

# The Role of Civil Society Organizations in Promoting Democracy in Bo City, Southern Region Sierra Leone

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## ABSTRACT

This work is an investigation into the critical role played by civil society organizations in promoting democracy as a vehicle for change and positive sustainable development in any country globally; this is a way of complimenting government's efforts in consolidating peace and national cohesion through democratic institutions and processes in the Bo City, Southern Region of Sierra Leone. This research study was conducted with the use of the Mixed Method Research analysis to gather viable and unbiased views of the nature of role played by CSOs in the democratic space. This study also utilized the descriptive approach that created a mental picture of the prevailing issues. Most of these issues were never ending and they become contentious on a daily basis. Through the mix method research analysis, twelve (12) civil society organizations were targeted for this study and data was collected using both primary and secondary data sources. The sample was drawn from a face to face meeting with the head of the civil society organization in Bo who directed the process for a reliable report.

Result from the study shows that, most people in Bo does not seem to see clearly the role civil society organizations play in the democratic space, either because of their allegiance with the political powerful or the political parties themselves. Most if not all have been under the influence of the status quo and in the process they trade the feelings and aspirations of the common man. The outcome in the findings indicate that, most CSOs prefer dancing to the tune of the powers that be in governance, and for fear of intimidation or failure to get the brown envelope (bribery). Additionally, few Civil Society Organizations have eroded among many Sierra Leoneans due to the high level of ineptitude they show in handling matters of democracy in the country.

Finally, for the effective functioning of democracy and good governance in the country and especially in the Southern Region, much effort is needed from credible CSOs' operating in the country to balance the democratic space.

**Keywords-** Civil Society Organizations, Democracy, Good governance, Bo

## INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone as a post war nation has had many setbacks ranging from the gruesome war, Ebola, mudslide and COVID-19. These unforgettable events created a lot of damage to the peaceful co-existence this country once enjoyed even during post-colonial Sierra Leone. A country that have been hit by many outbreaks and with a fragile political atmosphere where elections and leadership issues are always contentious needs a vibrant civil society, that not only serve as checks and balances, and hold government as well as its people accountable should either side fail to uphold its mandate.

Oladipo H.B Venn (1986); posited that, Government is a machinery that is charged with the responsibility to carry out the activities of its citizens. This role is supported by the constitution of Sierra Leone that establishes the broad mandate of these institutions to act in accordance with the 1991 constitution of this country. This constitution provides for the establishment of democratic space for institutions to promote democracy in the country. Civil society's roles are critical throughout the formation and implementation of

democratic institutions in Sierra Leone. This is evident during two prominent political transitions; (2007-2018). These years saw an increase in political tensions where the fate of democracy was tested. One of the recommendations of the TRC report for one of the reasons for the war in Sierra Leone is as a result of political parties holding on to power for long time. CSOs role has been to ensure a smooth transition whenever it takes effect.

#### Civil society for Africa or Civil Society in Africa?

The civil society discourse in Africa has been around the issue of civil society for Africa or civil society in Africa (e.g. Diamond, 1999; Maina 1998; Comaroffs,1999; Mamdani, 1996). Civil society scholars and activists argue for the case of 'real civil societies' that are embedded in Africa and as such for an explanatory, descriptive rather than a prescriptive use of the concept. In advancing the debate for an explanatory use of the concept scholars anchor the concept in three configurations of civil society: Formal or modern civil societies, traditional and neo- traditional (World Bank, AFREX, 2007).

The formal civil society groups have organizational forms and operational logic which closely approximates western notions of civil society; neo-traditional civil society groups combine both western and indigenous organizational forms, criteria and modes of operation; and the traditional indigenous civil society groups have organizational forms and operational logic which mirror indigenous cultural practices. The argument has been that exploring these organizational forms of civil society groups in Africa allows for a descriptive approach which analyses civil society motives, pick out their major challenges and discuss ways in which CSOs could be positioned to play vital roles in the social, political and economic governance (World Bank, 2007). Instead a prescriptive civil society for Africa model does not capture the real civil society configurations, processes and motives in Africa.

