

The Third sector in West Africa - Maimed by COVID-19

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Introduction

One sector in West Africa that has found itself crippled on many levels by COVID 19 is the third sector and specifically non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community based organisations (CBOs). The World Health Organisation (WHO) [announced](#) on March 11 that the Corona Virus emergency had now become a full blown global pandemic and many organisations have found themselves in dire circumstances as this crisis hit without warning. Their plight has been compounded by the [measures](#) deployed by governments across West Africa to respond to the pandemic, including lockdowns, border closures, social distancing and bans on public gatherings (OECD Country Tracker, 2020).

Emergency Funding

There are a number of reasons for this situation. They include the nature of funding arrangements with NGOs/CBOs– project-based short-term contracts that contribute little to building strong and resilient institutions. With these being the mainstay, several of these organisations live from hand to mouth, sustained from project to project (Arhin, Adam & Akanbasiam, 2015). They have little or no reserves and have no emergency funds they can rely on in times of crisis like this. Funding is channeled mainly towards project delivery with the usual 7-10% for administrative overheads. This leaves them with nothing to fall on when rainy days come; how much more a tsunami like COVID-19. Governments in West Africa do not fund NGOs and CBOs and they are not considered in the government economic stimulus packages to mitigate the negative effect of the pandemic on businesses.

The dependence of NGOs and CBOs on external donor funding (Kumi, 2017) has done little to help as this already dwindling source is further squeezed because the traditional donors – European and American governments, development agencies, Foundations and in some cases International NGOs, have found themselves also fighting COVID 19 in their countries. Although they remain concerned and invested in their partners in West Africa, they have been compelled to invest also in addressing the COVID challenges in their countries and to focus on their own survival.

Technology deficit

With lockdowns and social distancing came remote working. Organisations had to close their offices and allow staff to work from home. This required access to technology and data and for many NGOs and CBOs this remains a hurdle. A quick survey conducted by the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) in March 2020, revealed that many organisations had their work severely hampered because of the high cost of internet and data tariffs and the lack of laptops (because most of the organisations work with desktops in their offices). Other challenges were with procurement and approval of software and hardware because most of those processes could not be moved online. There was also the difficulty with procuring useful software such as the paid versions of Office 365, Zoom and Dropbox due to lack of adequate funds. Even where funds are available,

organisations were unable to get the approvals for procurement, and for some who did acquire it, did not have the needed skill or capacity to use it effectively.

Hampered programming

Programmatic interventions have stalled, which has had a negative impact on organisations that rely on physical interaction with participants and beneficiaries of their programmes to deliver efficient services and make the needed impact. Several of these have had to postpone or cancel programmes altogether. Even though a number of donors have given room to changes in project implementation and grant management such as redirecting funds towards addressing COVID-related programming (e.g [Wilde Ganzen](#)) or given flexibility in timelines for programme implementation, very few have gone a step further to enable organisations use the funds given to cushion the institutional shocks they are facing. The Hewlett Foundation is one of the very few that have taken this step (Kramer 2020).

Many of the programmes undertaken by organisations in this sector particularly around social accountability have required face-to-face meetings, group sessions, demonstrations, marches and social audits which are hindered by social distancing and bans on public gatherings. Moving these activities online particularly where this has not been the culture has presented a hurdle in effective organizing, translating to some extent, to low energy and effectiveness in mobilizing support for causes (Mullard and Aarvik).

The ability to change programme focus to respond to COVID-19 needs of the constituencies they work with has also been challenging as a result of the lack of flexibility of grant agreements to enable that agility.

Aluta continua

Yet, life for these organisations has to continue as work remains to be done. There is need to continue the work on social accountability and ensure the effective and efficient delivery of public services to citizens especially the poor, vulnerable, socially excluded and marginalized populations. As funds roll in from the [IMF](#), [World Bank](#), the United Nations and other entities to assist governments' responses to COVID 19, there is need for transparency and accountability in the use of those funds and to ensure that it reaches the beneficiaries for whom it has been sought. That watchdog role is that of civil society.

NGOs and CBOs have been actively supporting the vulnerable in their countries. Examples of self-help initiatives set up by civil society organisations have sprung up in different parts of West Africa to provide much needed essential supplies to vulnerable populations, especially during the lockdowns. In Ghana, a [CSO COVID 19 response Fund](#) has so far supported the mentally challenged, people living with disability, street children, widows and aged in the two cities that experienced the lockdown. Some organisations continue to provide psycho-social support to victims of domestic violence. Advocacy and research organisations have been vocal on real and perceived human rights violations with some cautioning that governments may overreach their powers during this time with the institution of emergency measures and legislation, some without timelines or limitations to the exercise of power in restricting freedoms. The need to protect civic space even in these times, remains

critical (ICNL 2020). The security services in some countries have been called out for abuse of power in their bid to enforce lockdowns (Simpson, 2020). Digital security for citizens has also become an issue of concern and focus.

As governments roll out policies, one major gap that has been identified is the lack of engagement with civil society even though many of these policies and measures have an effect, some adverse, on citizens. A number of civil society organisations have the expertise and knowledge to enable policy makers make informed policy choices that inure towards the benefit of citizens - leaving no one behind.

To fight and overcome this pandemic, public education is of the utmost importance and in countries like Ghana and others that have lifted lockdowns, the fate of people have been left in their hands. Personal responsibility is the requirement now. Prevention protocols may seem simple enough but adhering to them in practice requires key changes in everyday practices. That happens when people are well sensitised about an issue and take ownership of becoming a part of the change that is needed. It requires deliberate programming to create awareness - a role that civil society plays very well.

The issues that plagued the sub-region pre-COVID 19, such as inequality, climate change, terrorism threats, corruption, human rights violations etc. still persist and will post-COVID 19. A strong civil society sector is needed to engage other sectors of society, government and the private sector to tackle the problems and find the solutions to it.

Call for change

Clearly, the contribution of NGOs and CBOs is still needed in West Africa but it cannot be business as usual. Things will have to change. There will be the need to have more flexible resourcing, longer term partnerships, solidarity would have to be built with unlikely groups even within civil society such as professional bodies and NGOs, faith based organisations and labour unions. Civil society has to coordinate better and collaborate and also make a strong case to government about the need to support the sector, showing evidence of its contribution to the development of countries. There needs to be better engagement and collaboration between government, civil society and the private sector- bilaterally and multilaterally. Local resource mobilization can no longer be just a dream and more effort must be invested into building a local philanthropic culture that contributes to social justice and accountability and the institutions that champion it. To do this though, there is a trust deficit that needs to be bridged between government and citizens and even between citizens and NGOs/CBOs. Ways of working, organising and mobilizing support may never revert to what they used to be and civil society organisations will have to devise more innovative ways of doing this, using technology. The capacity needed for this has to be built and the necessary investments made.

Conclusion

COVID 19 has negatively affected many organisations in West Africa. To use the language of the times, the morbidity rate is very high especially because of underlying conditions that organisations suffer due to years of neglect and the lack of support in building strong and resilient institutions. The fear now is that if this status quo prolongs, the mortality

rate of organisations would also be high. This will not augur well for the progress made in West Africa in development, good governance, human rights and social justice. Many years of progress would be rolled back. There is still light at the end of the tunnel if the needed investments are made by all concerned to build a strong and resilient third sector in West Africa. That has to be made now and need not wait for a post-COVID era. For all interested in the development, peace and prosperity of West Africa, the choice is ours to make.

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