

Action Agenda for the Prevention of Armed Conflicts in West Africa

Preamble

Mindful of the magnitude of destructive violent conflicts that have hijacked the prospects for economic and social development in all West African states, particularly Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, and Guinea Bissau;

Concerned by the poor performance of all West African states on the 2004 Human Development Index of the United Nations with 13 of the 15 ECOWAS Member countries occupying the last unenviable bottom position of the scale;

Aware of the fact that this poor performance is attributed to generalized poverty and bad governance (characterized by rampant corruption, abuse of power, fraudulent elections, lack of transparency, and unfair international trade regulations), competition for scarce means of sustainable livelihoods, and ethnic and religious intolerance;

Recognizing proliferation of ethnic militias, rebel movements and mercenaries, small arms and light weapons, gross human rights violations, growing popular discontent, poorly managed transitional processes, transnational influences and war economies as incentives for the escalation of violent conflicts;

Considering also the fact that the phenomenon of state failure in West Africa is on the rise as the seemingly artificial entities can no longer provide the basic necessities such as water, electricity, health and schools to its citizenry as a result of years of bad governance and failed development policies, constitutional crises and ineffective and/or incoherent state institutions, and absence of viable political ideologies;

Conscious of the fact that the preponderance of rebel movements, militias and mercenaries which, although arguably the result of insecurity, has led to more insecurity as the states have demonstrated gross inability to cope with the huge security needs of the population thereby allowing the ground for West Africa's agents of destabilization;

Recalling the United Nation's Secretary General's call to action: *"...there is no higher goal, no deeper commitment, and no greater ambition for the United Nations other than the prevention of armed conflicts."* the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflicts (GPPAC) was established to enhance the role of civil society in developing effective action in preventing and transforming violent conflict, as well as to strengthen civil society relationships with governments, ECOWAS, and the United Nations;

Mindful of ECOWAS' protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security and the supplementary protocol on Democracy and Good Governance and the role of civil society in ensuring the implementation of these and related protocols;

Encouraged by the budding initiatives at shifting from a culture of reaction to one of effective and pro-active conflict prevention through the *“Capacity Building in Conflict Prevention and Good Governance for ECOWAS and Civil Society Organizations in West Africa”* (with assistance from USAID, Catholic Relief Services West Africa Regional Office), the West African Civil Society Forum (WACSOFF) and the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflicts (GPPAC) led by the European Center for Conflict Prevention based in Netherlands;

We, representatives of the West Africa Civil Society organizations active in conflict prevention, the promotion of good governance, and human security meeting for four days in Accra, the Republic of Ghana to deliberate on issues of Peace, Human Security and Conflict Prevention that undermine the development of West Africa;

Hereby resolve to establish a “West Africa Civil Society Platform for Conflict Prevention, the Promotion of Human Security and Good Governance within the West Africa sub region;

Challenges of CSOs in West Africa

During the Regional Conference on *“Consolidating the Role of CSOs in Preventing Violent Armed Conflicts and Promoting Good Governance”*, we representatives of West Africa civil society organizations made a critical review of the West Africa sub-region and identified and deliberated on the key challenges on sub-regional peace and security:

1. Preventing Armed conflict

The conference noted the complexity of being proactive, anticipating and dealing with the underlying issues of conflict while at the same time minimizing the escalation of violence in the process of tackling these underlying issues.

Poor Governance was identified as a key challenge for peace and security in West Africa. The consequence of such bad governance including the unequal distribution of resources, weak justice systems and unjust laws creates intolerance especially where these governments are undemocratic and repressive. Civil Society collaborations and structures are weak and ignorant and have not succeeded in organizing effectively to engage at the high level with governments and policymakers

It is also difficult to mobilize all key actors around a common agenda and purpose. In many cases, there is insufficient knowledge about constitutions and protocols by the populace; this is an expression of the disinterest of the affairs of the state by the citizens of the sub-region. There is still a lack of conceptual clarity on the meaning of citizenship in terms of allegiance to the nation state and ethnic community.

At the inter state level, it was observed that there is little interaction of CSOs across borders and the lack of such cross country CSO activities adversely affects CSOs efforts in preventing armed conflicts in the sub-region.

2. **Human Rights:**

Extreme poverty in many communities and the problems associated with development was identified as a fundamental challenge to the respect for people's rights. The rights and liberties of people are undermined by the conditions of poverty while the inequitable management and distribution of resources exacerbates the problem of non respect of fundamental human rights.

3. **Elections:**

The conference observed that in some countries of the sub-region, the large number of political parties is unable to sustain viable democratization processes. There is insufficient knowledge and training to enhance efficient electoral processes while the tendency for the political leadership to manipulate constitutions is a source of armed conflict. Participants added that all countries of the sub-region, should observe and abide by term limits for the Presidency to ensure that transitions do not become ground for instability and civil wars.

