Women of Mano River Union: A discourse on the role of Civil Society in the Sustainability of Peace in the Mano River Region.

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Abstract

Civil society is an important institution in the post-conflict peace-building and in the sustainability of peace. The paper examines discourses on civil society generally and the role played by Mano River Women Peace Network (MARWOPNET) and Women in Peace Network (WIPNET) in the peace process in Liberia and Sierra Leone. These two civil society groups played significant role in bringing about peace through a non-violent approach based on the inherited wisdom of women. This wisdom was demonstrated by forcing the three leaders of the Mano River Union – Ahmed Tejan Kabbah of Sierra Leone, Lanasa Conte of Guinea, and Charles Taylor of Liberia to the negotiating table. The fact that countries emerging from war may likely experience another round of war when those issues that caused it are not addressed justifies the continual relevance of civil society like MARWOPNET and WIPNET in the political stability of the region. The paper therefore hypothesizes that absolute peace cannot be guaranteed in a fragile political environment. Besides, there is the anticipation of a possible breakdown of law and order arising from post-conflict peace-building process such as conducting of democratic elections. It is axiomatic that elections in most African countries are usually marred by manipulations which Liberia and Sierra Leone may not be exception. This is because these countries are just emerging from war with weak institutions that may not contain the problem associated with political contestation. It is against this background that it becomes necessary for the Mano River women to remain a veritable agent of change, tool for political mobilization and engendering of peace. The basic challenge of women is how to ensure that ex-combatants and internally displaced persons are fully reintegrated into the society. It is therefore imperative and expedient for the Mano River women groups to collaborate with other civil society groups to ensure that peace is sustained in Liberia and Sierra Leone through reintegration of ex-combatants to avoid a situation of this group of people being used as thugs in the post-conflict democratic elections. The paper concludes that there is need for the recognition of the paradigm shift from state-centred to society-centred approach for the sustainability of peace as demonstrated by women civil society groups in the Mano River region.

Keywords: Civil society, peace-building, social movement, reintegration, democratization, and sustainability of peace.
**Introduction**

The role of civil society in the resolution of conflict and in sustainability of peace in post-conflict society in recent time has attracted little or no scholarly attention. Women of Mano River Union had demonstrated the capacity to bring peace to bear in Liberia and Sierra Leone during their conflict. No doubt, women globally have been recognized as playing important role in conflict resolution and in post-conflict peace-building. Similarly, civil society actors have increasingly become important instruments in forging and fostering peace and security across the world. The focus therefore on women civil society groups is informed by the fact that women were both victims and perpetrators during the war in these countries. Often times the analysis about women in relation to war is that they are the victims of war without also adverting our minds to their role as participants. It is the understanding of the multiple roles women play in conflict situations either by aiding directly or indirectly facilitating the war efforts of the belligerent groups that this paper examines. It must be acknowledged that women in spite the destructive roles they played in civil wars in these countries, they were in the forefront in the peace process that led to the termination of those wars.

The MARWOPNET and WIPNET have become social movements in the Mano River Union region that formed with sole aim of bringing about peace in the region. Social movements by definition are collective actions in which the populace is alerted, educated, and mobilized for particular period to challenge the power holders and at times the whole society to redress social problems or grievances and restore critical social values (Moyer, et.al. 2001). Women of Mano River Union under the umbrella of Mano River Women Peace Network (MARWOPNET) had mobilized the women not only to make history but to preserve history. According to Touraine (1981) “Society is a system of actors in which people make their own societal history.” Social movements, ordinary concerned people, not just the power holders, play a leading part in the peace process in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Civil society as social movements actions are predicated upon certain societal values such as justice, democracy, civil and human rights, security, and freedom. It is acknowledged that women approach to the resolution of conflict in Liberia and Sierra Leone was non-violent. This approach is based on the fact that ultimate goal of a social movement is to create a healthy citizen-democracy in which citizens are restored as the basic source of political legitimacy (Moyer, et.al. 2001:25). In the whole process of social change, the women become the true constituency of the change agent representing the general public especially during the war when majority of the people are affected by the war. The women as change agent helped to create the forum for resolving social problems and moving the society from reform to social change by promoting a paradigm shift in the state –society relations. A shift from state-centred approach to social problem to society-centred approach is instructive in this analysis.

In Sierra Leone for instance, women’s roles in peacemaking became more glaring with the formation of women’s civil society groups through which they mobilized and galvanized the society (women) to call for peace, democracy, and an end to hostilities (Badmus, 2009: 824). Prominent Sierra Leone women such as Zainab Bangura, Amy Smythe, Elizabeth Lavalie, and prominent female parliamentarian and Kadi Sessay through organizing workshops and conferences aimed at promoting democratic ideas and ideals. Similarly, in Liberia the involvement of women in the 1990s when the war began and in the peace process with the
conception of a movement for peace known as the Liberian Women Initiative composed of women from all walks of life regardless of their ethnic, religious, educational, or socio-economic background.

It is therefore against the background of persistent violent armed conflicts in the Mano River Union area of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire (the last entrance into the Union) that is of great concern. It was the outbreak of conflicts in these countries that led to development of civil society organization, especially women groups in this region. This tend to suggest that prior to the civil wars in these countries civil society organizations are not in existence even when they exist their impact was not felt. These countries have been ruled by dictators that never allowed for voice of dissent. Thus, the thesis of this paper is that the war opened up the channel for dissenting voices to emerge such as those from women group. The women were continuously involved in the resolution of the conflict and by extension post-conflict recovery and peace building processes. One therefore argue that the involvement of women will help to prevent these countries from being sub-emerged into armed conflict in the future.

