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7 Feasible Ways to Expand Civic Space in West Africa in 2020

By Christian Elongué and Charles Kojo Vandyck



AUTHORS



Elongué is an Afropolitan and bilingual professional who serves as Knowledge Management Programme Officer at WACSI. He has over 7 years' experience as a debate trainer, instructional designer and communications professional with leadership experience in both the public, private and civil society sectors. He is a 2013 Certified World Debate Institute' Trainer (USA), an Ashoka Changemaker Fellow and 2018 Alumni of Aileen Getty School of Citizen Journalism from the European Union Peace-building Initiative. He is a member of the Alliance for Nonprofit Management (USA) with research interests in cyber-security, women leadership, African philanthropy, civil society sustainability and social movement.



Charles currently serves as the Head of the Capacity Development Unit at the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI). Charles has over 10 years of experience working in international development and social justice issues in Africa.

Charles was the founding Board Chair of Innovation for Change (i4C)-Hub Afrique, as well as the founding member of the International Consortium on Closing Civic Space (iCon), an initiative of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington DC. Charles currently serves as the Member of the Governing Board (Coordination Collective) of Africans Rising. He is a Member of the Development Studies Association, United Kingdom. Charles is a 2017 Stanford University Fellow for Nonprofit Leaders and a certified Change the Game Resource Mobilisation Trainer.

Editorial Team

Jimm Chick Fomunjong - Head, Knowledge Management Unit, WACSI

About WACSI

The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) was created by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) to reinforce the institutional and operational capacities of civil society in the region. WACSI also serves as a resource centre for training, research and documentation, experience sharing and political dialogue for CSOs in West Africa.

About WACSERIES

WACSeries are analytical periodic write-ups on topical themes and issues relevant to West Africa. These write-ups provide experts, researchers and practitioners a space to reflect, analyse and posit views and recommendations on emerging issues and debates.

The WACSeries Op-Eds are thought provoking and intellectually engaging write-ups that provide critical reflections and analysis of issues relevant to civil society and development in West Africa.

Objectives of WACSERIES

- To raise awareness on key issues in West Africa;
- To generate debates and discussions on these issues;
- To proffer recommendations on civil society involvement in advocacy;
- To provide recommendations to policy makers.

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For more information, write to:

**West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) No. 9 Bamboo Street (Formerly Bingo Street), East Legon P.O. Box AT 1956, Achimota Accra, Ghana
Email: research@wacsi.org Tel: +233 (0) 302 550 224**

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To contribute to this publication,
contact : research@wacsi.org
+233(0)501440545



Introduction

The effective implementation of WACSI's interventions is dependent on civil society's contributions and feedback on the Institute's work in promoting an open, safe and prosperous West Africa. WACSI's interventions are guided and inspired by the critical voices from key stakeholders and engagement by different communities and groups across West Africa. At WACSI, we are conscious that civic space affects everything civil society does and everything civil society does affects civic space.

A safe, open, free and enabling space for all to form and voice opinions, debate, be heard and peacefully protest, is also an essential prerequisite for achieving the ECOWAS Vision 2020. Civic freedoms including the freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, safe environments and effective participation are therefore essential. This Op-Ed critically assesses the civic space environment in 2019, predictions for 2020 and issues that need more introspection and collective action.

A. 2019 in Retrospect

In 2019, the crackdown against civil society in West Africa was in different forms and machinations including protest bans, online and offline abuse, smear campaigns and severe harassments that led to the demise of civic space actors. Governments continued to use anti-terrorism discourse to target legitimate civil society groups. As [reported in 2019](#) CIVICUS' People Power Under Attack:

"Most countries in West Africa are rated as obstructed, and several countries in this region have seen a slow but steady decline in respect for fundamental freedoms, highlighted by [Nigeria's civic space](#) rating being downgraded to repressed, violations of fundamental freedoms in the context of elections in Benin, the killing of an investigative journalist in [Ghana](#) and a crackdown on [protests in Guinea](#) against the perceived attempts of President Alpha Condé to replace the 2010 constitution in order to run for a third term were banned and repressed."

