

Obama's Visit to Ghana: The Peacebuilding Perspective

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President Barack Obama will from July 10-11, 2009 visit Ghana, his first visit to sub-Saharan Africa and second to Africa, after Egypt. The West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) welcomes Obama to Ghana and Africa. There is no gainsaying that Obama's election orchestrated an infectious joy and rekindled hope among the hopeless the world over. The 'yes we can slogan' was, and is, so assuring that the impossibilities now seem possible. There is a new tone over the past six months of Presidents Obama's administration to recognise the potential and goodness in people, communities and countries and engage with them in mutual respect to work for sustainable development and peace.

In his election victory speech, President Obama pledged to support those working for peace and security. In a release on the planned visit to Ghana, it was stated that the choice of Ghana was informed by the country's great strides in democratic governance and a vibrant and achieving civil society. WANEP identifies itself with these virtues, first as a peacebuilding organisation and secondly, as a network of more than 450 organisations with head office in Ghana with 11 years experience in peacebuilding in West Africa. WANEP has been part of Ghana's evolving democratic governance.

Upon entry into Ghana, President Obama and his entourage would be welcome at the airport with the message: "Welcome to Ghana, Gate way to Africa". This again is a very symbolic message. Ghana opened the doors to African independence. There are lots of expectations and debates on what Africa should expect from this historic visit. WANEP does not in any way want to fall in the temptation of believing that all Africa's problems would be resolved by this single visit. What we believe is that President Obama's visit can lay the foundation for a new partnership for conflict prevention and peacebuilding in Africa, recognizing and advocating for sustainable support to civil society initiatives and public private sector 'investments' in peacebuilding.

Civil society in Africa in general and West Africa in particular is braving the challenges and working tirelessly to transform the image of the continent. The pessimists' mentality and resignation attitude built on a perception of a continent where nothing ever works well is being demystified. We count first and foremost on our selves. We understand the difficulties and continuous menace of new threats like organized crime, drug trafficking, illicit arms and gun running, youth unemployment, bad governance and perpetuation of some leaders to power, plundering of natural resources (by multi-lateral companies with connivance of some African leaders), environmental pollution, dumping of toxic industrial and chemical waste, and 'suicide migration' across the Sahara and Mediterranean to Europe.

In the light of these challenges, WANEP has particularly taken a unique and strategic option to engage West African policy makers, and be part of the transformation process. In 2002, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) provided the grant that provided an opportunity for WANEP to enter into a partnership with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The "Capacity Building in Conflict Prevention and Good Governance Program for ECOWAS and Civil Society Organisations in West Africa" has been a huge success.

First, it created a unique platform of cooperation, exchange, and confidence building between civil society and governments at the inter-governmental level. Through this partnership, the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) has been operationalized. Secondly, the partnership has changed the notion, and perhaps perception, that civil society is only there to criticize and reject. Indeed, the WANEP-ECOWAS partnership demonstrated how local capacity and resources could be effectively harnessed and enhanced to solve local problems and maximize local ownership. Thirdly, the WANEP-ECOWAS partnership has tremendously reawakened the belief that conflict prevention is feasible and can work. All that is needed is adequate support, commitment of actors and stakeholders and the political will of governments.

The uniqueness of this West African 'success story' is gradually shaping the way peace and human security should be tackled. We need to consolidate and build on this. USAID has just taken an initiative to consolidate this major milestone through another (limited) grant. What is certain is the fact that civil society is no longer a tertiary stakeholder only. That civil society is clearly advocating for a new approach to peace and security: a shift from reaction to prevention; and the need for a well-thought-out balance between the use of 'hard' and 'soft' power in dealing with threats to peace and human security. No single organisation, country or entity can do this alone. Hence, strategic and sustainable partnerships among stakeholders are inevitable.

It is true that Africa is a mosaic of cultures and traditions, with different historic and colonial heritage. The Horn of Africa has its specificities; Central and Southern Africa have their own challenges; the Maghreb is unique. Yet all these geopolitical settings have found common ground in the African Union (AU) whose Peace and Security Architecture has greatly evolved. The Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) and the African Standby Force (ASF) are concrete achievements that are unfolding, though not without challenges. The Obama Administration can evolve a peace and security agenda that consolidates, complements, enhances what is already on ground. This new approach should be a partnership based on mutual respect. Above all, listen to us (Africans) and hear our perspectives before taking decisions concerning Peace and Security in Africa.

This is our expectation.

Akwaaba to the Obamas!