The absence of a framework for consensus building through inter-political party consultation was observed as another major challenge. Election observation and monitoring has often been limited only to election days while problems of the organization of elections which makes these elections flawed happen long before the election the day. Some of these include vote buying, exploitation of religious and ethnic passions to gain political advantage over political opponents as well as the irresponsible conduct and behavior of some political leaders. The logistical organization of elections in West Africa is replete with challenges. They include the manipulation of the electoral register, disagreements over the electoral list, insecurity during the electoral process, low voter turn out, the lack of independent electoral commissions and dependence on donor support to organize elections due to the high cost of organizing elections.

4. **Youth**

The conference observed that poverty and bad governance made youth to be the most vulnerable and therefore easily manipulated and used to fight wars. Youth are excluded from effectively participating and contributing to structural or systemic reforms in the sub region. The prevalence of unemployment provides the impetus for

youth involvement is societal destabilizing activities. Lack of financial support for youth initiatives contributes to impeding personal growth and enhanced capacity to contribute to peace and security in the sub region. It was also observed that lack of education and marketable skills as a result of collapsed political and social systems of the state in West Africa limit the opportunities for youth development.

Young people lack training and skills in leadership, peacebuilding and conflict prevention as well as peace education. The broad spectrum of civil society does not support youth initiatives which demoralize their enthusiasm towards participating or contributing to conflict prevention and peacebuilding in the sub-region. While there is exclusion of rural youth in the youth agenda, there is also fragmentation and disunity amongst the youth themselves through the competition for leadership space. It was also observed that the youth today are lackadaisical, look for greener pastures in the West (Europe, North America etc) and are not committed to social and political reforms.

5. **Chieftaincy:**

The conference took particular notice of the deterioration of West Africa's cultural heritage embodied in the chieftaincy institution. The processes of nominating, and selecting chiefs is wrought with problems which often undermines the legitimacy of chiefs. There is the fear of cultural invasion and the dynamics of socio-cultural changes, creating conflicts between culture, modernity, human rights, law and order.

At another level, the lack of codification of legal instruments to protect chieftaincy institutions was noted. There are problems associated with the administration of land, the recognition and status of female traditional leaders/rulers, the lack of training and capacity building of traditional leaders and finally the role of chiefs in conflict prevention.

6. **Small Arms Proliferation:**

Under this thematic area, the conference viewed the lack of a political will to implement the protocols associated with small arms proliferation, the absence of awareness about small arms, the lack of confidence between civil society and government, specifically the security agencies who perceive arms to be their domain and no one else to embody the challenges posed by small arms proliferation in West Africa.

In an environment where the borders are porous, states are fragile and there is no system of registration of firearms as well as harmonized legislation at regional level to manage the proliferation of arms, the challenge to peace and security will remain ominous. The ineffective mechanisms for early warning and early response exacerbate the problem of small arms proliferation.

7. **Gender:**

The conference highlighted the unwillingness of decision makers to associate women organizations in particular and CSOs in general in policy making to prevent and resolve armed conflicts. CSOs are financially constrained and women organizations are particularly limited financially and cannot work to achieve their objectives.

Access to information is difficult and a high rate of illiteracy and lack of capacity compounds this problem. While the lack of transparency was highlighted as a general problem in the management of CSOs the weak solidarity that exists amongst the CSOs, the struggle for leadership and the non respect and refusal to adhere strictly to organizational internal operating manuals and statues makes it difficult for CSOs to be regarded as serious partners by the private sector and state actors.

8. **Religion:**

On the theme of religion, the conference observed religious extremism to be a major challenge with an absence of intra/inter-faith networks to respond adequately to these challenges. In some countries, Government policies discourage inter-faith activities and widen the gap between state and religious institutions. The manipulation of religion for the purposes of political gains was also highlighted.

The conference also observed that there is low awareness of religious leaders in preventing armed conflicts.

Media:

Under the thematic area of the media, the conference observed the difficulty to have access to information and the lack of sufficient infrastructure for communication. Whereas the media is a key institution in facilitating peace or contributing to conflict, the conference observed the lack of interest by the media in conflict and peace reporting and the deficit in the training of media personnel in the skills of preventing violent and armed conflicts.

Finally, the conference observed the absence of collaboration and synergy amongst the various media networks in the sub-region and the refusal by media practitioners to adhere to the code of ethics and conduct of the practice of journalism.

Having taken cognizance of the aforementioned challenges we do hereby adopt an Action Agenda for Conflict Prevention, the Promotion of Human Security and Good Governance within the West Africa sub region;

Action Agenda:

As a result of the identified challenges civil society representatives from across West Africa have committed to implement a broad Action on Conflict Prevention, the Promotion of Human Security and Good Governance within the West Africa sub region;

This Agenda recommends specific actions to each thematic area:

1. Prevention of Armed Conflict

The conference agreed that in the short to medium term ECOWAS through its Zonal Bureaus, WACSOF and WANEP, should make available to CSOs protocols on conflict prevention, peace and security, information on NEPAD and the Millennium Development Goals. These documents should be translated into local languages and disseminated by CSOs at the community level using appropriate media such as radio, TV, Flyers, plays, drama, songs and poem.