The paper is guided by certain assumptions: Does the inclusion of civil society in the peace process help to prevent future conflict? What is the value and relevance of strengthening strategic partnerships between women and civil society organizations on one hand and civil society groups and the government on the other hand? What lesson can be learned from the experiences in Liberia and Sierra Leone? The paper is divided into different parts: First part is the introduction which set the tone for the succeeding parts. Second part is the contextual discourse of civil society from the time of Aristotle to Gramsci. Besides, it takes closer look at the context of civil society from different regions of the world, more specifically in Africa. Third part is the theoretical reflections on aged long debate on state-society relations and conflict transformation theory. Fourth part assesses the role of civil society in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Fifth part takes a look at the basic pillars for sustainability of peace in the Mano River Union region and the conclusion.

**Contextual discourse of civil society:**

From theoretical argument and available literature on civil society the focus is on the relations between civil society and the state. The work of Charles Taylor (1995) provides the departure point for understanding civil society. He argues that a civil society is a sphere of free associations that are independent of state power. On the other hand, civil society is an ensemble of associations that interact with the state and can significantly determine or inflect the course of its policy. A society as whole may be structured and coordinated through free associations, thus reducing or even eliminating principle of power (Cited in Greenstein, 2003:4).

Chatterjee (2001) uses the term civil society to refer to modern institutions of associational life which are based on notions of equality, autonomy, freedom of entry and exit, contract, deliberative procedures of decision-making and recognized rights and duties of members (Cited in Greenstein 2003:9). However, this paper employs a definition which defines it as registered non-governmental organizations and other organized social networks and associations outside the governmental sector, whose activities and programmes influence and inform the lives of wide sectors of the community. They include voluntary associations, non-governmental organizations,
social movements, traditional organizations, and community-based associations (Lamptey, 2007: 9).

Civil society is one institution that gained importance in its perceived ability to facilitate regular and sustained participation by the citizenry, beyond simply voting in general elections (Paffenholz, 2010). It channels people's participation in economic and social activities and organize them into a more powerful group(s) to influence public policies and gain access to public resources, especially for the poor. They can provide checks and balances on government power and monitor social abuses. Marina Ottaway and Theresa Chungn (1999: 106) define civil society as a voluntary associational realm that lies between the family and the state and is autonomous from the state. In other words, it encompasses the range of voluntary associations in between the family and the state (Baden, 1999).

Civil society also refers to those associations around which society voluntarily organizes. They include trade unions; non-governmental organizations, gender; language, cultural and religious groups; charities; business associations; social and sports clubs; cooperative and community development organizations; environmental groups; professional associations; academic and policy institutions; and media outlets. Political parties can also be included in this typology, although they straddle civil society and the state if they are represented in parliament but for the fact that they aggregate and articulate interest in the political system they can still be seen as civil society (UNDP 1994:4).

From the various definitions presented in this paper, it is clear that the concept remains fluid and nebulous and therefore lacks any precise meaning. Thus, the tendency to always see civil society only as those non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and excluding groups and associations that reflect Africa's associational culture such as traditional governance structures may be very intellectually costly and damaging (Eyikor, 2008). Adopting therefore, the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) of the African Union definition will not be out of place. It defines civil society as comprising social groups; professional groups, NGOs, community-based organizations (CBOs); voluntary organizations; and cultural organizations among other segments in which women, youth, children, national Diaspora and elements of the private sector such as market women's association and the media are listed (ECOSOCC's www.africa-union.org/ECOSOCC/home.htm). It is therefore axiomatic that civil society operates as independent of the family, the state and the market as arena where people associate to advance common interests. In this context, civil society include formal and informal groupings such as traditional chiefs, Queen's Mother associations, Youth Movements, Market women, religious groups and the media (Ekiyor, 2008: 28).

John Locke's philosophy of social contract explains the inevitability of civil society to man than perpetually living in an imaginary State of Nature. John Locke and his fellow social contract theorists stressed the importance of the state and the civil society. To Locke, civil society should be understood as a body in its own right, separate from the state. Aristotle, Rousseau and Immanuel Kant articulated the notion of civil society as being synonymous with the state or political society (Paffenholz, 2010: 4). It was only in the second half of the 18th century that attempt was made to conceptualize civil society as distinct institution different from the state. It was seen as no longer oriented toward the state but also acting as a limit on (and sometimes even a counter) to state powers.
Friedrich Hegel viewed civil society as the historical product of economic modernization (and not as a natural expression of freedom) and the bourgeoisie-driven economy, positioned between the two spheres of family and state (Keane 1988 cited in Paffenholz, 2010: 4). Hegel emphasized that civil society comprised huge variety of societal actors not directly dependent on the state apparatus. He was of the view that civil society must be controlled by a strong state that is supposed to act in the universal interest of the population (Keane 1988 cited in (Paffenholz, 2010:5).

Karl Marx defines the concept as comprising the entire material interactions among individuals at a particular evolutionary stage of the productive forces Marx states that civil society is the base of the capitalist domination model, regulating and subordinating the state, which thus becomes an institution of the dominant class. In Marx’s words, “Civil society is the structural base, and the state belongs to the superstructure that ensures capitalist domination by force”(Marx cited in Paffenholz, 2010:5).