#### Traditional Civil Society

The traditional civil society are structures borne out indigenous customs and traditions of us local people especially in the rural areas. They are governed by chiefs and organized in to patrilineages, sodalities, labour gangs and Osusu associations. They provide the structures for meeting the needs of the people at the local level. The forms of these structures for interaction may be different from western forms of civil society, they nonetheless perform roles that approximate those that civil society groups in the West perform. These groups build the social capital and moral pacts necessary for influencing, countervailing or participating in the political, social and economic governance of local societies. They are closer and more involved in the lives of the ordinary people and their communities. The debate is that this public is moral and legitimate and credible unlike the civil. Peter Ekeh, (1975), argues that in fact, there are two public realms in post-colonial Africa, with different types of moral linkages to the private realm. At one level is the public realm in which primordial groupings, ties and sentiments influence and determine the individual 's public behavior. I shall call this the primordial public because it is closely identified with primordial groupings and sentiments and activities which nevertheless impinge on the public interest. The primordial public is moral and operates on the same moral imperative as the private realm. On the other hand, there is a public realm which is historically associated with the colonial administration which has become identified with popular politics in post-colonial Africa...based on civil structure... the military, the civil service, the police etc. Its chief characteristic is that it has no moral linkages with the private realm. I shall call this the civic public. The civic public is amoral and lacks the generalized moral imperatives operative in the private realm and in the primordial realm.

The challenge is to democratize both realms. The primordial realm is not devoid of contradictions and inequalities and thus the need to democratize it. The challenge is how to affirm the civility of this realm in a modern society that needs to be sustained by laws and norms that are not primarily based on primordial relationships of kin, territory or religious affiliation. Neo –traditional Civil Society Group These are groups with formal organizational structures but where eligibility for membership is based on ascriptive identities (mainly ethnic and locative). Social capital derived from ascriptive identities are utilized by these groups to

organize and make political and other claims on behalf of an ethnic group or descendants of a particular area. These organizations are also engaged in assisting members in times of bereavement, wedding and naming ceremonies. The need to form such groups arise out of the perceptions that if a people with a particular ascriptive identity do not organize themselves into an association they may find it difficult to access certain resources. Examples of neo-traditional groups include such ethnicity lodged groups, social and self-help groups such as ‘Teguloma’, ‘Fullah Progressive Union’ and ‘Limba Progressive Union’ etc. These groups have immense social capital and are closer to and more involved in the lives of the ordinary people and their communities (World Bank, 2007).

#### Formal Civil Society

Formal Civil society groups are those which approximate western notions of civil society. These include the professional groups, unions, human rights gender, development and economic sector. Recently, a new form of civil society group has emerged which transcends the traditional state- civil society divide. It includes such state actors as parliamentarians, local councilors. They are called hybrid civil society organizations.

### **The History of Civil Society Organizations in Sierra Leone**

Civil society in Sierra Leone has seen successes since the end of the civil conflict in the country in 2002. Before the conflict, the country had several professional and trade union organizations, but they were not as influential and active as they have become since 2002. CSOs only became particularly active during and after the conflict. It is the conflict that influenced stakeholders to have organizations of like-minded countrymen who constructively hold governments accountable. Sierra Leone practices a multi-party, political system of government, where only two political parties, the ruling Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) and opposition All People’s Congress (APC) have governed since independence in (1961) The Constitution, which was passed in 1991, provides for separation of powers, but the executive arm is clearly more powerful and seems to wield huge control over both the judiciary and legislative arms. In spite of efforts to enhance access to justice for persons across the country through the Legal Aid Board and additional recruitment of judges and magistrates, the judiciary is perceived to be corrupt and largely unresponsive to the justice needs of the people. Efforts by successive governments have been done to silence CSOs, in 1994, and later reviewed in 2003 by Kabba and Koroma. In December 2018, however, the government approved a policy that has been roundly criticized by CSOs as simply “a tool of the Government of Sierra Leone to unduly control CSOs, narrow the civic space, and potentially silence dissenting voices.”

