



EU ROADMAP FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH CIVIL SOCIETY IN LIBERIA FOR THE PERIOD 2021-2024

GENERAL INFORMATION

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SUMMARY - BRIEF ANALYSIS OF THE CONTEXT AND PAST EU ENGAGEMENT

A. THE STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY: BRIEF UPDATE ON RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Liberia has a rich and diverse civil society history that can be traced back to the student movement in the 1970 — 1980s, and social justice engagement by the media, the church and private citizens. Cumulative efforts of collective engagement became more visible during the Liberian civil conflict and right afterwards, when Liberian civil society organisations (CSOs) played a very important role in fostering peace in the country. Women's organisations played an important role during the peace process and remain, while fragmented, one of the strongest CSO sectors in Liberia. CSOs also played a paramount role during the Ebola crisis, through community mobilisation to promote health and safety behaviours, and the provision of basic services.

The Ebola outbreak in Liberia coincided with sharp falls in the rubber) that further stagnated Liberia's already limited economic growth during and post Ebola, experienced an influx of funds, mostly due to the expansion of international support¹. Thereafter, civil society underwent a period of development, intending to shift away from the humanitarian context of operating primarily as a service provider in the absence of state institutions, to more development-oriented actors, focusing on governance and accountability mechanisms. However, crises continue to impact Liberia. According to CSOs, especially those outside of Monrovia, the COVID-19 pandemic had considerable disruption in their operations, which led to the loss of funding and unexpected cancellation of existing contracts or other partnership agreements. Whereas some Monrovia-based organisations and many international non-governmental (INGOs) were able to shift programming to online platforms, many Liberian organisations (especially those outside Monrovia) either did not have sufficient power supplies to be online or did not have the digital literacy to manage a remote work environment.

Today, the total number of formal and informal organisations remain somewhat unclear. In 2012, the National Civil Society Council of Liberia (NCSCCL) conducted a survey², communicating that civil society in Liberia consists roughly of over 1,500 formal organisations and countless informal organisations³. Many CSOs are small community-based organisations (CBOs), working on niche projects to deliver services at the community level, as well as a few larger organisations which are active at the national level in governance and accountability. In 2008, for formal coordination, the NCSCCL was established as a coordinating body for civil society. Today the NCSCCL is the largest umbrella organisation in Liberia, formalised by the Government of Liberia (GoL)-CSO Accord⁴.

¹ <https://ebolaresponse.un.org/liberia>

² <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/file/86370/download?token=N3BWRgMK>

³ <https://blog.philanthropy.iupui.edu/2020/07/01/the-essential-characteristics-of-liberian-civil-society/>

⁴ <https://docplayer.net/168732643-The-gol-cso-accord-a-memorandum-of-understanding-between-the-government-of-liberia-and-civil-society-organisations-of-liberia.html>



Civil society continues to face numerous internal challenges with regard to the legitimacy and representative nature of CSOs, due to weak internal institutional development, governance, strategic planning and accountability processes. Additionally, while civil society has legal and regulatory support and avenues for engagement to participate in policy making, it has few resources to support technical capacity in policy issue verification, research, and developing outcomes-based evidence.

In addition, the civil society sector at large suffers from fragmentation, which often leads to duplication of efforts and poses difficulties in establishing collaboration and coordination. This is partly due to competition for and dependency on international funding, and partly due to organisations' lack remains to be seen if a greater number of Liberian CSOs can shift to more strategic approaches of mobilising communities, building and engaging constituencies, developing and advocating for policy positions, and engaging as public policy partners with the government in more remote rural areas, as well as donor funding availability and funding priorities, will play a key role in this development.

Liberia's press remains vigilant and independent. At and violence against journalists⁵. Prior to, during and after the senatorial elections on 08 December 2020, several incidents and cases were documented by press freedom organisations⁶, in which journalists were subjected to assaults, harassment and threats⁷.

Enabling Environment

Perhaps the most significant update to this report is the perceived shrinking of the enabling environment for CSOs that is not so much reflected in the **relatively favourable CSO enabling environment**⁸, but in **civil vulnerability to administrative decisions that do not always unfold to them**.