Alex de Tocqueville emphasized the role of independent associations as civil society in his work “De la democratic en Amerique – translated to mean Democracy in America). He saw these associations as schools of democracy in which democratic thinking, attitudes, and behaviour are learned by individual citizens, the aim being to protect and defend individual rights against potentially authoritarian regimes and tyrannical majorities within society (Paffenholz, 2010).

Antonio Gramsci focused on civil society from a Marxist theoretical angle but presented a reverse version of Karl Marx. In contrast to Marx, Gramsci saw civil society as part of the superstructure in addition to the state, but with a different function. The civil society served as the basis through which values and meanings were established, debated, and contested. What is unique in Gramsci’s interpretation of civil society is that it provides an understanding of contemporary African usages of civil society and his notion of hegemony of the ruling class. The argument on political and cultural hegemony of the ruling class and societal consensus formed within civil society still remain relevant. Arguably, the ruling class which is part of the state machinery often hijacks the civil society organizations through its sponsorship and funding. As convincing as this argument may be, the civil society cannot be equated with the state, but rather it is seen as an instrument of the people to check the excesses and actions of the state.

In a nutshell, the classic conception of civil society encompasses a number of key elements (Jusu-Sheriff 2004:266). First, civil society comprises formally organized groups and associations located, which Hegel sees as the space between the state and the household. Second, the civil society groups express and protect primary “private interest”, but operate in the public sphere and usually participate in setting public rules. Third, civil society actors are autonomous of the state and while cognizant of the legitimacy of the state, they resist its “incursions” into civic spaces. Fourth, members of civil society groups are often committed to liberal democratic values and free from market capitalism. These four key elements are present in Africa based on its experience though may not be exactly the same like in Europe.

Paffenholz (2010:10) provides civil society discourses in different context and regions of the world. First, states in political transition especially, the transition from feudalism to Monarchical rule in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries were based on political emancipation of citizens from one epoch to the other. From this phase, the demand for civil and human rights, as well as the right for political participation was dominant. While the second phase which began in the
19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries saw the rise of new actors as working class, farmers, and churches as social movements who made claims on social welfare, political and social emancipation for the underprivileged and deprived groups. The third phase was the emergence of new social movements in the 1960s, such as women's liberation, students, and peace and ecology movements.

Second, the United States and Western Europe context of civil society threw up the debate on social capital. As the social capital is declining in the United States it necessitated the debate in the 1990s, which was intended to evaluate the performance of major social institutions including representative government, and its relation to political culture and civil society. The argument about social capital hinges on social networks as one of the core element of civil society. The underlying argument is that the characteristics of civil society and civic life affect the health of democracy and the performance of social institutions (Putnan 1993, cited in Paffenholz, 2010: 10).

Third, the transition in the Eastern Europe from dictatorship to democracy, economic transformation from a state controlled economy to a free market economy, and the state transformation that resulted in the disintegration of the Soviet Union (Markel 1999 cited in Paffenholz, 2010: 10). Arguably, at every transition phase the civil society was very prominent and most significantly incorporating democratic procedures in its own structure and organization, especially after immediate system change.

Fourth, the African context of civil society is different from the Western European and American. In the first place, civil society in Africa started slowly and dates back to colonial rule. However, there are many groups within African civil societies that have deep indigenous and historical roots (Jusu-Sheriff, 2004: 267). It is established that in the pre-colonial time, the various groups such as the hunter, religious, and other associational groups were constituted as alternative sources of power and even carved out their own autonomous “civic” space to promote or defend their specific interests. In most colonial territories the colonial authorities did not encourage the growth of urban elite group. Although, traditional associations existed on different parts of Africa, but did not operate as civil society that can mobilize the people for participatory rule. This pattern continued in the post-colonial era. Civil society re-emergence in Africa in the 1990s follows the quest for democratic rule and the challenge of despotism and autocracy after the end of the Cold War.

It is worthy of note that African civil society organizations were dominated by the colonial legacy of ethnic divisions and control by native authorities in the country side, in the post-colonial Africa. The only exception to this trend is South Africa. One would have thought that because of high levels of industrialization and urbanization, coupled with the oppressive apartheid system a multi-racial civil society would emerge early, but this was not the case. The danger however, of organizing civil society at the urban centre is that it would result in neglect in dismantling structures of power and tribal authority in the country side. This would mean incomplete democratization which may eventually lead to the reversal of urban democratic gains as well (Greenstein 2003: 10).

Critics of African civil society argue that the possibility of civil society working in Africa the way that is expected by the Western countries is questionable and objectionable. The fact is that Western model of civil society may not be suitable for Africa. Nelson Kasfir one of the critics of...
African civil society believes that there is nothing civil, on its behaviour. According to him, organization is said to be ‘civil’ when it shows ‘civil’ behaviour and seen to be autonomous of other interests and not bound into neo-patrimonial networks (cited in Paffenholz, 2010:12). The argument generally is that it is difficult for any autonomous organization to exist and be sustained without seeking support and assistance from the government and foreign donors in Africa. The Western civil society seems distant from the government, though not completely, but this is not the case with African civil society which attaches itself to the government. It is not possible for an organization that does not have financial autonomy to sustain a democratic struggle. This is reason why most civil society groups go out of existence after a short period of existence.

