Regional civil society peacebuilding in West Africa

A conversation with Emmanuel Bombande

Emmanuel Bombande is co-founder and Director of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP)

How and why was WANEP established?

In the 1990s ECOWAS (Economic Community of West Africa States) intervention in Liberia through ECOMOG (ECOWAS Monitoring Group) was purely military and lacked a clearly defined strategy even for rebuilding the state. There was a need for peacebuilding and conflict prevention efforts, but no organisation for coordinating these existed.

When I was growing up in Ghana I would often see my grandfather convene early morning meetings where he sat with a group of elders in a circle. I later understood that they were solving crises—today you would call it conflict prevention. We advocate professionalising this sort of response capacity. It is indigenous and integral to our way of living. Building the national institutions of the modern state must take into account these indigenous capacities that promote dialogue and consensus.

We formed WANEP in 1998. When Freetown almost fell into rebel hands in January 1999, we worked with several Sierra Leonean civil society organisations to develop capacities to respond. A priority at that time was to build social cohesion. We organised a series of roundtable consultations with different grassroots groups, including victims, ex-combatants and traditional leaders. Meetings discussed what Sierra Leone should become in the next 5–10 years. Consultations were voluntary and informal. These are the sorts of situation where people begin to reconnect and look to their shared future, and that for me is at the heart of peacebuilding work.

Our strategies were tailored to countries’ specific peacebuilding needs. In some countries focusing on peace education was more urgent than focusing on women and peacebuilding; in others vice versa. The network has grown organically across the region. In Liberia, early consultations were not with targeted community groups. They were civil society-led and sought to engage with the government and influence policy through advocacy on specific issues such as statebuilding.

In Sierra Leone we quickly realised that we were men trying to facilitate consultation with victims, the majority of whom...
were women. It was clear that without women facilitators, there were some things we could not do. There was a need to build women’s capacity to lead, facilitate and be involved in peacebuilding. So the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) was developed in 2002. WIPNET in Liberia did much to mobilise women for mass action for peace – Leymah Gbowee, a 2011 Nobel Peace laureate, was the coordinator. It was women who got Charles Taylor to accept ECOWAS mediation.

What are the main threats to peace and security in Liberia and Sierra Leone?

First, political exclusion brings suspicion about the integrity of electoral processes, and an environment in which it is difficult to engage in genuine dialogue on policy. Because elections are highly contested and can breed civil unrest, in post-conflict environments like Liberia and Sierra Leone they cannot be organised in the same way as in other countries.

Second, the majority of both populations are very young. Youths do not have the training or skills to be able to get the type of jobs that they need. These countries are recovering from wars in which their economies almost totally collapsed and they do not have the capacities to generate sufficient jobs for youths.

Third, the borders of West Africa are artificial and porous, dividing communities along boundaries that were drawn by colonial powers, but also allowing instability to spread. Problems in one country affect others in the region. For example, demobilised Liberian ex-combatants went to fight in Côte d’Ivoire, so disarmament was both reversed and displaced. This is why a regional approach is very important.

Other problems include the refusal of people driven abroad by war to come back and contribute intellectually to the rebuilding of their own societies, and the intolerance that violence has bred in our societies as a consequence of these wars.

Why did you focus on social cohesion in Sierra Leone?

Formal approaches to reconciliation did not resonate with people. Take the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which effectively became a bureaucratic institution of the state. Its contribution was appreciated as a post-conflict attempt to build peace. Witnesses appeared and testified as if in a court, and the things they said were recorded.

The TRC operated at the national level. Nobody was talking about outlying counties. In communities like Voinjama or Gbarnga the social humiliation of a family home where women were violated and abducted stretched beyond even the extended family to include the whole clan. High levels of gender-based violence also occurred beyond the TRC timeframe. The TRC did not connect on the ground on emerging challenges; it was too structured and missed what people really wanted from reconciliation.

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Can you tell us about processes for forgiveness and healing?