Both legal and policy frameworks recognise the need and added value of CSO engagement, reiterated by the GoL⁹. In practice however, **spaces for dialogue and partnerships with governments and other development actors are shrinking**, facing two sets of challenges: First, civil society is spread across different Ministries, implying multiple and dispersed responsibilities that, combined with unclear CSO provisions, are causing confusion. In addition, some Ministries appear to request additional requirements and fees to those set by the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning (MFDP) for registration. Second, formalised opportunities for constructive engagements between CSOs and the Government¹⁰ are being interpreted differently by civil servants. CSOs report of several instances in which their participation in working groups was prohibited or limited to participation by invitation only¹¹.

In September 2020, the MFDP introduced a **new NGO policy, the National Aid and NGO Policy of Liberia (NAPL)**¹² by announcement in a newspaper, introducing new requirements for NGO registration and accreditation with the objective to make aid more effective, promote long term stability for the Liberian government and CSOs alike, and to ensure that aid aligns with government priorities.

⁵ [The day Liberia shut down freedom of expression amid a mass protest · Global Voices Advoc](https://www.globalvoices.org/2021/01/01/journalists-attacked-harassed-and-threatened-while-covering-liberian-senate-election/)

⁶ <https://cpi.org/2021/01/journalists-attacked-harassed-and-threatened-while-covering-liberian-senate-election/>

⁷ <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2021/04/12/alarming-number-of-journalists-assaulted-threatened-intimidated/>

⁸ <https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/sites/default/files/2020-11/2020-index-report.pdf>

⁹ GoL – CSO Accord

¹⁰ Specific roles are given to CSOs in oversight bodies such as the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission (LACC), the Independent National Commission on Human Rights (INCHR) and the Liberia Extractive Transparency Initiative (LEITI).

¹¹ Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development, section 6.5.6 Pillar and technical working groups

¹² <http://liberianconsulatega.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/PAPD-Pro-Poor-Agenda-for-Prosperity-and-Development.pdf>

¹² <https://www.mfdp.gov.lr/index.php/component/edocman/national-aid-and-ngo-policy-of-liberia?Itemid=0>



B. LESSONS LEARNED FROM PAST ENGAGEMENT WITH CSOs

In a context of fragility and in the absence of strong state institutions, international NGOs, together with international organisations (IOs), have been an important mechanism to channel services and development support. The EU and member states have the capacity to play an intermediary role to help relax relationships between government and civil society and showcase the prosperity of society to depend on the existence of both the state and civil society.

As civil society is shifting to a more development-oriented outlook, its ability to develop a vision, specify its mandate and take a strategic approach to identifying priorities will be key. According to the consultation¹³, the issue of sustainability will be central to the private sector and philanthropists as a means for sustainable funding and funding diversification. In terms of credibility, evidence-based research and issue identification will be vital.

In this context a number of lessons can be drawn from the engagement thus far with CSOs:

Both government institutions and Liberian civil society are competing to find their space within society and contribute. Relationships with the international community and donors are often tied to financial implications in the form of funding. Thus, international donors and the EU and Member States play a central role in conveying and enabling a non-competitive space between the government and civil society, in which competition for resources is not instigated. Instead, **programmes need to invest in stocking up social capital – or trust and relationships – between civil society and government actors for the long term.** Bilateral government dialogue with the GoL needs to emphasise the importance of an independent and vibrant civil society, using diplomatic leverage to promote a stronger democratic civic and governance system, while investing in strong relationships with the government as well. It is this investment that in the long term will allow them to act collectively and pursue shared objectives.

Through “The shift towards structured dialogue”, the EU makes deliberate effort to shift conversations between the EU and civil society toward structured dialogue, defining structure as planned, regular, timely, predictable and transparent, versus ad hoc and one-off consultations. This is a positive initiative where it would be of great value for the EU to be mindful of **the imbalance of power** in these meetings, as well of the CSOs’ continued limited perception of the EU,

Liberia’s legal and regulatory structure offers many opportunities for CSOs to participate in planning and **decision-making processes**, with several avenues for providing feedback, in principle. However, civil knowledge and skills hinder them from articulating and amplifying the needs and demands of citizens in a **strategic and systematic, research and evidence-based** manner, an area that the EU and member states could play a significant role in.

Capacity development continues to require an integrated approach using different instruments and frameworks in a coordinated manner, focusing especially on the institutional development of CSOs, their interactions with other CSOs, with state institutions and the environment in which CSOs operate. CSOs need to be strengthened according to a strategic and long-term approach.