Civil society organisations (CSOs) in different domains, including health, education, housing and humanitarian assistance continued to face restrictions on funding and complex registration rules, often under the [pretext of national security](#) considerations. For example, in September 2019, the Nigerian army has shut down regional offices of two prominent NGOs operating in the country's northeast amid a brutal insurgency led by Boko Haram: [Action Against Hunger](#) and [Mercy Corps](#) which had been accused of supporting terrorists.

Independent journalists, humanitarian workers, youth activists, minorities and indigenous groups, environmental defenders, activists for women's equality, activists working on migration and forced displacement are frequently subjected to attacks, criminalisation or killings.

As a result of the visible challenges that civil society face with respect to their legitimacy and accountability, governments did not experience sustained public pushback when such restrictions on civic space occurred.

Dependence on external donor funds also continued to contribute to the perception that some CSOs are operated by out-of-touch elites who are more accountable to donor requirements than to their constituents. This situation has made it easy for community citizens to feel alienated from traditional civil society organisations.

In 2019, various multilateral initiatives were designed to strengthen the enabling environment for civil society actors. Globally, major funders [established](#) or expanded emergency funds for persecuted rights activists and organisations. This support helped civil society advocates to [successfully push](#) for reforms to overhaul harmful counterterrorism regulations. They also began engaging private sector actors on the importance of protecting civic space. In the West African region, WACSI has:

- Published over 50 reliable [updates on civic space](#) in 8 countries;
- Developed 8 monthly analytical and [evidence-based reports](#) covering civil society engagement in 15 ECOWAS countries + Mauritania, Cameroon, Chad;
- Organised [a convening](#) on the state of collaboration between activists, social movements and traditional social justice organisations to expand civic space;
- Documented [case studies of rights-based organisations](#) utilising innovative resource mobilisation approaches;
- Organised free webinars only to CSOs registered on the West Africa civil society e-directory, to help them develop and implement an impact-oriented communication strategy;
- Developed the Alternative Funding Model Guidebook to advance the Financial Sustainability of CSOs in Africa;
- Organised two West Africa Civil Society Policy Dialogue Series for stakeholders in Ghana to interrogate the state of domestic resource mobilisation in the country, explore the roadblocks to successful domestic resource mobilisation and offer context-relevant ways of sufficiently mobilising resources to support the work of civic space actors; and
- Published learning resources on [citizen led accountability](#), social movements and [social change](#) in Africa and legal practices and [regulatory frameworks](#) in Africa.



B. Anticipated Restrictions in 2020

Based on the work that was done in 2019, we are looking into the “crystal ball” to document our perspectives on possible civic space trends and its impact on the resilience and sustainability of the sector and proposed civil society responses.

1. Increasing attacks and restrictions on civic space by state and non-state actors

In 2020, there is likely to be an increased rate of closure of the civic space driven by state and non-state actors, especially in countries such as Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Guinea, Ivory Coast and Niger that will have presidential and parliamentary elections in 2020. These will manifest in various forms including brazen attacks on journalists, bloggers, human rights defenders the capture of state institutions by economic elites. It will [undermine the ability](#) of CSOs

to generate much-needed social capital, undertake political advocacy and mobilise citizens' participation in democratic governance. Also, [government-organised NGOs](#) (GONGOs) will continue its attempt to delegitimise genuine civil society voices, and consume time, space, and other limited resources.

2. **The impact of international anti-money laundering and terrorist financing regulations on civil society operations**

In 2019, some governments [invoked](#) national security, counterterrorism, and anti-money laundering in order to justify restricting international funding. Some of the legal and regulatory measures used to curtail international funding include the requisition for prior government approval for the receipt of international funding; requiring international funding to be routed through government-controlled entities; and using defamation, treason, and other laws to bring criminal charges against CSOs recipients of international funding. In 2020, they will continue to use the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) recommendations to justify funding restrictions and overly burdensome administrative requirements for civil society groups.

In order to enable the citizens take appropriate measures against Money Laundering and financing Terrorism (ML/FT), it is crucial to continue to raise CSO awareness of ML/TF and its predicate offenses. For example, WACSI in collaboration with the International Center for Non-Profit Law (ICNL) [convened a workshop](#) in Cote d'Ivoire for CSOs from French speaking West African countries on the theme "Anti-Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing in West Africa: Strengthening civil society capacity to combat its negative impact on civic space".

