

**COEXISTENCE AND DEMOCRACY IN WEST AFRICA:
TRENDS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

A summary of policies and practices aimed at promotion of democratic governance, coexistence and social inclusion in West Africa

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Draft Background Document produced by Coexistence International (CI) with input from the Ghana Center for Democratic Development and the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding

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Project Description

This document was prepared as part of the *Democracy, Conflict, and Coexistence in West Africa* project, initiated in 2008 by Coexistence International (CI), to create a platform for sharing experiences, best practice, and learning from international and regional intergovernmental and non-governmental institutions that design and implement democracy and governance programs. The project has a research and a workshop component, and seeks to create connections and an alliance between the people and organizations dedicated to these issues in West Africa. The project is funded by the Alan B. Slifka Foundation and the Compton Foundation.

The following is a brief description of the three organizations partnering on this project.

Coexistence International (CI)

Based at Brandeis University (Waltham, USA) since 2005, Coexistence International (CI) is an initiative committed to strengthening the field of policymakers, practitioners, and funders promoting coexistence at local, national, and international levels. CI promotes a complementary approach to coexistence work through facilitating connections, learning, reflection, and strategic thinking between those in the coexistence field and those in related areas, such as democracy, rule of law, transitional justice, sustainable development, cultural work, etc.

Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana)

CDD-Ghana is an independent, nonpartisan, public policy-oriented non-profit based in Accra. Its mission is to promote democracy, good governance, rule of law and integrity in public administration. With a strong capacity for research, analysis, and advocacy, the Center collaborates with a wide range of domestic and external partners to undertake programs that address national and regional challenges in areas such as democracy building and governance, conflict resolution and transitional justice and reconciliation.

West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP)

The WANEP network reaches throughout the region with programs that promote the vision of just and peaceful communities where dignity is paramount and where people can meet their basic human needs and decide their own direction. WANEP's mission is to enable and facilitate the development of mechanisms for cooperation among peacebuilding practitioners and organizations in West Africa by promoting cooperative responses to violent conflicts; providing structures for regular exchange of experience and information on issues of peacebuilding, conflict transformation, social, religious and political reconciliation; and promoting West Africa's social cultural values as resources for peacebuilding.

Introduction

An increasing number of international, regional and local organizations working in divided and post-conflict societies are focusing on the areas of governance, democracy, reconciliation, peacebuilding, transitional justice and reforms of the electoral, judicial and security sectors. There is a growing recognition that poor governance and political and economic marginalization of ethnic, linguistic, religious and other identity groups result in deep-seated grievances that can lead to mobilization of armed groups and result in long-lasting societal divisions.¹

Coexistence International's (CI) work is informed by a belief that in order to most effectively resolve conflicts and achieve lasting peace and security, coexistence and social inclusion efforts need to be fully integrated into democracy and governance programs. In this context coexistence-sensitive democracy policies and programs can act as a means of conflict prevention. CI does not promote any particular democracy model but recognizes that essential features of coexistence-sensitive democratic practice are inclusive representation, participatory dialogue, accountability and transparency.

This research document builds upon CI's earlier research and publications on complimentary approaches to coexistence and democracy-building.² In 2008, CI commissioned research to explore how organizations and practitioners in West Africa define and practice coexistence and democracy work and what linkages between these two areas currently exist. As part of the pilot project in West Africa, this research paper, subsequent workshop, and future reports will link what is learned from *international* scholars, practitioners and policymakers with the experiences of scholars, practitioners and policymakers in *West Africa*.

Methodology

The following are some of the key themes and questions being explored by CI:

- In what ways do democracy and governance efforts support coexistence and peacebuilding efforts? Likewise, how can coexistence and peacebuilding efforts support democracy-building? What negative impacts can democracy-building have on peace and coexistence?
- Are there differences in how democracy work is understood in West Africa and the westernized world?
- How is the impact of democracy-building and coexistence work being measured?
- How can the process of collaborative learning be sustained among institutions concerned with undertaking democracy and coexistence work in divided societies?
- What are the required collective action steps towards influencing national, regional and international policy of governments, intergovernmental bodies and donor agencies?

¹ The annual "Failed States Index" produced by Fund for Peace provides one such analysis of the relationship between the state of governance and the likelihood of conflict. See Failed State Index 2008 at <http://www.fundforpeace.org/>

² Part I and II of the "Survey of Coexistence Sensitivity in International Democratization and Governance Policies" and the July 2007 publication on "Coexistence and Democracy-building" are available at www.coexistence.net

In order to explore these issues within a specific regional context, CI selected six countries in West Africa that are grappling with questions of social inclusion and diversity within their borders. All six countries have different experiences with intercommunal and intra-state conflict and are at different stages of democratic consolidation.

Côte d'Ivoire

Côte d'Ivoire has had several periods of instability and violence, all of which have negatively impacted the democratic governance processes in the country. Previously one of the most stable countries in the region, Côte d'Ivoire historically welcomed immigrants from neighboring countries and embraced diversity within its borders. Constitutional changes introduced in 2000 limiting immigrants' rights to citizenship and political participation led to tensions over the election process and to violence between government forces and insurgents. Several peace agreements have been negotiated but lasting peace and stability have not yet been achieved.

