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Civil society, peacebuilding from below and shrinking civic space: the case of Cameroon's 'Anglophone' conflict

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the current conflict in Anglophone Cameroon and examines the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in conflict resolution. In doing so, it explores a paradox in the peacebuilding literature. On the one hand, the 'local turn' in peacebuilding has emphasised a bottom-up approach that high-lights the role of CSOs. On the other hand, the literature on 'shrinking civic space' has demonstrated how space for CSOs' activities has become increasingly restricted, especially in authoritarian contexts like Cameroon. The article investigates the contributions of CSOs to conflict resolution, the constraints faced, and their responses in turn to mitigate such constraints. CSOs' contribution to conflict resolution is at least three-fold: to engage with most-affected communities and build an evidence base of the conflict's adverse consequences for civilians; to draw national and international attention to the conflict; and to maintain pressure for a negotiated settlement through public protests and interactions with both government and non-state armed groups. Despite facing intimidation and violence at times, CSOs have responded in innovative ways that demonstrate examples of adaptation and resistance to shrinking civic space.

Introduction

Cameroon is currently in a critical situation and facing unparalleled political violence. The 'Anglophone' conflict is an oft-overlooked civil war ongoing since October 2017 between state security forces and armed separatist groups fighting for an independent state – the Republic of Ambazonia – in the two English-speaking Northwest and Southwest regions, the former British Southern Cameroons. With the military's counter-insurgency campaign focused on rural areas, there has been a devastating impact on poor rural citizens and their livelihoods, with many civilians killed and homes and businesses burnt down.[1] Almost daily violence and atrocities has led to hundreds of thousands fleeing the violence.[2]

Accurate data on the impact of the conflict are difficult to access, mainly due to government suppression of information, and figures often remain outdated. In 2019, the International Crisis Group estimated that the conflict had claimed over 3000 lives.[3] This figure has increased substantially since then, with estimates ranging from 4000 to 12,000 killed.[4] In 2018, UNICEF reported over 200 villages burnt and over 750,000 people internally and externally displaced, and 1.3 million people in need of humanitarian assistance.[5] In 2019, 80 per cent of schools were closed and more than 700,000 children were out of school due to a school boycott enforced by the separatist groups in protest against educational injustices in English-speaking regions.[6] Human rights reports show that rape and other forms of gender-based violence have increased dramatically, as well as documenting arbitrary killings, unlawful imprisonment, torture and kidnappings.[7]

Both warring sides bear a heavy responsibility for atrocities, though documentary evidence indicates that Cameroonian security forces are responsible for a majority of the killings and burning of homes, and for a greater level of indiscriminate violence.[8] While some recent reports show a decline in the violence, especially in the cities, this by no means indicates a return to peace. For instance, a June 2021 UNOCHA report indicates some internally displaced persons (IDPs) returning to their villages, yet equally documents persistent violence causing over 10,000 people to leave their communities in Menchum Division alone.[9] As we write (September 2021), there are government reports of 28 people killed, 15 troops and 13 civilians in a separatist attack on a military convoy, with a harsh military response anticipated.[10]

There is clearly an urgent need to end this terrible violence and resolve the conflict. Yet there is a current impasse. The main official attempt at conflict resolution thus far was the government-organised 'Major National Dialogue' from 30th September to 4 October 2019. This was unsuccessful and criticised for being elite-oriented and excluding key actors.[11] Not only were major non-state armed groups excluded[12] but also the participation of peaceful civil society groups, especially women's organisations, was limited.[13] Some analysts even doubted the sincerity of the government,[14] with the military crackdown in the Anglophone regions intensifying immediately afterwards,[15] and the government seemingly determined to pursue a military solution. Additionally, international offers from the Swiss government and the Vatican to mediate peace talks have been rejected.[16]

Therefore, in a context where top-down peacebuilding efforts have not made progress towards resolving the conflict, what can a bottom-up approach offer? In recent times the scholarly literature on the 'local turn' in peacebuilding has placed more emphasis on a bottom-up or grassroots approach, inclusive of the role of civil society organisations (CSOs). Yet this stands somewhat in contradiction to another recent strand in academic and practitioner literature concerning 'shrinking civic space'.[17] This examines how governments globally have enacted legislation and adopted informal measures to limit the scope and activity of civil society.[18] Therefore this article investigates this apparent paradox. On the one hand, the role of CSOs in peacebuilding from below is often perceived as positive and significant in seeking more lasting and legitimate peace agreements. Yet, on the other hand, such bottom-up peacebuilding is limited by the restrictions being imposed on civil society actors in contexts of shrinking civic space. The following three questions are explored:

- In what ways have Cameroonian CSOs engaged in efforts to resolve conflict and build peace?
- To what extent have such efforts been constrained by shrinking civic space?
- By what means have CSOs sought to overcome such constraints?