3. **The control of cyber space and social media by state actors**

New technology that provides new platforms and networks for activism will allow for new, expanded ways of control and surveillance of civil society. There will be an increase in sophisticated [state-sponsored cyber-attacks](#). We are also predicting that the most pervasive and [sophisticated cyber-attacks](#) to target activist groups over the next 5 years, can be perpetrated by a different nation-state¹. Therefore, civil society actors should invest more in secure technologies, such as authentication, identity verification, transaction monitoring, or data-theft prevention technologies.

¹ Elongué Christian and Sule Anthony, 'Enhancing Digital Security Awareness for CSOs in Africa', WACSI, accessed 23 January 2020, https://www.wacsi.org/resources/oped_detail.php?id=12.

C. How Should Civil Society Respond to the shrinking Space Challenges?

1. **Civil society actors must be more resilient and prepared for risks**

Being weary of the full extent of civil society's unleashed potential, states have continued to use a variety of tools to undermine the sector's influence. In Liberia, a student protest led to the death of a youth activist. In Cameroon, from the 26th - 27th January 2019, more than 100 protesters from The opposition party Mouvement pour la renaissance du Cameroun (MRC), were [arrested during](#) 'marches blanches' ('white marches'). In Togo, three activists and members of the international pro-democracy movement Tournons la Page (TLP) were [denied entry](#) to Togo, where they were to attend a meeting on 15th October 2019 to celebrate two Togolese civil society groups - Front Citoyen Togo Debout (FCTD) and Synergie de l'Intelligentsia pour des Actions en faveur des Droits de l'Homme (SIADH) - joining the TLP movement. Therefore, activists and other actors of the civic space in West Africa must be prepared for risks such as arrests and harassment of outspoken individuals, freezing of financial assets of activists to restrict their activities. Organisations and activists will need effective risk management training, holistic physical and digital security skills, budgets reserved for mitigation, prevention and emergencies, and strong support networks that provide access to legal, political and psychosocial support. Funders should consider the provision of different types of support to local CSOs to ensure that they can maintain a presence even in challenging environments. These include emergency reserves, pro bono legal and accountancy services, support for networking and alliance building.

2. **Increase collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and activists**

Working in diverse alliances to protect and strengthen civic space enables civil society actors to protect more effectively the most targeted or vulnerable CSOs and activists. However, alliances should be as broad and inclusive as possible including formal and informal associations and organisations. These alliances will also need to be inclusive to provide space for diverse actors. This is the case of the [West Africa Civil Society E-directory](#) which is open to any legal CSO across the region. It has provided visibility and engaged about 1020 CSOs across West Africa with like-minded individuals and development partners to effectively connect and share a greater impact.

From [the convening](#) that WACSI organised to strengthen stakeholders collaboration to expand the civic space in West Africa, it appears that, to effectively build these alliances, social justice organisations, social movements and activists will need to adhere to the principles of movement-building, including investing in strong capacities and mechanisms for managing internal differences including leadership conflicts. Solidarity among partners must go beyond programmes implementation. Meaningful partnership will require concerted action whenever the rights of one partner are violated.

3. Local CSOs should build wider constituencies for their work to resist attacks on the legitimacy of civil society

A strong domestic supporters' from CSOs networks help to protect against political crackdowns or accusations of being externally driven. It can also reduce risks from declining donor funds and amplifies voices in advocacy and influencing. International non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can play an important role in encouraging and accompanying domestic CSOs in constituency building. This network and constituency building should be beyond capital cities and urban settlements.

4. Social movements will continue to revive civic activism and youth political engagement

In 2020, civil society actors should continue exploring new strategies and tactics that are effective within [shrinking and shifting spaces](#) to contribute to transformative change. Particularly, informal youth or social movements have shown high flexibility and creativity² in exploring new ways and spaces to organise and express themselves. The capacity of Local activists should be enhanced to enable them mobilise more transnational public support through social media. Therefore, connecting to and learning from these actors can help more institutionalised civil society actors, to refresh their ways of working so that they can still achieve their visionary goals within the context of changing spaces.

