

# **CIVIL SOCIETY IN A CONFLICT ENVIRONMENT: A CASE OF GULU DISTRICT IN NORTHERN UGANDA AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL SERVICE DELIVERY**

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## **About the author**

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## **Summary and policy implications**

The paper argues that the scenario in northern Uganda should be representative of other war environments in other developing countries such as Afghanistan, El Salvador, Somalia, the Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, in which the traditional service providers, the government and market have failed and the traditional 'third' sector has become the 'first' conduit for delivering services. This is because, as is commonly known, in a war situation, especially those wars that last a decade and beyond, the government structures fail to optimally meet the needs of the people and the private sector, especially the pro-profit organisations, does not thrive well where people are poor.

What emerges from the discussions in the paper is that civil society in a conflict environment is becoming more complex in types, forms and orientations. However, civil society organisations are a key factor in response to conflicts and have become important channels for delivery of social services and the implementation of other development programmes where government capacity is weak or non-existent. In this regard, the paper supports the broadly shared view that civil society has emerged as a global social force (Murphy, 2005; Taylor, 2004). It is evident that civil society plays a major role in conflict situations in three developmental areas: a) Providing basic life sustaining services and goods; b) Peace- building and human rights advocacy; c) Infrastructure development. Indeed, from the discussions in the paper, it becomes clear that their services are more accessible than those of the government and private providers.

The paper realistically exemplifies that the civil society organisations can be at the forefront of saving lives and building peace in a complex and ever-unstable situation in many countries worldwide, such as in northern Uganda. Through their diverse forms and modes of intervention, they can promote social inclusion and political participation at all levels of governance. They cover issues ranging from gender, environment, and infrastructure, to peace, human rights and advocacy. As is well known, an active civic community and democratic values (norms and networks) are preconditions for good local governance. Economic and fiscal reforms in many developing countries have led to decentralisation or even privatisation of social service delivery, and this should create a

big potential for even a larger role of civil society organisations to fit into the development process.

The paper also emphasises that informal civil society institutions could, under certain conditions, be an effective route for reaching the poor. It is also true that by emerging only when formal institutions fail to perform, informal institutions do not provide sustainability because of limited capacity and resources. However, their roles should be seen as complementary to, rather than a substitution for those of their counterpart, the formal institutions.

The paper strongly argues that the visibility of civil society in such a conflict situation, as opposed to government, is because of its methodology of intervention, which is much more recipient-friendly. For example, its participatory processes can be engines for increased collaboration between and among population groups that have experienced tension resulting from conflicts, and can help promote reconciliation. This participatory methodology builds trust and is a good weapon for managing expectations. Moreover, with this participatory approach, transparency in the input-output cycle of intervention is manifested and sustained.

Accordingly, if civil society is to remain a formidable and relevant global force in service delivery in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the following key policy issues must be addressed by all development stakeholders who care about the plight of the marginalised communities in areas or countries with prolonged conflict:

- ‘Failed’ governments in conflict areas must support the services rendered by non-governmental organisations. It is important for governments in particular to recognise the civil society as such, and equally, that civil society should begin to recognise that in any conflict situation they are a force to reckon with. The freedom of action of civil society organisations must be respected by governments. Policies that restrict their activities must be avoided; instead, those that strengthen the range of institutions of civil society, especially in LICUS (Low-Income Countries Under Stress), where there are complex

social structures, and governments do not have a monopoly over power and are not the only legitimate authority, should be encouraged.

- Civil society organisations should continue to motivate policies at the top, and address the obstacles they face in terms of resources and retaining independence while engaging with policy-makers on crucial issues that affect their effective operation. They should endeavour to more persuasively impact on the policy-making of governments and inter-governmental organisations.

- Civil society organisations should concentrate on building partnerships and cooperation amongst themselves as this could bolster their capacity to be more serviceable “around”, “in” and “on” conflict<sup>1</sup>. A major challenge raised in the 2002 African Governance Forum (AGF), was to work out how best to build bridges between, and networks among, existing formal and informal institutions and empower poor people to take advantage of social service delivery structures and market opportunities, UNCDF (United Nations Capital Development Fund, 2003). As a first step forward, institutions in conflict areas, both formal and informal, should begin to look for opportunities for information sharing, participatory intervention and capacity-building among themselves, both vertically and horizontally. Civil society networks with the public sector, in particular, could facilitate local governance by helping to mobilise additional resources, by enhancing the accountability of local-level political and management officials, and creating synergies leading to innovations and higher levels of productivity.

The formal civil society organisations should contribute to better cohesion among themselves by working together to develop standards of good practice, by sharing and applying these standards across the sector, and reduce the competitive pressures that often undermine unity. They could universally set the following minimum standards of operation for all members by:

- keeping appropriate government authorities informed and updated on its plans, activities and programmes;

- documenting their work programme and disseminating it to the appropriate authorities;
- regularly sharing their objectives with their members and beneficiaries;
- establishing good working relations with relevant government departments or other stakeholders in the communities where they operate;
- making efforts to relate with other sectors, beyond its membership, working in its operating environment. The private sector and government departments are crucial here;
- making an effort to regularly monitor and evaluate its programme activities;
- understanding and being able to identify its current or actual programme outputs;
- having written programme or activity plans that aim at achieving its strategic objectives.

The above will not only enhance their credibility and trustworthiness, but will make them effective organisations, better able to secure their necessary freedom of operation and better placed to defend their interests against any pressure or manipulation, especially from repressive Third World governments.