Despite the proliferation of NGOs in Africa, their impact is yet to be felt in terms of sustainability of democracy. Of course, the emergence of NGOs in Africa have helped to place important issues on Africa such as human rights, good governance, rule of law, etc in the agenda of international community. They also conduct large and well-organized campaigns on development issues and presented alternative view points to government and donor agencies.

The fear of most critical minds is that the commercialization of civil society, especially the advocacy or public policy work, discourages more legitimate local actors that do have external support from participating or becoming more active. Civil engagement today is at risk of being dominated by commercial NGOs, and this has the tendency of weakening the development of vibrant civil society (Paffenholz, 2010). It is therefore paradoxical that the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone have led to state collapse leading to revert to primary groupings like the Mano River Women Peace Network (MARWOPNET) and the Women in Peace Network (WIPNET) in a bid to bring about peace.

Theoretical reflections

The theoretical arguments of the paper are anchored on the state-society relations and the conflict transformation theory. A state-society relation is defined by the Department for International Development (DFID) as ‘interactions between state institutions and societal groups to negotiate how public authority is exercised and how it can be influenced by people. They are focused on issues such as defining the mutual rights and obligations of state and society, negotiating how public resources should be allocated and establishing different modes of representation and accountability’ (DFID, 2010:15). The argument is that state and civil society cannot be completely separated rather they are to act to achieve the goal of order and good governance for the betterment of man.

In the political development of Africa, academic literature from the 1990s was dominated by talk of the African renaissance. Larry Diamond (1988); and Naomi Chazan (1994) represent this perspective. In the debate on state-society relations in Africa in the 1990s was dominated by the need to assign roles to civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Larry Diamond argues that the weakness of democratic regimes in Africa is partly because of the absence of institutionalized civil society. The main obstacles to democratization, he argues, are wide-range state regulations of and control over the economy (Eriksen 2001: 291). Due to its control over the main sources of wealth, the state has been able to prevent the emergence of a strong and autonomous bourgeoisie, separate from the state. There is a symbiotic relationship from the liberal theoretical perspective between the bourgeoisie and democracy. This arises
from the fact that the bourgeoisie is seen as the natural agent of democracy. The bourgeoisie often times defines its interests in opposition to other classes, especially the land-owning class, which is likely to result to democracy. When it forms an alliance with them it results in non-democracy. This is resultant effect of the emergence of labour-repressive forms of agriculture that prevent the opening up of politics (Philip, 2007). It is argued further that a strong middle class forms the basis of a strong civil society, which is vital to the functioning of liberal democracy (Eriksen 2001 291). In the absence of such a class in Africa, the pressure for the expansion of democratic rights and the limitation of state power has been weakened. This explains the weakness of democracy in Africa and by extension the countries in the Mano River Union region until the 1990s when the civil wars broke out.

Rueschemeyer et al (1992) suggests that there are two opposite extremes in state-society relations that are detrimental to democratic development. First, at one extreme, the state can sometimes play an overpowering role and inhibit the development of plural groups within civil society that might if allowed to do so, press for democratization (Cited in Philip 2007:62). Paradoxically, when the state co-opts the civil society it will lead to one-party rule. This will be detrimental to states emerging from war such as Liberia and Sierra Leone. Second, at other extreme, it is dangerous and damaging to have a weak state completely penetrated by powerful social groups or business enterprises. Philip (2007) argues that there is need for some degree of autonomous law enforcement which is necessary for the persuasion of social forces to operate through institutions. When the state is not autonomous from the society it becomes an impediment to democratization.

Africans of all shades of opinions believe that the state is the source of the problem and therefore need to be reformed in order to ‘liberate’ civil society from the strangle-hold of regulation and its inefficiency (Eriksen 2001 :291). It is believed that when the institutions of governance of the state are reformed or institutionalized, and a strong and autonomous middle class emerges democracy will be sustained and consolidated thereby paving way for peace.

Chazan on the other hand, argues that the emergence of popular organizations and voluntary associations form the basis for the emergence of civil society (Erikson 2001). However, every voluntary association can be described as part of civil society. According to Chazan (1994) civil society is characterized by formal organizations, which are both independent from and directly related to the state (Eriksen 2001: 291). She argues that the flourishing of associations is a reflection of the state’s curtailment of services, or what she calls ‘dissociation from society’. (Cited in Eriksen 2001: 292). The vacuum created by this disengagement has enables private organizations to grow stronger. As the state has become unable or unwilling to provide services for its citizens, people resort to other private solutions. The truth is that once these organizations are established independent of the state, they can become an alternative sit of power and balance and limit to the power of the state. The argument posits that the emergence of voluntary organizations is partly seen as resulting from the rolling back of the state associated with neo-liberalism, which has led to a kind of withdrawal of the state from the society.

Both Diamond and Chazan arguments can be sustained in the sense that the main cause of economic decline, the resultant conflict, excessive state regulation of the economy means that the state has become the main source of wealth accumulation by individuals and thereby under minding both its capacity to act and to engender economic development (Eriksen 2001).
Critics of this perspective argue that it relies on an oppositional model of state-society relations, similar to that of the old modernization school of the 1960s. On the other hand, if the state is seen as the private property of an individual ruler or elite group, then the state-government distinction, which is necessary for peaceful political contestation to develop, will be difficult to find (Philip 2007: 63). While modernization theorists see the state as a rational instrument of modernization, and society as inherently ‘backward’ and ‘irrational’, the new civil society theorists advocate the mobilization of civil society against the irrational and ineffective state. In both cases, the state and society are seen as diametrically opposed.

