to drift into bidding for project funding and competing with their members is reduced.

It would also be helpful to map and assess duplication between CSOs, and to investigate solutions to duplication, such as harmonising and consolidating roles, or pooling or outsourcing some functions.

IMPACT

CSOs need to develop a culture of evaluation, and should be supported to put in place and apply monitoring, evaluation and reporting tools to determine where they are achieving impact, and to feed evaluation back into programme design.

To increase their chances of policy impact, CSOs need to take steps to emphasise their legitimacy, and their connections to constituencies. CSOs also need to collaborate in order to make sustained and inclusive policy advocacy efforts over time, and should make this a key role of CSO networks. Networks can amplify voices and offer a stronger presence over longer periods.

POLITICAL, LEGAL AND REGULATORY SPACE, AND RELATIONS WITH GOVERNMENTS

Governments need to develop more enabling legislation and regulation, and donors and CSOs need to work with them to encourage them to do so. Key principles of CSO laws and regulations are that they should be

predictable and simple, should treat all CSOs equally, and offer independent appeal procedures. Registration and reporting procedures should be efficient, accessible, simple and inexpensive, and should uphold the freedoms of assembly, association and expression. Laws and regulations should go beyond establishing minimal rules of engagement to promote civil society, for example by offering tax breaks to CSOs and for donations to CSOs.

Governments need to provide spaces that go beyond superficial encounters, and that foster real dialogue and participation. Dialogues should be broadened to encompass a wider range of CSOs, and should be made more systematic. CSOs should be enabled to work with governments to help set the parameters of interactions. For their part, CSOs need to develop their capacity to advance constructive, plausible recommendations, rather than simply criticise. This may imply mastering technical expertise in their policy areas, and being supported to do so.



CIVICUS

WE EXIST TO **STRENGTHEN
CITIZEN ACTION** AND **CIVIL SOCIETY
AROUND THE WORLD.**

VISION

A WORLDWIDE **COMMUNITY** OF INFORMED, INSPIRED,
COMMITTED CITIZENS ENGAGED IN **CONFRONTING**
THE CHALLENGES FACING **HUMANITY.**

CIVICUS SEEKS TO **AMPLIFY** THE VOICES AND
OPINIONS OF **ORDINARY PEOPLE.** IT RECOGNIZES
THAT FOR **EFFECTIVE** AND **SUSTAINABLE** CIVIC
PARTICIPATION TO OCCUR, CITIZENS MUST ENJOY
RIGHTS OF FREE ASSOCIATION AND BE ABLE TO
ENGAGE IN ALL SECTORS OF SOCIETY.



CIVICUS

CONTACT US



/CIVICUS



#CIVICUSalliance



info@civicus.org



civicus.org/subscribe

SOUTH AFRICA



CIVICUS House
24 Gwigwi Mrwebi Street
Newtown,
Johannesburg, 2001
Tel: +27 (0)11 833 5959
Fax: +27 (0)11 833 7997

SWITZERLAND



11 Avenue de le Paix
CH- 1202
Geneva
Tel: +41 (0)22 733 3435

UNITED STATES



1425 K Street NW
Suite 350
Washington DC 20005
Tel: +1 202 331 8518
Fax: +1 703 224 8801

UNITED KINGDOM



Unit 60,
Eurolink Business Centre
49 Effra Road
London SW2 1BZ
Tel: +44 (0)20 7733 9696