Ghana

Ghana has enjoyed relative political stability and economic growth for more than a decade. However, in the northern region of the country where population is diverse and differs linguistically, religiously and culturally from the politically and economically dominant southern regions, there are unresolved tensions between several ethnic groups over access to land and other economic resources.

Liberia

Liberia has made significant progress towards recovering from a civil war that brought on disintegration of civic and political space and violence that spread to several neighboring countries. The post-war transition period and the subsequent democratic elections have paved way for major reforms in the security sector, in governance structures and in the economic sphere. The Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission has drawn both support and criticism from domestic, regional and international stakeholders who want to see these processes contribute to lasting reconciliation and justice without resulting in renewed divisions.

Nigeria

After three decades of military rule, Nigeria's presidential elections of 1999 brought back the promise of political stability, democracy and economic growth. However, intercommunal violence between ethno-religious factions and armed groups in several parts of the country has been on the rise and has led to a deepening crisis of security and governance as well as deterioration of the socio-economic situation in already marginalized and poor regions. The ruling elites continue to control much of the country's resources and profits from the oil production and the political environment is characterized by ethnic, religious and regional divisions.

Cameroon

Cameroon has enjoyed relative stability and economic growth due to investments in its agricultural, petroleum and timber sectors. However, many rural and urban people representing over a hundred ethnic groups, live in poverty, which led to recent violent strikes over fuel prices and other grievances. Political power is concentrated in the hands of the ruling party widely

regarded as representing the interests of the Francophone community. The alienation of the Anglophone community, persistent and widespread corruption, intermittent tensions between Christian and Muslim communities and the unresolved border disputes with Nigeria are among the pressing issues facing the country today.

Sierra Leone

In 2002, Sierra Leone emerged from eleven years of civil war that brutalized the civilian population and further weakened the already dysfunctional political, economic and social institutions. Long-standing grievances over political and economic marginalization of youth, poor governance and lack of rule of law all of which led up to the war, remain important issues being tackled by the current government. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and local peacebuilding efforts have focused on the wide range of issues including reconciliation, democracy and good governance and increasing economic opportunities for young people.

Sources Consulted for the Initial Research Study

The desk research and literature review for this paper included relevant publications, reports and case studies by international scholars and practitioners focused on democracy-building, governance, peacebuilding and coexistence topics. The body of literature on this topic is growing rapidly and we are aware of the limited scope of this initial literature review. The sources consulted were all in English and easily accessible in print form and through the Internet. Future literature reviews may include a wider range of policy documents and briefs produced by international, regional and local organizations working on democracy, governance and coexistence issues, including Anglophone and Francophone sources.

For the primary research, a team of two researchers conducted phone and in-person interviews and distributed e-mail surveys to individuals representing a diverse range of agencies working across West Africa. Most were local civil society organizations, but some were regional or international organizations. The thirteen interviewees were selected based on their expertise and experience with coexistence and democracy work in West Africa and their availability during the June-August 2007 research period. Given time constraints, we chose to focus on a particular sector within the framework of coexistence stakeholders. CI is very much aware that the list of interviewees represents only a preliminary sample of perspectives; the interviews summarized in this working draft are not intended to be exhaustive and are just a start for what we expect to be further research.

Coexistence by its nature is a dynamic of many stakeholders and understanding this dynamic on a fundamental level will include not only the perspective of civil society practitioners but also stakeholders at the grassroots level, politicians, and international bodies, among others. While it was beyond the scope of this report to engage other stakeholders, it is hoped that future research will be done to synthesize the multitude of perspectives. The data gathered through interviews is integrated into this summary document, which will be used as a basis for workshop discussions to be held in Accra in October 2008. A report on what is learned from the workshop will be disseminated widely.

The questions asked during phone interviews and through e-mail surveys included:

1. What language does your organization use to describe the work that is done to help people to live together peacefully? What language do you use to describe how people share power?
2. How is your organization involved in this type of work?
3. What are the key problems facing your country in relation to democracy and governance? And coexistence? What is being done at the national and local levels about these problems?
4. In what ways does your organization promote democratic and inclusive governance? How do you take into account existing conflicts between groups? What challenges does such work pose for your organization?
5. Have you evaluated your work? How? What have you learned about its impacts?
6. Can you share some success stories or lessons learned so far about how to do this work effectively? Have these lessons learned changed the way you work?
7. Apart from your own organization, what other national and grassroots groups have helped in contributing to democracy and good governance in your country?

Definition of Key Terms

Democracy

There is no universally accepted definition of democracy and countries who have been practicing democracy for more than two hundred years continue to debate various interpretations of key democratic precepts. Recognizing that the practice of democracy around the world is culturally and contextually embedded, it is important to highlight several essential features that help distinguish democratic societies from those that are not. At its foundation, democratic society is one where the people are able to exercise civic and political rights and elect government officials to represent their interests in local and national political structures. A democratic system of government can take many forms and is fundamentally based on the principles of participation, representation, rule of law, protection of citizens' freedoms and liberties, limitations on the government's power in the private and public spheres, free and fair elections and an independent and transparent judiciary system.