The democratization in Africa has rarely been the result of internal pressure from society. Instead, democracy has largely been introduced from ‘above’ through the support of state officials and the international donors (Eriksen 2001: 292). This clearly shows that these civil society organizations are not independent of the state. If democracy that will give birth to civil society is imported from outside then the relationship between it and the state will be asymmetrical. African experience shows that most civil society organizations are mere business enterprise or better still consultancy firms that operate in undemocratic ways. They are often funded by the state and sustained by it. This is why the World Bank refers to them as GONGOs (government-organized NGOs) and even BONGOs (Bank-organized NGOs), which show that they are not in any way grass-root organizations (Eriksen 2001).

However, the line dividing the State and civil society is very difficult to determine. This theoretical reflection on state-society relation establishes the gulf between the state and society. Many state-oriented scholars have followed Weber’s emphasis of the state as an autonomous organization vested with the means through which to dominate, but in the process they neglected the role of civil society (Paffenholz, 2010). Civil society plays an active role in shaping state formation, while states in turn, play a key role in shaping civil society. It is impossible to think of the reinstatement of the state without the growth of a civil society that would not only extend legitimacy to state institutions and processes but also exercise a constant check on their power, offering competing policy options, demanding accountability, questioning policies, and aggregating and articulating demands from different social, economic, and cultural factors (Layachi, 1995: 186). To maintain order, legitimacy and economic revival in a collapsed state require a well developed civil society and differentiated state institutions. Governance involves trust in state-society relation, legitimacy in the exercise of power, structures of accountability, and ‘reciprocal relationships’... based on an underlying normative consensus (cited in Zartman ed. 1995:187).

There is need therefore for a systematic analysis of the state -civil society relations in Liberia and Sierra Leone in their specific manifestation. In Liberia, during the presidency of Charles Taylor from 1997 to 2003 the political space narrowed for civil society organizations. The government was autocratic in nature, which invariably affected democratization process. The regime was characterized by client – patron relationship, which is rewarding those considered to be in support of his regime through appointment. In its façade attempt to run a participatory government some eminent personalities and opinion leaders were consulted. The government claimed that the group was representative of Liberia civil society. Paradoxically, Charles Taylor was insensitive to the need to restructure or reform the security sector and this confirms the persistent and flagrant abuse of human rights which have made it increasingly difficult for
genuine national reconciliation. As the war continued in Liberia, the relationship between the state and civil society continue to sour and feeble.

Despite the electorate’s demands to vote as a way of maximizing the possibility for political stability, this hope was dashed by Taylor’s intransigency and he unleashed terror on the civil society, especially in Monrovia where civil society had flourished under the favourable condition created by Interim Government of National Unity headed by Amos Sawyer. Charles Taylor saw the civil society as part of the political opposition. His actions towards them were based on the notion that they were funded by Western governments and NGOs. This explains his attitude towards them at that material time. For instance, critics of the Taylor government were harassed, arrested, tortured, and imprisoned especially the prominent civil society activists such as human rights lawyer Tiawan Gongloe and Hassan Bility, editor of the independent Analyst a newspaper in Monrovia, former Chief Justice Frances Johnson Morris, then director of Catholic Justice and Peace Commission who was arrested after she presented a paper at a public forum in Monrovia questioning the validity of the “state of emergency” declared by President Taylor (Pham, 2006).

It is on record that state-society relation under Taylor’s government was such that by most socio-economic indices, by 2003 the average Liberian was worse off than he had been at the start of the civil war. Life expectancy in July 1990, for example, had been 54 years for men and 58 for women, by August 2003, those same values for the 3.3 million Liberians were estimated to be 47.03 for men and 49.3 for women respectively (Pham, 2006: 85). The victory of Mrs. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf who was elected in 2005 as president of post-civil war Liberia tried to establish good relationship with the civil society. She demonstrated that she is a product of civil society.

In Sierra Leone, the relationship between civil society and the state can best be described as oppositional from 1968 to 1985. For instance, in the 1960s, under Siaka Steven (1968-1985), the civil society was politicized and those that opposed the president were described as dissidents and as such threatened by state security agents namely: this included student groups, trade unions, an professional associations (IPA, Report 2002: 10). It is usual for the government that is autocratic in nature to stigmatize political opponents as dissidents rather than as neutral actors (IPA, Report 2002). Unfortunately, Sierra Leone NGOs did not utilize the opportunity they had to broaden their political space during 1960s and 1970s. This invariably affected the development of autonomous civil society from the on-set.

At the outbreak of civil war in Sierra Leone, very little attention was paid to civil society initiatives to seek an end to the war. The earliest civil society under the APC rule was infected with corruption as they became part of the government. The government of APC tactfully co-opted the perceived rivals into the government. This was to weaken the strength of the opposition. For instance, the leadership of the Sierra Leone Labour Congress (SLLC) was closely tied to the governing APC, hence ensuring relative industrial harmony (Pham 2006). As Sierra Leonean Scholars Earl Gontech-Morgan and Mac Dixon-Fyle observed, these appointments “served as pecks or carrots intended to neutralize the institutions by ‘buying out’ their leaders” thus casting a pall over civil society that was only gradually removed after the overthrow of APC rule (Pham 2006: 86).

