



CONCEPT NOTE

Regional Conference on “Civil Society and Civic Culture: in the context of Financing Capacity Building for Social Change in West Africa

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Introduction

The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) supported by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) will organise a conference on “Civil Society and Civic Culture: in the context of Financing Capacity Building for Social Change in West Africa” on 22 April at Alisa Hotel in Accra, Ghana.

Background

Africa’s democracy needs strong democrats schooled in democratic norms, values and processes to survive and deliver development to Africa’s poor. In many parts of West Africa (and other regions), civil societies have been in the forefront of the democratic project in campaigns against military and autocratic rule, advocacy for transparency and accountability, access to justice and peaceful co-existence. As democracy reaches an important curve (after more than two decades) characterised by new challenges (insecurity, terrorism, drug and human trafficking, unemployment and the youth bulge, etc.) and new opportunities (discoveries of new resources) in many parts of the region, the demand for active citizen participation (broad and deep civic culture) is ever more urgent.

This demand requires retooling civil society organisations (CSOs) to sharpen their voice and analysis and improve the value of their input to important decision making processes.¹ It requires targeted interventions to court and involve important citizens’ groups and constituencies previously ignored and left out in the change project. But more importantly, the demand calls for deeper reflections on strategies for funding and delivery of capacity building resources to re-engineer CSOs, bolstering their accountability and bridging communications with governments and key state actors.

Established in 2007 to reinforce the capacities of civil society in West Africa, the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) has pioneered/redefined the capacity building agenda for CSOs as critical change agents in West Africa. Using a three-pronged approach of training, research and policy advocacy, WACSI has trained, in five years, more than 1,800 civil society actors (officers, managers and executives) and government agencies in West Africa in 92 training and policy fora, enhancing their skills in policy research, advocacy and engagement; NGO management; fundraising; networking and alliance-building; gender mainstreaming; resource mobilisation; financial management; personal productivity; effective lobbying and monitoring and evaluation. It has contributed significantly to knowledge generation and documentation through research and publications on major topics that engage civil society and other social constituencies in the region.²

There is a direct linkage between the realisation of the positive outlook for West Africa and civic activism. Many regional and international reports paint a robust future for West Africa based on the history of growth and the potentials represented by new discoveries of natural resources. This, in spite of the poor outcomes over the last five decades in many parts of the region. Active citizenry is necessary to change this course. CSOs have an important role to play in this.

¹ According to the 2007 Needs Assessment Report conducted by WACSI, Civil society organisations (CSOs) face many challenges that inhibit the success of such initiatives, including regulatory state restrictions; exclusion from policy processes; low levels of transparency and accountability; poor networking/duplicated efforts; unhealthy competition; varied donor approaches to capacity development and limited support for the concept

² See WACSI website for detailed publications: <http://wacsi.newscoop.pro/en/site/publications/>



To fulfil this role more effectively, CSOs require innovative, tailored training programmes to sharpen their organisational capacity and boost institutional accountability. In this context, the role of and funding for institutions set up to provide capacity assistance to CSOs becomes a critical component of the capacity assistance agenda for them.

WACSI Strategy

This realisation is at the root of WACSI's new five-year strategy. WACSI aims to expand and strengthen its training bouquet including the methodology and strategies in order to meet the demand on CSOs for social change. This will involve the development of customized capacity development initiatives to suit specific beneficiaries and emerging areas like social media, courses on civil society-government relations, private sector engagement, community participatory methodology and facilitation skills. The institute will also explore and develop an online platform for learning, sharing and information exchange.

Regional conference & Objective

WACSI is convening a one-day regional conference on “**Civil Society and Civic Culture: in the context of Financing Capacity Building for Social Change in West Africa**” in Accra, Ghana, on 22 April 2013. WACSI aims to draw attention to challenges confronting CSOs as change agents and platforms for deepening civic culture in West Africa and mobilise consensus for strategic capacity assistance for CSOs in the region.

Participants

The meeting targets 50 participants drawn mainly from development partner organisations, Foundations and other donor organisations, government, private sector, WACSI Board members, and media.

Outcomes

WACSI anticipates that the Donor Conference will result in:

1. Better awareness of the capacity needs of CSOs in West Africa;
2. A deeper understanding of the critical need to enhance civil society's capacity for social change;
3. An overview of different donor approaches toward capacity development for CSOs in West Africa and areas of confluence with WACSI; and
4. Donor commitment to fully mainstream support for long-term capacity development in their funding modalities.