Coexistence

In a paper titled *What is Coexistence and Why a Complementary Approach?* Published in 2007 by Coexistence International, Jessica Berns and Mari Fitzduff write that coexistence describes societies in which diversity is embraced for its positive potential, equality is actively pursued, interdependence between different groups is recognized, and the use of weapons to address conflicts is increasingly obsolete. As we examine pre-conflict, conflict, and post-conflict situations around the globe it is clear that for relationships between different ethnic, religious, or social groups to be positive and sustainable we need to move beyond the notion of mere tolerance, to a definition of coexistence that incorporates equality, diversity, and interdependence. Coexistence is evidenced in relationships across differences that are built on mutual trust, respect, and recognition, and is widely understood as related to social inclusion and integration. The term coexistence has a particular focus on inter-group relations. Other language that seeks to describe a similar vision includes social cohesion, social inclusion, and social integration.

Coexistence International understands coexistence work to cover the range of initiatives necessary to ensure that communities and societies can live more equitably and peacefully together, including conflict prevention and management, post-conflict and conflict transformation work, conflict-sensitivity, peacebuilding, reconciliation, multicultural, and pluralism work. Coexistence practice and policy activities can find their institutional homes within governments and governmental institutions, INGOs, NGOs, community-based organizations and donor agencies, businesses, as well as cultural, social, and religious institutions. Many types of activities or strategies can fall under the rubric of "coexistence work," including: mediation or reconciliation of conflicts, equity and diversity work, people-to-people programs, advocacy around issues of immigration, ethnic, or cultural rights, coexistence-related research, and development of coexistence-sensitive policies at local, national, regional, or international levels.

Relationship between democracy, conflict and coexistence

In a paper called titled *Focus on Coexistence and Democracy-building* published by CI in 2007 Isabella Jean and Jessica Berns write that in multi-ethnic and diverse societies, democracy offers strong prospects for managing social and political conflicts. During the last decade, there has been a new and important emphasis in scholarly and policy realms on conflict- and coexistence-sensitive approaches to democracy-building and promotion of good governance. There is growing agreement that multi-stakeholder dialogue and consensus-building is essential in such efforts as constitutional- and electoral-system design, security sector reform, transitional justice initiatives, natural resource management, and national dialogues on minority and language laws. These efforts, when pursued in a participatory and inclusive manner, are as important as the content of the political treaties and normative documents that result from them. In societies that have endured long-lasting divisions, as well as in consolidated democracies, the sustainability of conflict-prevention efforts and intercommunal coexistence relies on democratic practice informed by principles of inclusion, participation, and respect for diversity.

Democracy enables greater societal reconciliation to take place via many routes, including increased civic engagement, rule of law, an independent judiciary system, equality legislation, and the recognition of both collective rights of minorities and the individual rights of citizens. Although democracy-building in war-torn societies is often correlated with peace and reconciliation processes, neither non-violent management of societal conflicts nor intercommunal coexistence can be achieved by simply ‘launching’ democracy.

It is idealistic to assume that democracy-building is in itself a conflict-free process and that democracy as an end goal is effortlessly realized, or provides the panacea to a post-conflict society. Many contemporary societies, but particularly those emerging from war, struggle with how to manage deep-rooted societal divisions. Such democratic “essentials” as elections, constitutional and security-sector reforms, and political-party formation can intensify and exacerbate identity-based divisions. Democracy can facilitate the development of multiple and complementary political identities, and yet it can also polarize them when it comes to political inclinations at the ballot box. Moreover, the political agendas and mandates of the leaders driving these processes have a tremendous impact on their conflict-inducing potential.

Coexistence Practice in the West African Context

Use of the Term “Coexistence”

The majority of the practitioners interviewed agreed that the term coexistence appropriately describes the work carried out by them and by other practitioners and organizations working on peace, conflict resolution and reconciliation in their countries. While not all of the organizations use the term coexistence in their publications and project documents, the term and the concept is widely understood and accepted. There was an agreement that the use of this term should be promoted widely to reach beyond the arena of non-governmental organizations and to be included in the policies, laws and practices of national and local governments and other decision-making institutions.

In Nigeria, the formal recognition and inclusion of more than 250 tribes that make up the country's population is seen as an important step towards greater coexistence. In addition to the acknowledgement of diversity and difference, the Nigerian government commissioned the electoral tribunal committee to recommend changes that reflect the interests of all Nigerians. In Liberia, the term national reconciliation is widely used but the concept of coexistence is seen as even more applicable to the current discourse. In Sierra Leone, where coexistence is understood as respect for diversity and difference, people are starting to use the term more widely.

Key Divisions and Cleavages Addressed by Coexistence Work in the Region

Interviews with West African practitioners working on peace, governance and human rights revealed a growing recognition and concern that coexistence issues are at the heart of the many recurring tensions and conflicts. In Nigeria, where ethno-religious divisions are affecting local and national politics, peace practitioners are focusing their efforts on coexistence between Muslim and Christian communities across the country. Other interviewees described the cleavages between the Northerners and Southerners in Nigeria. The legacy of the Biafran war and the historical exclusion of the Igbo people are another area where coexistence efforts are being focused.