Experiences from these two countries have shown that there is fragmentation between the civil society leadership in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Such fragmentation inhibits any effort to establish and build a more vibrant civil society. It makes things difficult for civil society to
effectively hold the political leadership accountable. The danger also of fragmentation between or among civil society is that they cannot engage in a struggle for emancipation. There will be no useful interaction between the state and society. The resultant effect of such relationship will be that any disagreement between them will lead to the state cascading into sporadic violence.

The conflict transformation theory focuses on the transition from deep-rooted armed conflicts into peaceful ones, based on different understanding of peace-building (Paffenholz and Spurk, 2006). John Paul Lederach (1997) in his analysis of comprehensive transformation-oriented model which is in line with the conflict resolution school sees the need to rebuild destroyed relationships, reconciliation within society and strengthening of society’s peace-building (Paffenholz and Spurk, 2006:22). The key element that can be identified in this approach is the focus on peace constituencies of mid-level individuals or groups and empowering them to build peace and support reconciliation. Empowerment of the middle level is assumed to influence peace building at the macro and grass-root levels. Lederach divided society into three levels, which can be approached with different peace-building strategies. This is provided in the diagram below:

Fig.1 Lederach’s Levels of Peace-building

(i) The top level is the elite leadership which can be accessed by mediations at the level of states (track 1) and the outcomes –oriented approach. It means that the transformation of
the society from one that resorts to violence to political means to resolve conflicts requires elite involvement during negotiation (Samuels, 2005). It comprises the key political, military, and religious leaders in the conflict. They are the primary representatives of their constituencies and highly visible. This is why the elite are being focused in the peace process. There is every possibility that without focusing on the elite in the peace process they may derail the process by sponsoring rebel group(s) because of their vested interest.

(ii) The middle range leadership (track 2). This can be reached through more resolution-oriented approaches such as problem-solving workshops or peace-commissions with the help of partial insider (i.e. prominent individuals in society). This involves informal interaction with influential unofficial actors from civil society, business or religious communities, and local leaders and politicians who are considered to be experts in the area or issue being discussed. It helps to facilitate dialogue between the parties as the MRWPNET did. This comprises leaders of NGOs, those who function in leadership positions but are not necessarily connected with formal government or major opposition movements (Lederach 1997:41). They serve as an important connection between the top and grassroots levels.

(iii) The grassroots leadership level (track 3) represents the majority of the population and can be reached by a wide-range of local peace commissions, community dialogue projects or those involved at the leadership level, including those involved in local communities, members of local or indigenous NGOs carrying out relief projects, health officials, and refugee camp leaders (Lederach, 1997: 42). These groups of people understand the fears of the people and are endowed with expert knowledge of local politics and issues.

By applying peace-building theory of conflict transformation, one focuses on the actor-oriented model of peace building, the leaders at various society levels, i.e. on the level of tracks 2 and 3 have been enlarged to almost every actor in a conflict country that is not a government and not an armed party (Paffenholz and Spurk 2006). The conflict transformation has the advantage of focusing on the roots of conflict and relationships among conflict parties and society and it explains that the issues can be addressed by non-state actors, especially the internal actors. The model shows that different peace building processes, which when adopted by each type of actor will form a comprehensive peace building framework. The approaches at all levels serve as an important systematic function. The issue of negotiations among the leadership will help to bring about peace. Just as problem-solving workshops and peace-commissions formed by mid-level leaders play crucial role in establishing a relationships and skill-based infrastructure necessary to sustain the peace building process (Lederach, 1997:51). Finally, grassroots approach bring together former protagonists or actors at the village level and command measurable level of influence to ensure reconciliation and attaining durable and lasting peace.

Peace building programming based on the theory of change explains how interventions contribute to peace (www.careinternational.org). Peace building in its comprehensive and all encompassing is understood to mean all processes, approaches and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable and peaceful relationships. The term thus involves a wide range of activities that precede and follow formal peace agreements. The theory of change states that “We believe that by doing X (action) it will achieve Y (progress towards peace)”. This simply shows that if women are trained in negotiating skills, they can become effective advocates of peace through a non-violent means. Similarly, the generation of employment for the youth will help to prevent them from being used as tool for violence.
These three theories are used in eclectic manner to provide a framework for understanding the role of civil society in conflict resolution and sustainability of peace and for evaluating the role of women of Mano River Union women peace network and other similar groups.

Assessing the role of civil society groups in the peace process in Liberia and Sierra Leone

The framework offered by Merkel and Lauth and the Edward’s role model provide a point of departure in analyzing the role of civil society groups in the peace process and even in preventing future conflict. The framework provided by these scholars known as functional approach offers a better explanation of the role of civil society. These functions are: protection of citizens; monitoring of accountability, advocacy and public communication; socialization; building community intermediation and facilitation between citizens and state; and service delivery (Spurk, 2010: 24-25). These are broad functions that are performed by civil society in Liberia and Sierra Leone which include: faith-based organizations, the media, educational establishments, and women’s organizations.

Faith-based Organizations

Faith-based organizations in both Liberia and Sierra Leone played significant role in the peace process. Inter-religions councils were established during the war with the aim of facilitating a peaceful end to the conflicts. In Liberia, for instance, the religious community-comprising both Christian and Islamic faiths were in the vanguard in the struggle for peace and social justice (Toure, 2002). The religious leaders through their pastoral letters issued by the church and sermons preached at places of worship condemned abuse of power by government and what may be termed as excessive governance. The collaboration between Church and Mosque under the auspices of the inter-faith council of Liberia (IFCL) played active role in conflict resolution and mediation. Instructively and remarkably too, the blue print for the Liberian Peace process during the first civil war was proposed by inter-faith council and was later amended and adopted by the ECOWAS as the ECOWAS Peace Plan for Liberia (Lamptey, 2007: 15). The Liberian religious council worked closely with the religious community in Sierra Leone to address issues of peace and insecurity in the Mano River Basin (Toure, 2002). In Sierra Leone, Young Women’s Christian Association (Y.W.C.A), Muslim women’s associations, the Supreme Islamic Council, the Council of Churches were actively engaged in conflict management activities.