While Monrovia-based organisations are often accountable to their board of directors and are more focused on the national agenda and donor trends, the **CSOs and CBOs operating outside Monrovia often have their legitimacy strongly-rooted in community structures** such as elder councils, membership bodies or the community at large, where decisions are being made by consensus or majority vote. These CSOs and CBOs enjoy great credibility and trust within the community. The civil society sector would greatly benefit from strengthening local linkages between Monrovia based organizations and those in other counties.

There is a continued need to **rethink donor support models to CSOs in order to reinforce local ownership and financial sustainability**. To date, donor support to CSOs has been for the most part project-based, service

¹³ According to the key informant interviews. Annex 2: Key Informant Interview Guide

¹⁴ The shift towards structured dialogue with CSOs at country level, Guidance Note, EU, 2020



provision oriented, channeled through intermediary organisations (mainly INGOs/IOs) and largely driven by donor agendas. Examples of alternatives could include flexible short term grants, and in kind support such as IT infrastructure and technical support that give CSOs greater responsibility to set their own strategies, priorities and sector focus, leading to greater ownership and sustainability in the long run.

Liberian society feels disillusioned about the GoL's promises of addressing **accountability, and improving healthcare and road infrastructure**. In addition, inflation and the effects of COVID-19 barely allow the population to cover nutrition or other basic needs. Recent examples of violent outbreaks and attacks on government institutions, including the judiciary, the election process, and the need to **link governance to conflict mitigation and peacebuilding**, and indicate an opportunity for the EU to invest in conflict prevention, sustaining peace and building resilience. Considering youth vulnerability in these developments, youth should play a central role in any programming efforts.

Some areas of work expose CSOs to greater risk, as they face substantial resistance and push back from their communities. These areas include: work to eliminate violence against women and girls and harmful practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), as gender inequality and unequal power relations between women and men are rooted in communities; rights of people with disabilities; rights of sexual minorities; “Green Deal” and “Sustainable Growth and Jobs”, due to vulnerable communities reliant on natural resources as their sole income, such as deforestation to gain charcoal for cooking; and the area of land rights. Working in these areas, a **more comprehensive approach** is needed that includes **broader awareness raising** campaigns for target communities, in addition to safeguarding measures for survivors and those working on these issues.

Efforts to involve civil society in policy advocacy have been heavily focused on identifying opportunities for influence and advocacy, as well as mobilising CSOs to play a ‘watchdog’ role. Going forward, a **shift in focus to the foundations of policy advocacy is recommended**, including: issue verification, research and developing policy; community mobilisation and outreach; and identifying opportunities for influence and impact. In conversations with government representatives and CSOs, it was striking that almost all respondents state CSOs as being highly relevant, while describing civil society as only somewhat credible.

Adapted support is required for networks and platforms, as well as CSOs, which have difficulties in raising funds and who often compete with their members for funding, at the risk of becoming project implementing bodies rather than serving their members and constituencies. Furthermore, the financial sustainability of Liberian CSOs also requires enhancing local fundraising approaches and initiatives. As the EU, member states and international organisations aim at contributing to decentralisation and pluralistic voices, more efforts need to be directed into bottom-up approaches to enable accountability, governance, networking and partnership as a means to ensure ownership and sustainability.

Generally, a **comprehensive definition of civil society**¹⁵ includes faith-based groups, professional associations, trade unions, social movements, and coalitions among others. **It seems the work of the international community, the EU and member states is heavily focused around CSOs and CBOs**, meaning that opportunities to work with more mature voices within civil society are potentially being missed; analysis and research would be needed to explore the capacity and impact of professional associations, such as the bar associations, journalist associations or chamber of commerce, especially with regards to professional standards and network and coalition building.

C. UPDATE OF THE CSO ROADMAP - THE PROCESS

The EU delegation partnered with Mercy Corps to update the CSO Roadmap 2021-2024. To inform the process, Mercy Corps, through the ADARA Research & Management Institute (ADARA), carried out a qualitative research study in April and May 2021 using key informant interviews as well as focus group discussions with civil society representatives from activist, organisations and networks. Interviews were also held with government agencies and EU Member States.

¹⁵ https://www.who.int/social_determinants/themes/civilsociety/en/