That policy, known as the Development Cooperation Framework (DCF) or NGO Policy, includes a regulatory and accountability framework for both CSOs and development partners in Sierra Leone. The government claims that the policy seeks to promote transparency and accountability in the operations of CSOs whilst at the same time ensuring better coordination in the sector. CSOs hold a different view and have rejected it since the first day it was passed. Among other concerns, the Policy provides that all development assistance channeled through CSOs must be aligned with the national development priorities and should be properly coordinated with the government. CSOs must sign Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with their respective sector ministries before they can commence operations. In addition, the Policy provides for onerous registration and renewal procedures, including multiple reporting obligations. Overall, the years of deep-seated mistrust between civil society and government are not improving in the country.

#### **(ICNL updated report 2022).**

Similarly, the just concluded June 24 2023 general elections witnessed massive criticism from members of the public for what is described as the worse of elections in the African sub-region Miss Marcella Samba’s news broadcast on the 26<sup>th</sup> of the post elections witnessed high rates of electoral discrepancies in the

outcome of the elections where the opposition cried foul/fraudulent play in the election results, this was followed by heavy confrontation from the ruling SLPP accusing NEW, an electoral observation organization since 2007 as biased and intended to plunge the country into disrepute and unrest. This division is characterized by stories of brown envelopes (bribery) in the civil society organizations who instead of working in the interest of the people, they are giving accolades/ praises the government in power for massive criminal syndicates (corrupt practices including bribery) which is commonly called in the country as brown envelope (NEW, 2023).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Societies everywhere need proper monitoring systems of their government for transparency and accountability. Civil society organizations mostly start as a small pressure group that constantly reminds government of their actions and inactions. Most democracies in Africa and the world over crumble should there be any failure or refusal to uphold democracy, and civil society is just one among the many state apparatuses charged with the responsibilities to identify, criticize and recommend where there is democracy. In the report, the institute conducted a survey on the fragility of the state due to failure to uphold the principles of democracy in Sierra Leone. Out of 9/10 sierra Leoneans (87%) expressed the view that, they are worried about the economy. (IGR report 2023) the current state of the country according to them is an alarm especially linking it with the previous war in (1991)

Similarly, the institute of government reform reported a survey that, 64% of the people in sierra Leone did say the elections result reflects their votes amidst international criticism, which has seen the country banned on certain people who are believed to be responsible and have a hand in meddling with the stability of the state. This is one of the controversial areas about civil society organizations in bridging the gap between the people and government in the country. This is an election many local and international observers describe as a threat to democracy, where the democratic space is not given to the opposition.

### **(NEW 2023) (IGR2023.) (Credit calabash newspaper publications 2023)**

The problems with civil society in Africa have had a systemic and structural challenge which has been difficult to mend. The continent of Africa had become so fragile to the extent that, it takes just a week or two to hear of military takeovers in the African sub-regions, this is not far from the case in Sierra Leone that had even created alarm and panic on the people and government. Much has to be done for practitioners in civil society to understand the nexus and disconnect between their practice and government.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The methodology adopted for this study was the mixed method research which allowed the researcher to collect data from credible sources. This research data was conducted through interviews, reviews, observation and focus group discussions. This study was also descriptive in nature in order to bring out stories that could reflect on the minds of the readers and the people of the south. In collecting the said research data, both primary and secondary sources of data collection were used into this study. The research study was conducted in Bo City. However, Key consultations were done with government stakeholders, civil society organizations, and other key players and promoters of democracy in Bo City, Southern Province of Sierra Leone.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

This article looked at the role of civil society organizations in promoting democracy in the southern region, Bo City. The findings for this paper are discussed under the following headings. The points below form critical functions of government and by extension CSOs who are middlemen to the government and the people. Results are presented and discussed using data collected from the mixed research methodologies.

### **The Judiciary**

The judiciary is one of the state apparatus belonging to the three arms of government. Its primary functions are to interpret the laws and set judicial precedents; they do so using the constitution of the state as a guide. It is believed that, in order for the judiciary to be effective in this regard, it must remain as an independent body that is protected by both parties' civil society and largely government. This helps improve the democratic space for confidence on the judicial processes. Due to the provisions set out by the constitutions (1991) chapter vii part 1, it lays the foundation for the establishment of the judiciary of Sierra Leone to dispense justice for the ordinary man, to the extent that even those who cannot get themselves Legal representation can be provided for by the state. According to the findings, civil society's role is to ensure smooth judicial jurisprudence for a quick process. Many of the respondents believed that, justice delayed is justice denied, therefore, CSOs' between times should look at matters that are sent to court, the way and manner they are handled.