In Liberia, the religious divide between Christians and Muslims has played an important part in the politics and war. The asymmetrical power dynamics between Americo-Liberians and indigenous Liberians are another important factor in the political life of the country. Other social and political groupings that are being targeted by democracy-building and coexistence efforts are ex-combatants, student organizations, labor unions and religious institutions. As one Liberian practitioner stated, “There must be a way for each of these organizations to relate to each other, accommodate and tolerate each other. This is coexistence.”

In Ghana, inter-ethnic conflict among its 92 ethnic groups remains a concern and religious divisions also occasionally flare, for example between the Ga people of greater Accra and the Charismatic churches. In addition, civil unrest can on occasion disrupt the general perception of peace and good governance that Ghana enjoys. Several government led initiatives have been established to address these concerns. For example, the Ghanaian constitution mandates the

State with the “responsibility to actively promote the integration of the peoples of Ghana and prohibit discrimination and prejudice”³

In Cameroon, the tensions between various religious and ecumenical groups are being addressed by local organizations. Organizations are also tackling issues caused by conflicts in neighboring countries. Another key source of discontent and division in national politics is the unrestrained power of the current president.

Some interviewees also argued that while ethnicity remains an important factor in political mobilization by unscrupulous leaders, there are new and important cross cutting divisions being formed which transcend tribal and ethnic affiliations and are based on ideological differences which are part and parcel of democratic societies elsewhere. For example, in the last general election in Nigeria the supporters of the elected president cut across ethnic and religious lines.

Examples of Coexistence Work

The interviews point to a great diversity of programs and approaches to coexistence and social inclusion work. One notable trend is the increase in civic education programs which are carried out by many civil society groups in these countries. Another common area of work is on governance issues with specific focus on increasing citizens’ participation. The following is just a sample of projects undertaken by the organizations interviewed for this study.

- In Nigeria, a local group engages school age youth in popular education on democracy and governance principles. Such early civic education efforts aim to empower voters and prevent unwanted mobilization by tribal and religious groups.
- One Nigerian organization has had success in improving relationships between Christians and Muslims in Kano, a state of 10 million people. An important achievement includes better integrated schools where children representing various ethnic groups are attending classes together. The organization’s board members cut across the ethno-religious divide.
- Other organizations in Nigeria are focusing on advocacy and human rights work and address the political and economic marginalization of people living in oil rich areas where extraction is taking place by foreign and Nigerian companies. Advocates insist that laws protecting the rights of these communities need to be introduced in the legislature and that local population needs to be better engaged in the decision making concerning the exploitation of natural resources in their ancestral areas. It is through such local participation that meaningful democratic governance will be built.
- In Ghana, the National Peace Council, (NPC) is composed of well regarded and respected private citizens selected in consultation with political parties, ethnic leaders, youth and women’s groups. Mandated “to monitor conflicts and advise government and its partners on how to mediate, deepen dialogue between feuding parties and also provide a policy framework for dealing with conflict situations”⁴ in 2007, “NPC played an instrumental role in resolving a stalemate between teachers and government that had disrupted teaching and learning in the country’s high schools.”⁵ This reflects that how members of a body are

³ The 1992 Constitution of Ghana, Chapter 6, Article 35 (5).

⁴ Gyimah, A., Kane, M, and Oduro, F. (2008). *Coexistence in Ghana*. Coexistence International Working Paper

⁵ Ibid.

chosen is significant. A transparent process that consults stakeholders can offer legitimacy and effectiveness.

- In Liberia, a local human-rights group fosters dialogue between religious leaders, students, ex-combatants, teachers and government leaders. These discussions raise many important issues which are then forwarded to the government for policy formulation. A successful radio program broadcasted in 16 local dialects features prominent leaders and human right activists discussing reconciliation and human rights in Liberia.
- A Liberian advocacy group implements citizenship education programs, human rights literacy training, rehabilitation and trauma counseling programs for youth affected by conflict as well as monitoring and documentation of on-going human rights issues.
- A Nigerian-based regional network has successfully integrated programs that promote peace, development and democracy building by fostering new partnerships, coalition-building, community building, democracy work and human rights.
- In Sierra Leone, a prominent civil society organization works to integrate citizens' participation, peace, security and gender equality. The organization believes that persistent gender inequality further complicates human rights issues and considers the relationships between men and women as an important contributor to coexistence. The organization works in partnership with other grassroots groups to strengthen democratic participation. It has carried out education programs for the newly elected members of parliament on various forms of governance and on democratic representation of the populace in parliament. In addition, it works with stakeholders including the military, police, and civil society groups on issues related to conflict, small arms, cross border relations and peace and reconciliation.
- In Cameroon, an ecumenical service utilizes the prominent role of the church in the society to preach peace and serve as a mediator between the various ethnic and religious groups living in the Northwest of the country. Among its peace and coexistence focused efforts, there are civic education and training programs which target administrative officers, political leaders, religious leaders and religious institutions, youth and women's groups, NGOs and CBOs, trade unions, students, media and traditional leaders.
- In Côte d'Ivoire, a local human rights organization advocates for good governance through public denunciations of human rights abuses and by utilizing mediation and diplomacy approaches. The organization promotes dialogue among political parties as a vehicle through which good democratic governance can be developed.
- In Liberia, a local democracy-building organization in partnership with local and international groups primarily works with rural communities, students, traditional leaders, women's groups, religious leaders and common citizens to promote democratization, peaceful coexistence and social tolerance. It organizes a democracy forum in the form of town meetings and campus-based intellectual discourses, conducts research, workshops and symposia to provide space for discussions on constitutional issues and builds relationships between government officials, citizens and the security sector. Evaluation has shown its programs have a positive impact on democracy-building and governance since it cuts across many ethnic and religious lines and effectively unites Liberians. The greatest impact has been from the civic empowerment programs which allow citizens to interact with policymakers and hold them accountable. The civic empowerment programs have promoted greater decentralization of services and people-centered policies.