Media

The media in both countries have been reported in some quarters to have suffered from negative impact of war manipulation and propaganda. In Liberia, journalists refrained from publishing news stories because of fear of arrest and threats to their lives. There were internal divisions in the media, which undermined collective action. For instance, during the conflict there were rival media houses such as Press Union of Liberia (PUL), the Liberian Association of Journalists opposed the PUL. In March 2000, the call by PUL for a press blackout in protest of the government’s action ordering the closure of Radio Veritas and Star Radio was not adhered to by
some press that were pro-government. In August 2000, the media was divided over the government’s arrest and detention of four foreign journalists charged with espionage. While the independent media described the government’s action as harsh and unwarranted the partisan press supported and defended the government’s action (Toure, 2002: 14 -15).

In Sierra Leone, there were also divisions amongst the journalist, between those who were advocating for a change in government and those who supported the status quo. The media divisions persisted throughout the war. The warring factions manipulated the media to their own advantage. Undoubtedly, the media created the forum for public debate and opportunity for political action by civil society groups. Subsequently, the post-conflict period has opened up opportunities for utilizing the power of the media to promote reconciliation and peaceful co-existence among divided societies torn apart by war.

**Intelligentsia/Educational Institutions**

The intelligentsia/educational establishment played prominent role in bringing about peace in Liberia and Sierra Leone. The intelligentsia and academics were able to mobilize wide segments of the population to challenge the authority of the state and to demand for social justice and political change (Lamptely, 2007). The academic community in both countries through their teaching and research created awareness about the need for peaceful resolution of the conflicts. There was partnership engagement between the peacekeeping mission and educational institutions (Lamptey 2007). In Liberia, the academics were able to raise the question of the desirability for elections under the existing constitutional arrangements or to overhaul the entire political system. Many Liberian scholars made proposals for a more decentralized government with greater power devolved to the local authorities and even called for postponement of the election in 2005 (Pham, 2006: 101). In Sierra Leone, the academics played an important role in facilitating a series of country-wide consultations which laid a good foundation for consolidation of peace. It was estimated that 80% of the representatives to the Lome Peace Talks on Sierra Leone were academics (Lamptey, 2007: 14). This was in recognition of the role of intellectuals in the peace process.

**Women’s Groups**

In 2000, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution referred to here as UNSC Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. It is one of the internal mechanisms of international law that become a rallying point for organizations and individuals around the world. This resolution 1325 focuses on the negative experiences that women and girls face on conflict and calls for the need to include them into all levels of the peace process (UN-INSTRAW, 2009). The resolution also highlights the role that women can play in conflict prevention, peace negotiations, peace building and post-conflict recovery (UN-INSTRAW, 2009: 5). Women were recognized by this provision as agent of change rather than as mere victims of war. It is noteworthy that the resolution embraces three core dimensions of participation of women in all levels of the peace process, protection of gender-based violence and prevention of armed conflict (UN-INSTRAW, 2009).

In Liberia, women’s active involvement in the peace process began in 1994 with the conception of a movement for peace, the Liberian Women Initiative composed of women from all walks of life, regardless of their ethnic, religious, educational or socio-economic background (UN-
While in Sierra Leone, the failure of diplomatic effort to broker peace between the government of Sierra Leone and Revolutionary United Front (RUF) encouraged the women Forum, a network of women’s organizations including the Young Women Christian Association (Y.W.C.A), the Women’s Association for National Development (WAND), the Women’s Wing of the Sierra Leone Labour Congress, the National Displaced Women’s Organization, Women leaders’ groups, and Muslim Women’s Associations, to engage in activities that were considered hitherto as too political (IPA, Report 2002:7).

There is no doubt that women are both victims and perpetrators of war. This partly explains why they are seen as peace builders and assuming more strategic and influential roles in the peace process in Liberia and Sierra Leone. The role of women however, may not be clear, especially in peace building, but in the conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, women were in the forefront. The women in the grass-roots in conjunction with other local associations, faith-based groups, and guilds worked together to protect their families and communities during the war.

Women were involved in providing relevant information to local communities during the war on where to take safety. Through this process women directly or indirectly began to play an important role. For instance, Liberian Women’s Initiatives and Campaign for Good Governance in Sierra Leone contributed through their advocacy for women’s involvement at all levels of peace building (Eyikor, 2008: 31). Kadi Sesay one of the Sierra Leonean’s women activists used her position as the chairwoman for the National Commission for Democracy and Human Rights (NCDHR) to promote civic education, democracy and human rights (Badmus, 2009: 825).

In 2000, Mano River Women Peace Network (MARWOPNET), a joint peace initiative of women ministers and parliamentarians, journalists, lawyers, academics, researchers and individual from the private sector of the Mano River region (Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone) prevented hostilities re-erupting among the three countries by bringing their leaders back to the negotiating table.