- Other global development stakeholders must play a part in as many ways as possible in enhancing the participation of civil society in the development process in conflict areas. The example of the World Bank, which now has a policy note on engagement with civil society, that encourages its staff to engage with civil society, identifying information-sharing, policy dialogue, and operational collaboration as the three broad areas of contact (World Bank, 2000), is a case in point. The World Bank's civil society paper assumes, and rightly too, state incapacity, asserting that working with civil society is essential for developing consensus and local ownership for reforms, ensuring nation-state accountability and transparency by helping to ensure that government funds are focused on citizens' needs, and are actually spent on the programmes for which they are intended (World Bank, 2003). In this regard, the paper submits that the World Bank can go a step further by practically funding some of the development projects of frontline organisations in conflict areas or by providing the technical support that most national NGOs and CBOs (Community-Based Organisations) desperately need. Strategies to reduce poverty

used by major multilateral organisations such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTD) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and those by bilateral agencies, should take care of the diverse interests of the civil society organisations in conflict areas if the increasingly globalised world is to witness a comprehensive development framework with a lasting impact on vulnerable communities. Given their significance in maintaining cultural values and being at the root of problems, self-help organisations should begin to attract policy attention from the donor community. Formal national and lower levels of civil society organisations should also begin to target these self-help associations in addition to getting involved directly in delivering services. Doing so could make service delivery cost-effective and enhance the relevance of intervention in alleviating the problems identified by the community themselves at this informal level. Supporting the self-help groups is one way of empowering them to effectively address their own problems the way they see them and accountability issues are likely to be less complicated. Moreover, when empowered, they can evolve into formal organisations that can be much more visible and viable for development from below.

- Lastly but not least, since it is an undisputed fact that civil society is an emerging global force in the development discourse, the author concurs with other philanthropists' view for the formation of a unified global civil society for a more comprehensive interventions into the social and economic policies of client states (Cammack, 2002; Chandler, 2004). The global governance system, which Rischard (2002) long advocated in his book *High Noon...*, where he listed 20 global challenges<sup>ii</sup> - ranging from basic education to global warming – as not being addressed by the current international system,<sup>iii</sup> appears to be closer to the ideal framework. The paper in part supports this new framework of a global governance system proposed by Rischard, given the shocking story of Kony's LRA<sup>iv</sup> that has been operating in three independent sovereign countries - Uganda, the Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for 20 years but without being arrested or defeated. The UN alone has proved incapable of handling this crisis, as it has failed elsewhere before, even after the (International Criminal Court) ICC

indictment of the war leaders. However, this paper builds on Richard's proposed governance system in two ways: a) Instead of putting in place the elite networks drawn from 'knowledgeable' government bureaucracies, global business, and the NGO sector to create for each of the twenty issues a global issues network as Rischard proposed, the governance system should only be constituted from among the 'professional' civil society organisations dealing with each of these twenty issues; b) In states which have 'failed' for more than 10 years to deliver services to their population or part thereof, this new global governance should assume direct political governance of the state in question under a restructured, reformed and properly mandated UN.<sup>v</sup> Creation of this global governance system should not be an option if the targets for the Millennium Development Goals and the existing global challenges in respect of global warming, biodiversity, deforestation, natural disaster prevention and mitigation, the digital divide, international labour migration rules, among others, are to be effectively and comprehensively addressed.

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<sup>i</sup> "Around" conflict: avoiding conflict areas and issues as far as possible. "In" conflict: adapting as far as necessary in order to continue normal programs. "On" conflict: using aid strategy and policy to influence the impact of conflict towards development objectives (Department of Foreign and International Development *DFID*, 2002).

<sup>ii</sup> The 20 problems are: Global warming; biodiversity and ecosystem losses; fisheries depletion; deforestation; water deficits; maritime safety and pollution; massive step-up in the fight against poverty; peace-keeping, conflict prevention, combating terrorism; education for all; global infectious diseases; digital divide; natural disaster prevention and mitigation; reinventing taxation for the twenty-first century; biotechnology rules; global financial architecture; illegal drugs; trade, investment, and competition rules; intellectual property rights; e-commerce rules; and international labour and migration rules (Rischard, 2003, p.19).

<sup>iii</sup> Rischard proposes addressing these problems through elite networks drawn from "knowledgeable government bureaucracies, global business, and the NGO sector to create for each of the twenty issues a global issues network...there would be people from three parties, government officials that really know the issue well...the second party that would bring in knowledgeable people from the private sector, big companies that know all the ins and outs...the third group of people would come from knowledgeable NGOs, the IUCN, the World Wildlife Fund, a lot of these big NGOs and networks of NGOs that have a lot of knowledge" (Rischard, 2003).

<sup>iv</sup> Kony is the leader of the notorious LRA (Lord's Resistance Army) that has been fighting a guerilla war against the government of Yoweri Museveni of Uganda since 1986 from their bases in northern Uganda and Southern Sudan. The five ICC LRA indictees are: Joseph Kony, Vincent Otti, Dominic Ongwen, Odhiambo Okot, and Raska Lokwiya. Also available in *Daily Monitor*, Monday, July 31, 2006, p.8.

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<sup>v</sup>This proposed UN structure is contained in a proposal by the author entitled, “Meeting the Millennium Development Goals Target: Proposed UN Global Governance Framework to Confront the Challenges of the 21 Century” (Omona, J., forthcoming).

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