- In Nigeria, a Catholic organization works to promote coexistence in over 100 parishes in Lagos and the Niger Delta. The projects – which focus on social justice, democracy and good governance – include legal assistance for people awaiting trial, public interest litigation, election monitoring and civic education on the election process. The group also advocates for improved governance on behalf of its constituents, particularly those who are most negatively affected by the severe economic and social distortions of Nigeria’s oil-based economy.
- In Sierra Leone, a local coalition focusing on government accountability and justice issues has been engaged in human rights monitoring, reforms in juvenile justice system, peacebuilding, rule of law initiatives and work with local and special courts. It provides technical advice and conducts workshop for local NGOs. One of the positive impacts has been from the collaboration among inter- religious councils, teachers unions and other civil society groups.
- In Liberia, a local Muslim women’s group carries out advocacy work involving youth, children and Muslim women. It works to empower women to be active partners in democratic processes and coexistence efforts through participation in community deliberations, workshops and seminars. The key issues addressed by the programs are divisions over land ownership, unemployment, social hardship, illiteracy and skills training for youth.

The Challenges to Coexistence and Democracy in West Africa

This section combines research findings from print and electronic sources with the perspectives and opinions shared by practitioners during our interviews. The themes that we highlight as the most pressing issues facing governance and coexistence in the region were selected after an analysis of the initial data from thirteen interviews. Further discussions will help expand these themes and add more contextual information as well as offer concrete recommendations.

Pervasiveness of identity-based politics

The partition of Africa by Western colonial powers and the imposition of political structures which undermined traditional forms of leadership and participation left behind many unresolved challenges when it comes to sharing power in contemporary African states. The most enduring legacy of the colonial “divide and rule” policies was the deepening of ethnic and clan divisions within the artificially crafted boundaries resulting in today’s identity-based politics which are at the heart of most electoral and political crises in Africa.

Many Western and African scholars agree that while the divisions and conflicts in each country have their unique features, there is an important underlying factor present in most of these conflicts which is the issue of citizenship and rights.⁶ Having inherited the design of their political systems and constitutions from their former colonial powers, the tendency has been to institutionalize entitlements, rights, and privileges along ethnic lines with a resulting negative

⁶ Said Adejumobi. “Citizenship, Rights and the Problem of Conflicts and Civil Wars in Africa.” *Human Rights Quarterly*, V. 23, Number 1, February 2001, p. 148.

impact on the institution of citizenship. Howard Wolpe writes that “The fundamental challenge of democratization and peacebuilding lies not in the absence of democratic values, but rather, in the fact that members of many culturally plural states simply do not see themselves as part of the same national community.”⁷ Most West African governments have been unable neither to create a unifying national identity through citizenship nor to effectively guarantee equal rights and access to political and economic power to its citizens.

Recent civil wars in West Africa can be traced back to grievances over real or perceived exclusion and political marginalization along ethnic or other identity lines.⁸ According to Darren Kew, “imposition of the state created a remarkably similar set of dilemmas that Africans have faced across the continent: an ethnic security dilemma, in which ethnic groups are caught in a reciprocal struggle for power to secure the interests of their group, and a subsequent economic dilemma, in which growing numbers of people must vie for portions of shrinking economic output.”⁹ Acquiring control of political power therefore becomes a matter of life and death for leaders representing their ethnic base.

Within the realm of competition for power, many political parties in countries of West Africa generally fall into the trap of ethnically based identity politics and are regarded by the populace as having just one mission – “to win elections.” This ultimately undermines any efforts at national unity and coexistence and reinforces the existing cleavages and divisions. As one Liberian peace practitioner said in an interview, “Instead of taking advantage of Liberia’s diversity, the leaders and the political parties are exploiting the differences among people for political gain. The divisions between people of different ethnic, religious and social groups enter the political arena. This politicization of identities weakens the national fabric and instead of building one unified nation, it fragments it. Anger and frustration increase when social and ethnic identity groups are excluded and they feel their last resort is a civil war.”

Transactional Leadership vs. Transformational Leadership

Transactional leadership refers to the practice of leaders in which in return for power they promise to focus on the needs of a particularly favored group, rather than the needs of all groups. Conversely, transformational leaders are genuinely able to transcend identity lines and cleavages to serve all the constituencies in a given state. The analysis of the contemporary challenges with democratic governance and coexistence in West Africa points to the recurring failure of leaders to govern in an inclusive and participatory manner and to be accountable to the people. The leadership factor is closely linked to identity-based politics in that the process of acquiring and holding on to power in many West African states shifts the political modalities from being policy-centered to being increasingly person-centered. Whether the leaders come to power through a coup or by means of an election, they often treat their opposition with contempt, disregard the rights of the minorities and other political constituencies, and continue to pay allegiance to their own identity group that has brought them into power.