When the leaders were no longer interested in peace talk to bring to an end the war, women literally forced the three leaders – Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, Charles Taylor and Late Lansana Conte of Guinea to the negotiation table. These women threatened to go on naked during the day if they refused to heed to their plea. As Mrs. Ellen Johnson -Sirleaf said: “Women are concerned about people…. They are in the homes carrying the burden of the home and the family”. From that experience, “women bring a sensibility, a sensitivity, to those things which bring peace” (Amran Rachel). This led to the formation of wider women’s networks such as Women Peace Network (WIPNET) and women’s peace advocacy campaigns such as the Liberian Women’s Mass Action for peace, which was acclaimed to be a major player in restoring peace to Liberia in 2003 (Eyikor 2008 32). Women were meant to observe the peace talks in Lome in an attempt to bring about end to the war in Sierra Leone, while in Liberia, Ruth Sando Perry was appointed to head the transitional government, the council of state between 1990 and 1994 (IPA Report, 2002: 7).

The major contribution of MARWOPNET to peace was the sending delegates to meet the dreaded Foday Sankoh of RUF in Sierra Leone, the leaders of ECOWAS in their 24th summit. The United Nations special representative of United Nations Secretary General for Cote d’Ivoire, Pierre Schort, emphasized “the commitment of the United Nations Operation in Cote d’Ivoire (UNOCI) to ensure women were involved in all the mechanisms to bring peace in the country in
Again, the emphasis on society-centre approach to peace will be enhanced through collaborative relationship between Mano River Union and ECOWAS with the civil society groups in the region. In this case, there is need to revitalize Mano River Union which is older than ECOWAS. Professor Adebayo Adedeji has suggested that ECOWAS must be revitalized to achieve its economic interaction and regional security objective (Jusu-Sheriff, 2004: 286). Mano River Union would have to be revitalized as well to face the security challenging confronting the region.

Re-integration of ex-combatants and internally displaced persons must be a condition for sustainable peace in the region. Reintegration is the most challenging in the overall peace building process. After disarmament and demobilization, the challenge of resettling the ex-combatants and starting up a livelihood need to be addressed. In a situation whereby the ex-rebels are meant to undergo traditional cleansing rite as in Sierra Leone will not be a condition for reintegration. The non-acceptance of the ex-rebels back their respective communities portends great danger to peace in the region. The tendency of ex-combatants who felt frustrated to arm themselves again becomes very high thereby thwarting the peace process. They may become ready pool for political violence. Women groups should join in the campaign for reintegration and disarmament. Arguably, demobilization alone does not sustain peace (Kingma, 1997). This is why the campaign for reintegration would be at the community level for the community leaders and elders to see the need for peace by accepting the ex-combatants and also ensuring that they do not encourage arms possession. Besides, the governments of the Mano River region should provide the enabling environment that engenders reintegration. Harris and Morrison (2003) noted that peace process involves empowering the people with the skills, attitudes and knowledge to create a safe world and build sustainable environment (quoted in Opotow, S. et.al 2005:306). The fundamental and strategic principles of peace education are based on the willingness to: a) treat everyone fairly; b) allocate resources to every in a more equitable manner; and c) making necessary sacrifices that would foster the well-being of all concerned. In addition, governments and civil society groups in these countries would conduct psycho-social healing of the ex-combatants through counseling, training in various skills, employment and provision of recreational facilities that will divert the attention the ex-combatants and youth from war and crime.

Conclusion:

Generally speaking, the social burden occasioned by the debilitating socio-economic conditions and eruption of violent conflicts have pushed women into assuming responsibility that were considered to be men prerogative area. In other words, women were seen in the forefront of democratization campaigns and ending the civil war in Liberia and Sierra Leone. From the contextual analysis of civil society, theoretical argument, the assessment of the role of civil society groups, and the basic pillars in which sustainable peace is rested; it becomes clear that the inclusion of civil society in the peace process in these countries has contributed in the peaceful resolution of the conflicts. It is therefore important to strengthen strategic partnership between women and other civil society groups on one hand and civil society groups and government on the other hand for sustainability of peace in the region. This synergy becomes necessary in view of the non-violent approach of women in conflict resolution.

It is therefore a combination of modern and traditional strategies of coalitions across civil society groups that conflict can be resolved and peace sustained. The shift from state-centred
approach to society approach to conflict management, peace-building and promotion of democracy is part of change initiative. The collaboration of the civil society groups with the relevant institutions such as Mano River Union and ECOWAS in the management of conflicts and promotion of democratic governance in the region remains a panacea for sustainable peace. The achievements of the women in the Mano River region can be built upon in the future conflict and in the democratization efforts in these countries –Liberia and Sierra Leone. They have complemented the efforts of the relevant institutions both ECOWAS and Mano River Union and the respective government of these countries- Liberia and Sierra Leone. They should continue to mobilize other civil society groups in the democratization process in the region.

Finally, the responsibility of women in ensuring that peace is sustained in the Mano River region is a choice well made not by chance because they will bear the brunt of war. In keeping with the choice they have made as agent of change, full cognizance must be taken of the imperatives of institutionalizing good democratic governance and re-integration of ex-combatants and internally displaced persons into the society. This is the challenge before the women and other civil society groups in Liberia and Sierra Leone. The price will be too costly for not sustaining peace and bringing political, economic and social stability to the Mano River region. This would be a lesson for other countries in Africa that is facing similar conflict by sharing experiences of Liberia and Sierra Leone.
References


(ECOSOCC’s www.africa-union.org/ECOSOCC/home.htm).