In Sierra Leone, the first priority for reconciliation has been to deal with the anger, resentment and suspicion people have in their hearts. In some instances, we used exercises to ask people what reconciliation should look like from their perspective. The more we did this, the more people were able to ask themselves very deep questions about why they did what they did to one another. I remember a young woman commander with the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Reconciliation for her meant helping her to see the face of her mother, and to tell her mother how sorry she was for what she did.

People also started to understand that while you could point a finger at those active in the conflict, many others were also implicated less directly by passively allowing the destruction of society. These types of conversation are powerful because they are informal and let people pour out their hearts.

How does WANEP operate, nationally and regionally?

Our member organisations are represented on national secretariats, which consult, identify priorities and discuss strategies and plans. Based on national needs, a regional secretariat advises members on how they can implement their plans. Sometimes we bring in international support: for example, we have just entered into a partnership with the Crisis Management Initiative on a 3-year programme on gender-based violence in Liberia.

We have worked hard to link what is happening at that sub-national level – for example difficult issues like ethnicity, religion or politics – to the national level and make them national priorities.
We coordinate civil society input into the ECOWAS Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) database across the region and have negotiated common early warning indicators. These facilitate monitoring at the regional level, and through our monitoring and tracking we have identified crucial issues that should be on the ECOWAS agenda. A forthcoming extraordinary ECOWAS summit has come about as a result of our regional monitoring of small arms trafficking. We are also beginning to work more with the private sector.

**What are some of WANEP’s key achievements with ECOWAS?**

West Africa cannot move forward without a very active civil society. ECOWAS has shifted from an exclusively top-down approach to one in which bottom-up and top-down have become integrated. In this respect it is far ahead of other regional bodies in Africa. This has made it possible for us to engage at the level that we have, in a structured and negotiated way.

We have had a Memorandum of Understanding with ECOWAS since 2003 which provides a framework for mutual partnership in which we need one another. Initially we worked most closely with the Political Affairs and Early Warning Directorates, but in the past three or four years this has broadened to include other departments. Engagement has gradually expanded and we now attend official meetings of ECOWAS with its bilateral partners. This partnership is beginning to improve how civil society is supported in West Africa.

Sometimes ECOWAS officials for reasons of mandate or political sensitivities have preferred that WANEP convey important issues for consideration by the ECOWAS leadership. We can engage in advocacy on issues way before the official ECOWAS line is made public. In our policy briefs we often address gaps that ECOWAS may not find urgent or important.

However, our relationship with ECOWAS does not compromise our role as a civil society organisation as we not only engage on, but also regularly challenge its policies. In the Côte d’Ivoire crisis in 2010, ECOWAS was decisive and would not compromise on political principles in its protocol on democracy and good governance. We praised this stand and commended the ECOWAS leadership for its commitment to the ECOWAS protocols, which constitute a baseline for conflict prevention.

But we objected when ECOWAS advocated military force against President Gbagbo. ECOWAS’ actual engagement in Côte d’Ivoire had in fact emphasised preventive diplomacy. This change of direction helped President Gbagbo to mobilise people on the grounds that they were being attacked by ECOWAS, and suggested that ECOWAS was divided between those who supported a military option and those who did not.

**How can ECOWAS develop its conflict prevention and response capability?**

ECOWAS should explore the idea of a West African regional electoral body because in some countries there is simply no trust in national election management structures. Extending these responsibilities to the regional level would help to neutralise suspicions regarding how elections are organised.

West African governments need to be more accountable to the people. We need to end the patronage system where those in power can sustain that power by using the resources of the state to protect themselves.

We also need to address issues of social and economic equality, the distribution of wealth and youth employment. Some ECOWAS Member States are not economically viable; they cannot pay the salaries of their civil servants. More integration can help: a vision of supra-nationality can promote building greater regional economic leverage and the ability to negotiate better internationally. A student in Dakar should not be looking for gainful employment in Dakar alone, but in Nigeria or Burkina Faso too.

The international community can help by providing technical expertise that might not be available within countries in West Africa, and by placing greater emphasis on addressing the structural causes of conflict, especially through international policies to prevent countries being exploited by commercial interests, for example on natural resource extraction or tax havens.

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Interview by Elizabeth Drew