⁷ Howard Wolpe and Steve McDonald. “Democracy and Peace-building: Rethinking the Conventional Wisdom.” *The Round Table*, Vol. 97, No. 394, February 2008, p.139.

⁸ Kwame Ninsin. “Re-Engineering Politics in Post-Conflict Societies.” In *Reconciling Winners and Losers in Post-Conflict Elections in West Africa, Political and Policy Imperatives*. The Nordic Africa Institute, 2007, p.16.

⁹ Darren Kew. “Building Democracy in 21st Century Africa: Two Africas, One Solution.” *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy And International Relations*, Volume VI, No. 1, Winter/Spring 2005, p.150.

Consequently, the concerns with “how to govern” (design of institutions and laws and implementation of policies and processes) are almost always superseded by the emphasis on “who governs” (ruling elites, co-ethnics, military). Andrew Ellis notes that “Electoral choice may be influenced, or largely determined, by the politics of identity. In post-conflict transition, it is well recognized that such identification can entrench the warring factions into the political process, leaving little or no space for new and cross-cutting political forces to develop.”¹⁰ The struggle for power by the political elites in West Africa who often renege on their reformist platforms and transform into a semblance of tribal chiefs once they gain their posts is essentially prohibiting a shift to more inclusive democracy to take shape.

One practitioner stated that “Democracy in Cameroon is not real democracy but something close to a dictatorial rule. While the leadership seems content with the current constitutional arrangements, the populace is unhappy. This makes the people start to look at each other through an ethnic lens.” Several Nigerian practitioners argued that a concerted effort is needed to not only demilitarize the civilians but also demilitarize the mindsets and foster a paradigm shift among political leaders and officials so that their approach to democracy is guided by mutual respect and as an equal partnership with the people. Another urgent area for democracy and governance work is increased advocacy and pressure to improve accountability from leaders. Leaders’ accountability to the entire nation as opposed to just their tribe or co-ethnics is seen as a fundamental step towards building stable democracy. A human rights activist in Côte d’Ivoire stated that “If the people feel that the government does not value their lives and therefore refuse to participate in governance processes, the response from the leaders will be less or no accountability to its citizens. This undermines the democratic rule. Governance problems have ramifications for democracy and are a result of hunger for power for selfish interests.”

Poverty, Money and Access to Power

Poverty is endemic in the developing countries of West Africa, where per capita incomes are some of the lowest in the world and national economies have been ravaged by recent wars. Competition for political power essentially becomes competition for access to state controlled resources that are often in the form of extractable natural resources. Political offices in both national and local governments are regarded as lucrative posts or ventures raising the stakes of political competition even higher. Those who assume positions of power do not want to leave office because it is one of the few areas where economic opportunities are available while those outside the power circles attempt to use whatever means possible to access these economic opportunities.

Virtually everyone we interviewed agreed that poverty and money politics greatly undermine the democratic process in West African countries. Incumbent parties with access to state resources divert such resources for the purpose of winning the elections. Wealthy elites and officials operate within a “patron-client” network and exercise undue influence over political institutions, political parties and bureaucratic bodies by placing their supporters or “clients” into strategic positions, paying for electoral irregularities and influencing the electoral outcomes in ways that

¹⁰ Andrew Ellis, “Dilemmas in Representation and Political Identity. In Democracy, Conflict and Human Security: Further Readings. International IDEA, 2006, p 69.

essentially intimidates and excludes many voters from participating in elections.¹¹ Darren Kew writes that “Rigged elections, one-party states, abuses of power became the norm, forcing excluded groups to find other alternatives to protect their interests, such as military coups, secession, and revolution.”¹²

As one Nigerian practitioner stated, “Coexistence is also affected by poverty and the money politics. The rich take control of power and use their economic might to prevail and subordinate democracy. Money, food aid and politics form a dangerous concoction which aggravates the ethno-religious divisions.” Another Nigerian stated that democracy-building efforts need to take into account socio-economic development of the people. A recent survey of human rights issues in Nigeria show that about 80% of the people have little or unequal access to justice as a result of weak judicial administrative processes and inadequacy of human rights groups to defend them. Nigeria’s judicial process is slow and cumbersome, leaving parties frustrated and hostile towards each other and putting coexistence issues at stake. Those who have the monetary means can buy justice while the poor often suffer for crimes they have not committed.

The widespread corruption in countries such as Cameroon and Nigeria, consistently ranked at the top of global corruption indexes, is, many believe, at the heart of poor governance and lack of economic progress in many rural and urban areas across West Africa. Corruption enters political life at many levels and is prevalent in the electoral processes across West Africa. Poverty has led to many incidences of vote buying that effectively disenfranchises many people. When livelihoods are severely threatened, the most vulnerable in the population are often left to trade a choice of a leader for a day’s meal. According to several people we spoke to in Liberia and other countries covered in this study, issues of corruption, bribery, exploitation, nepotism, exclusion, lack of accountability are seen as the most pressing governance issues which if not addressed can further harm the nation’s stability and prospects of peace.