At the national CSO should set mechanism for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of protocols by government. They should form national networks across borders for collaboration and sharing of best practices and lessons learnt.

2. Human Rights

CSOs should embark on campaigns to sensitize communities about their fundamental human rights as such as right to food, shelter, health, education and freedom of speech. CSOs should advocate for and lobby national governments, ECOWAS and international organizations to enforce laws that protect people's rights. In order for laws to be effective government should improve conditions of service for the judiciary and law enforcement agencies.

3. Elections

Under this theme the conference agreed that CSO, political parties and government should research into national electoral process to assess its strength and weakness so that latter can be improved upon to enhance the overall democratic process. CSOs should embark on civic education campaigns to sensitize citizens about electoral process thereby encouraging them to participate in it. The process should be computerized and be made transparent to avoid manipulation of voters register and vote rigging. In addition the capacity of social commentators should be built to monitor not just election days but the entire process effectively.

At the state level government should recognize the independence of National Electoral Commissions. The Commissions should be equipped with adequate human, financial and material resources to enable them function effectively. Governments should respect term limits for the Presidency to ensure smooth and violence

free transitions. WACSOF should advocate through ECOWAS for member countries to establish a harmonized minimum legislation standard for elections.

4. Youth

WANEP, WACSOF, GPPAC and ECOWAS should develop a regional youth policy with minimum standard to be included in national policies. The youth policy should focus on youth skill development and youth in the prevention, management and resolution of conflict. UNICEF, UNDP, Africans in the Diaspora, corporate bodies and the international community should be contact for financial support for youth skill training.

CSOs should not only advocate for and lobby government to adopt the policy but also support and monitor its implementation at the community level. There should be effective networking among youth across the sub-region for sharing of experience and best practice. In order to facilitate this cross boarder networking WANEP should develop a data base of regional youth groups or directory. WANEP, ANYP and youth groups should contact

5. Chieftaincy

The conference agreed that government and CSOs should research into and document the history of chieftaincy lineages in communities to serve as a guide to smooth succession. CSOs build the capacity of traditional leaders on conflict prevention at community, national and regional levels. They should create awareness among ECOWAS citizens about the ECOWAS protocol on free movement of people, good and services which by implication included settlers. As most conflict center around natural resources CSOs should advocate for an implementation of an effective resource administration policy. In addition they should also facilitate the establishment of council of traditional rulers. Members of this council would serve as eminent persons in mediating in conflicts in the sub-region.

On the part of the conference agreed eschew partisan politics and influence by politicians. They should advocate for non-violent resolution of disputes. King-makers should respect traditional laid down procedures in choosing chiefs, kings and queen-mothers.

Government in consultation with traditional leaders should codify lines of succession of traditional authorities, chiefdoms and royal houses.

6. Small Arms Proliferation

CSO should intensify campaign and lobby Heads of States to convert the Moratorium into a Convention. They should involve national parliaments, government authorities, the media and the general public in the fight against the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. Carnivals, durbars and fun games should be organized at the community level to sensitize the public about the relationship between small arms and violent conflicts.

National Commissions on Small Arms should mobilize civil society working to prevent the proliferation of arms and set sub groups. The Commissions in partnership security agencies should conduct local surveillance in cross border communities to reduce the spread of arms across porous borders. It should also develop website to propagate issues on small arms

The conference also called on ECOWAS to strengthen the capacity of the four zonal bureaus to monitor and prevent the spread of small arms. Governments should revise national constitutional and legal framework on small arms to reflect current situations.

7. Gender

CSOs should embark on sensitization campaigns to improve on the understanding of gender. The Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET), the Manor River Union Women in Peacebuilding Network (MARWOPNET) and other women networks and the donor community should build capacity of CSOs especially women to advocate and lobby for women's involvement in conflict prevention management and resolution process. Apart from these, government and other actors should assist women with micro-credit to engage in income generating activities

8. Religion

Under this theme the called on faith based organizations to exhort their followers to eschew fanaticism and tolerate other believes. WANEP, WACSOF and existing local faith based organizations should facilitate the formation of local and national inter-faith councils that will include women and youth. Networks of inter-faith councils should organize joint activities and celebrations. Regional inter-faith councils should collaborate with national governments, ECOWAS and the UN to influence policies at the national, regional and international levels and to prevent faith related violence.

9. Media

WACSOF and WANEP in partnership with other actors should facilitate and coordinate the formation of media networks across West Africa. WANEP with support from professional organizations should build the capacity of the media especially journalist associations in conflict prevention with particular focus on conflict reportage. In order to strengthen collaboration with the media CSO should integrate plans for engaging the media into their organizations' strategic plans. WACSOF through ECOWAS should advocate for the harmonization of media legislation frameworks by ECOWAS countries