The Civil Society in Conflict Management and Peace Building in Africa

Said Adejumobi

**Introduction**

Conflicts and wars and the processes of their management and resolution are essentially state driven exercises. It is, mostly an affair between the state, the rebels and the international mediators of state diplomats and those of multilateral agencies. Little consideration is given to the civil society in terms of conflict processes. Yet the civil society is usually a key actor in the contradictory processes and struggles of conflicts and the dynamics of their resolution. Conflicts do not emerge in a vacuum, they are products of social structure and character of society of which the civil society is an integral part. This piece raises issues about the role of the civil society in conflict processes, in terms of its emergence, management, and resolution. The paper starts with the basics. It examines the concept of civil society, which is being associated with everything good that the state is not. The second part focuses on the role of civil society in the emergence of conflicts and the final section dwells on the various ways by which the civil society can intervene in the process of conflict management, resolution and peace building in Africa.

**Civil Society: Making Meaning of a Romanticised Concept**

The 'animal' called civil society has assumed some determining characteristics in liberal political and intellectual discourse. It is benign, progressive, developmental, democratic and everything that the state is not. As such, the civil society is the 'darling' of everybody. International organisations like the World Bank, the United Nations and all its specialised agencies (UNDP, UNECA etc) court it, continent organisations like the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), and African Development Bank (ADB) adore it, while the state has been forced to now tolerate, if not respect it. However, this uncritical optimism about the civil society is neither supported by thorough theoretical analysis of the concept nor history. In reality, the civil society is a contested terrain. It is an arena of political, social, class and ideological contestations and struggles (Adejumobi, 1999). As such, it has no determining characteristics. It could be at once progressive and reactionary, benign and malevolent, democratic or otherwise. With this conceptual clarification, it is evident that a cautious approach has to be adopted in analysing the democratic and progressive potentials of civil society.

Civil society organisations are of various origin, mode, character and agenda. There are the state crafted Governmental Non-Governmental organisations (GONGOs), Donor driven Non Governmental organisations (DDNGOs), that are often without a social base, followership or a clear agenda, and the international NGOS. The foregoing are the groups that now take the centre stage in liberal civil society
discourse. The traditional civil society groups like labour, students' movement, women organisations, farmers' associations and community development groups of various shades are largely de-emphasised in the market driven liberal civil society discourse. Essentially, civil society is an assemble of non state organisations that encompass trade unions, students' movements, ethnic or tribal organisations, community development associations, women groups, the human rights associations, the press, and other forms of organisations outside the state arena. However, there is need to separate the civil from the political society. The political society is organised for the purpose of political power. This includes the political parties. Political parties are part of political rather than civil society.

**Civil Society and Conflicts**

There is a general assumption that the civil society is only relevant within the context of conflict management. This is an uncritical assumption. The civil society can be part of the problem of conflict generation or escalation. Since civil societies are embedded in the social character of society they also reflect the social contradictions in society. For instance, the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 could not have been possible or taken such gruesome dimensions without the complicity of civil society groups. The ideology of hate was not only propagated by the state, but was also actively supported by some civil society groups including some segments of the press. In Nigeria, the process of annulling the June 12, 1993 presidential elections by the vicious military junta of General Ibrahim Babangida could not have been possible without the connivance of some civil society groups. An association called "Association for Better Nigeria" (ABN) played a lead role in the annulment process. It was this annulment that enveloped the country in crisis from 1993. In Sierra Leone there are allegations that civil society groups particularly International civil society groups are now part of the problem rather than the solution in that country. Some of them are alleged to be involved in illegal diamond business and gun running with the rebels, under the pretence of alleviating humanitarian needs of the Sierra Leonians. The point being emphasised is that civil society may be an actor or facilitator in conflict situations and, not necessarily the manager of the process. In other words, it could be part of the problem as well as the solution.

**Civil Society and Conflict Management**

What are the kinds of civil society groups that can be part of the conflict management process and what roles can they play in it? There are various strands of the civil society that can be part of peace building and sustenance in Africa. These include human rights' groups, women associations, the press, trade unions, students' organisations and the modern NGOS, local and international.

The first challenge of a conflict situation, especially of war is one of basic human needs for refugees and displaced persons. Civil society groups in Africa, in collaboration with their international partners can organise for emergency relief for
those groups of people. This should however be done with some sensitivity to local peculiarities and the prevalent situation, such that it would not provoke local distrust or reactions from the people, which may reinforce or exacerbate the crisis. International organisations like the Red Cross, and Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) are involved in immediate conflict relief projects, by providing medical needs and relief materials in conflict ridden zones.

Second, is the process of peace negotiation in conflict situations. The general practice has been to use state channels, actors and agencies to negotiate peace. This is good, but may not be sufficient or very effective. Civil society groups, especially those with pan-national orientations should be incorporated into peace negotiation processes. The reason is that they can popularise peace deals, put pressure on belligerents, and mobilise popular support for the peace process. Negotiating peace should no longer be the sole prerogative of warring parties and the international mediators alone. Some civil society groups can also play very useful roles in securing peace deals and ensuring those agreements are respected. For example, the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa saw the active intervention of the labour movement, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in coalition building with liberation movements during the political struggles and in peace negotiation processes in the move towards ending apartheid and evolving a multi-racial and multi-party south Africa.

In the conflict in Sierra Leone, civil society organisations have played very important roles in the peace process both at the level of mounting pressure on the rebels to accede to peace agreements and also participating though informally, in the peace negotiation processes. Organisations like the Inter religious Council (IRCSL), Campaign for Good Governance, and the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), have sought to intervene in the peace process. The IRCSL was very instrumental in helping to secure children held hostage in rebel controlled territories and encouraging parties to the conflict, especially the rebel (RUF) to accede to negotiation. While the civil society groups were present in Lome during the peace negotiations, they were accorded only informal or observer status, yet they played a key role as mediators behind the scene in the negotiation processes. Indeed, the strength of their role was recognised as the Lome Peace Accord has provisions for the civil society in the peace building processes. For instance, Article VI of the accord talks about the establishment of a commission for the consolidation of peace, which was to have representatives from the civil society. In addition, organisations like the CDD have sought to provide platform of dialogue for the various stakeholders in the conflict to discuss, create better understanding and appreciate each other's positions.

Third, the civil society in the post war situation is extremely relevant in the process of peace building. Theses are in four directions. First is through assisting in the process of demilitarisation, demobilisation and adaptation to civil life for demobilised combatants. Second is through undertaking post war rehabilitation projects, especially in restoring basic social services like primary health care, education etc. Third is the creation of a new awareness and consciousness through enlightenment about the
futility of war and the primacy of dialogue in political and social interactions. The target of this campaign should not be only the political leaders, but also the people. Without the mobilisation of the people, war cannot be fought. The people must be conscientised about the inefficacy of war as instrument of political negotiation. The final dimension is in ensuring the principles of popular participation, rule of law, fairness, justice, and equal citizenship for the people, which are the fundamental issues that usually form the basis of conflicts in Africa. The press, human rights' groups, students' and labour movements can play key roles in this regard.

Conclusion

While the challenge of conflict prevention, mediation and resolution are enormous in Africa, they are not unrealisable. Some have suggested that Africa may be riddled with conflicts for the next two decades, I do not share that pessimism. Africa can and must indeed put behind it the scourge of war, famine and destruction. Such, a process will have to involve disaggregating and harnessing the potentials of some civil society groups in the process of peace building, and sustenance in Africa.

References