The persistent poverty and illiteracy of large portion of the population in many of these countries also means that people are often uninformed and unaware of their rights and responsibilities as a voting public. A staff person in a Liberian democracy-building organization argued, “The real challenge of nation building and democratization in Liberia is ignorance and poverty. These two factors are exploited by leaders to access political power.” A Sierra Leonean social justice activist argues that because more than 70% of Sierra Leoneans live under the poverty line, the Millennium Development Goals set by the United Nations will not be realized if governance doesn’t improve. He also argued that when frameworks for poverty reduction are imposed from above with no participation and involvement of the poor, this also undermines good governance.

Promotion of Democracy and Good Governance Seen as Externally Driven

The principles of free and fair elections, independence of the judiciary system, rule of law and good governance are widely accepted and desired by the majority of the population across the West African region. Numerous political leaders in these countries have explicitly stated their commitment to uphold these principles when elected to office. However, many leaders after assuming leadership positions have abandoned their earlier promises and undermined democratic

¹¹ Yomi Oruwari. “Winners, Losers and Party Politics in West Africa.” In *Reconciling Winners and Losers in Post-Conflict Elections in West Africa: Political and Policy Imperatives*. Nordic Africa Institute, 2007, p.18.

¹² Kew, p. 151.

processes. Moreover, some leaders openly pronounce many democratic principles as foreign and imposed from outside. One civil society leader from Sierra Leone argued that “democratic rule in Africa is challenged by numerous factors ranging from poverty, illiteracy and the fact that democracy is seen as foreign and alien to Africa.”

Western governments and donors have long been seen to be using their economic might to force a “universal democracy” in Africa without due attention to the unique socio-political features of each country. The negative experience of most African countries with the World Bank and IMF “structural adjustment programs” implemented in the 1970s and 80s produced strong critics who blame the weakened economies and poor governance record on the Western “one size fits all” approaches. Similar sentiments are repeatedly heard in response to the post-conflict transition processes promoted, funded and in part implemented by Western donors and the United Nations in the wake of civil wars in Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone. These transition processes are seen as “managed by the West” and include the crafting of transitional constitutions that reiterate the notion of democracy as it is understood in the West. According to William Gumedé, “Unless African ruling elites overcome their obsession that regular elections – where the winner takes all – is the main measure of democracy, the orgy of violence such as that over disputed elections in Kenya will be repeated elsewhere on the continent. Western donors, with their requirements that elections are enough to warrant aid, have helped along this limited view of democracy.”¹³

Several interview respondents expressed a strong concern with the way Western governments through their policies and engagement in the region have helped contribute to the failure of democratic governance and fortification of ethnic cleavages. They cited the example of Western oil companies going along with the authoritarian and military rule in Nigeria for the purpose of gaining access to oil reserves. Other examples cited included Western support of undemocratic leaders who are known to violate human rights. There was a strong call to foreign governments to stop all financial support to autocratic African leaders. The link between Western consumer-driven demand for diamonds and the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone was yet another example.

The Role of Outsiders in Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Peacebuilding

The international community continues to struggle with the challenge of responding to the needs of post-conflict and divided societies and channeling the available technical and financial resources in the most effective manner. Countless international organizations are dedicating their resources to areas such as re-integration of ex-combatants, capacity building for civil society dialogue, reconciliation and transitional justice initiatives. As in many development contexts, donor priorities rapidly shift to reflect a new trend making the resources available for peacebuilding programs at times scarce and the impacts from such programs short-lived. Many post-conflict reconstruction processes emphasize “quick fixes” by pushing for rapid reforms and reconciliation but often fail to impact the underlying structural causes of the divisions. Subsequently, when outside resources diminish before lasting results are achieved, there is a higher likelihood of renewed tensions or conflict.

¹³ William Gumedé. “Africa's version of democracy is in deadly crisis.” The Independent, Wednesday, 26 March 2008. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/william-gumedé-africas-version-of-democracy-is-in-deadly-crisis-800538.html>

The important role of Western governments and donors in helping to expand democratic space in West Africa through increased accountability was stressed by many people interviewed. A recommendation voiced by people in Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria is for Western governments and donors to emphasize government accountability as a condition for post-conflict reconstruction funds. Other areas of support that were highlighted as critical were programs that build the economic potential and opportunities for unemployed youth. This is due to recurring violence by youth in Sierra Leone and other countries where youth unemployment is seen as an important destabilizing factor for democracy and governance. Though long a concern, politicized youth violence is now often used in the interest of protecting the image of democracy. Those in power often turn to exploiting poor and marginalized youth by employing them to undertake overt political violence that state security forces may have pursued in the past.