However, the result shows that CSOs are not active in this respect. Many cases of how persons are locked up, remanded and or reprimanded for crimes they know nothing about. This has created the scar on the roles of CSOs in delivering their role in the democratic space of the country.

### **The Media**

Results on the findings of the role of civil society through the media indicated that, for effective functions of civil society organizations, the media play a pivotal role; they inform, entertain and educate. Therefore, a vocal civil society group means there is an active media landscape where critical issues are brought up and discussed for the views of Sierra Leoneans. Civil society through the media landscape, especially the electronic media informs the masses of government's ineptitude to address certain matters of national development as well as development strives of the government. The media plays its role as a watch dog for what the ordinary man cannot see. CSOs collaborate with the media in bringing these issues to the public for public inputs into them. The findings also prove that CSOs also hold media outlets who are censored in terms of what they do, how they do it and when. That way the public is informed adequately of happenings in and out of the country

### **Transparency and Accountability**

Majority of the respondents for this study see civil society as the powerful wing in the democratic dispensation as pivotal. Civil society groups like Campaign for Good Governance, (CGG) Center for Accountability and the rule of law (CARL-SL) are direct CSOs' working with successive governments in accountability issues. Many a time government's expenses are things in the dark which barely gets to public domain. References were made on the then APC government when it declared austerity because of the bad shape of the economy in 2016 after the Ebola scourge. Similarly, Sierra Leone as a country has witnessed what is referred to as re-denomination of the currency; a lot of conspiracy theory surrounded the process that involved. The legal framework, the outcome on what was printed is still untold that left the then Governor to resign and was immediately replaced. These experiences shared by the respondents are accounts of experiences they have over the years gathered and expect CSOs to be active in holding governments accountable to the people and the policies that guide them.

An account of a certain attire base group that brought in the issue of the suspension of the former Auditor General for what was alleged to be directly audited the office of the president. Her removals arouse public interest, but people who are concerned did not tell us what exactly happened until when parliament removed her and the deputy. Are we not supposed to know? "na we vote o" focus group discussion 2024)



### **The Role of CSOs' in Transitions**

A critical period in the democratic process of every state is during transitions. Sierra Leone as a country have had successful transitions; notably 2007, 2018. These transitions have witnessed intense happenings in recent times. Often time elections bring about violent outcomes, therefore civil societies role in this regard is to be moral guarantors that bridge the gap between the aggrieved parties after the election. Moreover, CSOs who have been working with the past government should help the incumbent to identify grey areas that can be handled by the incoming government. The findings show 50% role from civil society during transitions especially as peace brokers and engage the oppositions to hold the peace and respect the will of the people, though with 50% challenges on the manner in which some of the dialogue are handled. An instance made is the almost concluded tripartite which saw the opposition raising hopes of their supporters of victory at the end of the report, which is yet visible. Though with the numerous challenges, yet the roles of CSOs were vital and informing the public on the stages of the report until where it is.

### **Recommendations**

- As evident from the result, one strong missing link is the fact that, civil society's participation in promoting democracy is limited and skewed to fit the whims and caprices of the upper echelons. Thus, if democracy is to be promoted, there has to be reforms from civil society's point of view through their established coalition. This coalition is also expected to establish by-laws that frame the activities of new CSOs.
- CSOs participation in democracy is unmatched, therefore should not serve or seen as enemies to government or even the people, but key in decisions of democracy. This should be done in an unbiased manner to suit the people and government as well CSOs' are to be efficient in service delivery. Their activities are selfless, thus, when doing public service of national interest, passion should be put to achieve expected result.
- The concept that one cannot the finger that feeds them, CSOs should attract projects from the international community that detach their support from the central government, who in turn censure their activities. Should they engage in implementing international projects disconnected from government interference? Lastly, personnel who work for and on behalf of the general masses should understand the spirit of sacrifice and compassion; it is only through that they can do their job for the people and with the people

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