5. Increased solidarity across funders and development actors

Defending civil society isn't the domain of any one actor or sector. A common [African proverb](#) says that: "if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, let's go together". Civil society actors have understood that effective collaboration across funders can bolster efforts. In 2020, more donors are encouraged to join and

² Elongué Christian and Vandyck Charles, 'Social Movements and Social Change in Africa', WACSI, 26 April 2019, https://www.wacsi.org/resources/oped_detail.php?id=5.

fund collaborative efforts that will contribute to expand closing civic space as a global priority. Donors can also make their assistance more transparent to help reduce suspicion and pushback even if it may also facilitate repression. Development & human rights organisations should overcome their differences and work collectively for social change.

6. Greater engagement between civil society and the private sector

The need for businesses to undertake long-term sustained investments into social causes has never been this critical. However, implementing civil society - private sector partnerships in an effective and mutually beneficial manner has been challenging.

For this year, we envision an improvement in the engagement between the private sector and civil society organisations from West Africa. The dissemination and application of best practices would boost the education of stakeholders and support a broader change in attitudes and create a more conducive environment for effective private sector and civil society partnerships³.

7. Shifting the power

There is a growing number of individuals, CSOs, academia, philanthropic organisations, funders and Think Tanks that have a deep interest in community-led development and philanthropy in the region. These actors are yearning for alternative models of development and funding that can help create a more equitable and just society. This year, there is likely to be a greater shift of the power imbalance engrained in the international development system. As Nana Afadzinu⁴ rightly put it: "there is need for key stakeholders within the international development system within the global south and north to address the power imbalances within the system". WACSI is working with its partners to promote an agenda that seeks to shift the power to communities within West Africa. This is an effort to achieve a wholly prosperous West Africa, steered by West Africans.

³ Kpadonou, C., & Vandyck, C., K. (2019), Civil Society Beyond Aid: Reimagining Partnerships with the Private Sector in West Africa. WACSeries Volume 5 Issue 4, West Africa Civil Society Institute, Accra, Ghana.

⁴ Nana Afadzinu, "going beyond Western models of value to shift the power", WACSI. URL: https://www.wacsi.org/blog/blog_detail.php?id=35



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“Civic space affects everything civil society does and everything civil society does affects civic space”

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- 1 Civil society actors must be more resilient and prepared for risks
- 2 Increase collaboration between TSJOs, social movements & activists
- 3 Local CSOs should build wider constituencies
- 4 Social movements should continue to revive civic activism and youth political engagement
- 5 Increased solidarity across funders and development actors
- 6 Greater engagement between civil society and the private sector
- 7 Shifting the power



Conclusion and Reflections

Promoting and protecting civic space is a precondition for good governance and inclusive growth, as well as for effective and efficient open government policies and citizen participation in decision making. However, promoting and protecting civic space is not the responsibility of only one segment of civil society. To reverse these trends of shrinking civic space in West Africa, we need more committed actions and cooperation between local and global civil society actors, citizens, governments, multinational institutions, research institutes and universities, businesses, the media and other relevant stakeholders. Fighting civic space challenges also requires international aid, domestic resources and policy actors to face questions on the nature of closing civic space, how to address it, where to target funding to promote a safe civic space, and how to mitigate any unintended consequences of aid. Below are some reflections that civil society actors need to continue interrogating to create new spaces and opportunities and strengthen existing ones in 2020.

Proactive versus reactive

- Is it more effective to focus on a relatively bounded agenda of promoting a positive enabling environment for civil society? or

- Should funders and their partners approach the issue at a much higher level, and more broadly fight regression on democracy, pluralism and human rights?

Global versus local

- How can funders effectively support local-level responses to shrinking civic space while considering its transnational and global dimensions?
- How is civic space changing at a local or sub-national level? And how are people, formal and informal organisations experiencing and reacting to it? How do national restrictions and regulations impact differently on organisations working at different levels?

Unintended consequences of aid

- Are donors not also contributing to shrinking civic space?
- Has any funder implemented a long-term accompaniment of one or more CSOs, to see how they respond to shrinking space over time?
- How is an INGO different from a private contractor if they only do the work when there is a donor paying for it?

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