Another important area where outside actors have focused their expertise and resources is the work with political leaders. Howard Wolpe, from the Wilson Center's Project on Leadership and Building State Capacity, states that "The principal challenge in building peace and democracy, not only in Iraq but in all divided societies, lies not in abstract, sector-specific institutional 'fixes', but, rather, in bringing key leaders together in a long-term process designed to resolve the tensions and mistrust that are the inevitable by-product of conflict and war, and to build (or rebuild) their capacity to work effectively together across all of the country's lines of ethnic and political division. Failing that, institutional transformation will have little substance and no sustainability."¹⁴ It has been argued that most countries in Africa are theoretically democratic on paper and have good constitutions, laws and governance structures and procedures, but their leaders most often choose to exercise their power with impunity and disregard to these agreed on principles. Therefore the work with leaders is seen as critical because for years it has been the missing link in the efforts to achieve lasting peace and democracy as most interventions focused solely at the civil society and community levels.

Conclusion

There have been many positive developments in the six West African countries selected for this project. The civil wars in Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone have come to an end, the former military dictatorships of Ghana have been replaced with democratic principles, and the societal healing has begun although numerous issues still remain to be tackled. While it is too soon to assess impacts, the current direction adopted by these post-conflict states indicates that identity politics and exclusionary political practices are being gradually addressed. In Nigeria where the military rule came to an end and general elections have been held, many political figures are former army generals. Full civilian rule will take time to emerge. Many Nigerians recognize however that political space has widened although corruption and ethnic divisions remain as obstacles to consolidating the Nigerian democracy.

¹⁴ Howard Wolpe and Steve McDonald. Democracy and Peace-building: Rethinking the Conventional Wisdom. *The Round Table*, Vol. 97, No. 394, February 2008, p. 138.

Several Liberian human rights activists argued that because leadership is a key factor in fostering democracy, the Liberian politics have been transformed by the election of credible leaders who practice the politics of inclusion, respect of law and have helped expand the democratic space in the country. The trial of Charles Taylor in The Hague Court is seen by many as an important step towards demanding accountability by former and current leaders. A Sierra Leonean civil society leader said that “the future of democracy is improving in Sierra Leone.” The multi-party elections after decades of single party rule is an important sign of change and many Sierra Leoneans are starting to recognize that governance is not a way to advance the position of your ethnic group, but a way for a state to effectively deliver services to all segments of its population. There is hope that the period of political appointments along ethnic lines is coming to an end.

In all six countries, organizations committed to civic education, democracy-building and peacebuilding have increased in numbers as well as their size and reach. This has been attributed to an enabling environment created by governments and as a direct result of the increased need to address the issues of governance and coexistence among the formerly marginalized segments of the population. One recommendation that was voiced by a human right activist in Côte d’Ivoire is that democratic principles need to be clearly explained and disseminated through civic education alongside with the manifestos of each political party so that the common people who have lost hope in the promise of democratic rule can begin to participate in democratic processes. The importance of participatory and inclusive political processes has entered the political discourse in many countries partly due to the advocacy on behalf of local and international actors and due to an increased awakening of the citizens. In Sierra Leone, one practitioner argued that West African democracies can be enhanced if coexistence issues are put into historical perspective. Post-conflict transition periods provide a good opportunity for reflection and dialogue among the various groups as to the impact of identity-driven politics and wars.

Areas for Further Inquiry and Analysis:

There are no prescriptions or key solutions for the challenges of democracy, governance and coexistence in West Africa. However, the region shares a lot of similarities and there are important lessons learned and accumulated by the local, regional and international organizations who work on these issues. The following are some of our questions that we highlighted for further inquiry and learning. We hope to be able to engage many more people in conversations on these topics and to compile a more comprehensive report on the findings.

- Which government agencies are charged with addressing questions of coexistence?
- What has been the role of traditional leaders in promoting reconciliation and coexistence?
- What does democratic governance and coexistence mean to the leaders in these countries? What do these concepts and terms mean at the grassroots level?
- What indigenous models of democratic governance which account for unique national histories and socio-economic factors in each country are available at this time?
- What successful approaches have been used to diminish the detrimental effect of identity politics and ethnic-based competition on democratic processes?

- What roles can local civil society organizations play in this work?
- What roles are appropriate for outside organizations?
- How can the coexistence lens be applied to the strategies and programs that address identity politics?
- How can civic education efforts be strengthened in order to effectively build informed and active citizenry?
- How are coexistence and social inclusion principles integrated into the civic education agenda?

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Appendix A

List of Interviewees

1. Michel Femi Sodipo Olufemi, Director of KANO Peace Initiative Network, Nigeria
2. David Peterson, NID, USA
3. Prof. Nii Akuethe, Democracy and Conflict Research Institute (DCRI), Ghana
4. Macauley Marcella, Head of Programs, Campaign for Good Governance (CGG), Sierra Leone
5. Dan Saryee, Director Liberia Democratic Institute (LDI), Liberia
6. Suleiman Jabati, Coalition for Justice and Accountability, Sierra Leone
7. Marriata Williams, United Muslim Women Advocacy Empowerment Organization
8. Olda Bonah, Committee for Peace and Development (COPDA), Liberia
9. Lorma Baysah, Rural Human Rights Activist Programme (RHRAP), Liberia
10. Mr. Obibi, Director, Alliance for Africa, Nigeria
11. Lucien Matthew, Lidho, Cote`d Ivoire
12. Fr Onkubwa and Fr.Ngoye, Justice for Development and Peace Commission, Nigeria
13. Fr. Emmanuel, Ecumenical Services for Peace, Cameroon.