Cameroon's war provides a suitable context to address such questions. The research focuses on peacebuilding as the overarching concept, within which conflict resolution is perceived as an essential element.

Methodology

This article is based on primary data collected by the authors between January and May 2020 as part of an academic research project funded by Coventry University. The main data collection method was a full-day 'consultative dialogue workshop', held in Douala, Cameroon on 29 January 2020, with representatives from 15 Cameroonian CSOs. The CSOs were all non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with professionally qualified staff, and ranged from women's organisations to youth-led associations, human rights groups, a teachers' association, and humanitarian and development organisations. They included national organisations and regional and local ones. All were operational in the Southwest and/or Northwest regions. Two were national branches of international organisations. The purpose of the workshop was to encourage CSOs to engage in mutually beneficial discussion and reflection on the current conflict and their roles in its mitigation and resolution. Follow-up semi-structured interviews were held in May 2020 with senior representatives from six of the participating CSOs.

The article is structured as follows. The second section situates the research within these two apparently contradictory strands of scholarly literature: 'peacebuilding from below' and 'shrinking civic space'. The third provides background information on the Cameroon Anglophone conflict. The fourth, fifth and sixth sections address the three research questions in turn. The conclusion discusses the findings and provides final reflections.

Peacebuilding from below and shrinking civic space

Historically, interventions in civil war situations have been predominantly top-down, commonly led by international organisations, especially the United Nations, with the consent of national governments. These elite-level approaches have focused on the formulation and implementation of official peace agreements. However, such top-down approaches have been subject to criticism. Pearson emphasises that elite approaches to resolving ethno-political conflicts can be problematic because they undermine trust, and outcomes often do not reflect the needs of most-affected local populations.[19] Labonte concurs, noting that elite approaches enable those in authority to 'control, shape and manipulate decision-making processes or institutions' for their personal interests at the cost of the populace.[20] In response, a bottom-up or grassroots approach, often associated with Lederach,[21] has increasingly taken centre-stage in peacebuilding discourses.[22] This places emphasis on the 'significance of local actors and of the non-governmental sector and the links with local knowledge and wisdom'.[23] Some analysts consider such 'peacebuilding

from below' as essential to resolving conflicts,[24] notably in Africa, given that such approaches create space for the needs, perspectives and practices of local communities to be included in peace processes.[25] Further, as noted by Urlacher, bottom-up approaches recognise the efforts of local communities in navigating and mitigating daily challenges in the midst of conflict.[26] The interaction of NGOs with local communities is also significant and may commence with the provision of humanitarian relief, considered by Bigdon and Korf as an important element in transforming a conflict.[27] In his discussion on 'everyday peace', Mac Ginty further argues for the recognition of such local peace initiatives if peacebuilding is to be sustainable.[28] In other words, such initiatives should be recognised by the state and the international community in order to have maximum impact, particularly at the national level. For instance, in Liberia, the efforts of the Inter-Religious Council, a civil society group, were leveraged by ECOWAS and members of the international community to initiate dialogue between warring factions and make recommendations regarding the peace agreement.[29] Especially important is the centrality of gender and acknowledgement of the unique and crucial contribution of women to peacebuilding.[30]

However, as Ramsbotham et al. note, peacebuilding from below is not a panacea nor without its complexities.[31] Local communities are also 'sites of power asymmetry, patriarchy and privilege',[32] and traditional communal relations may have been replaced by 'new militaristic tendencies'.[33] Civil society can itself be clientelist in nature,[34] and local groups may not be benign actors but themselves subject to 'national and regional power plays'.[35] Additionally, a bottom-up approach to resolving conflicts is unlikely to be sufficient in itself. It can bring the perspectives, needs and interests of conflict-affected communities to peace negotiations, but resolution of conflict is likely to be formalised in national-level agreements and in governmental structures and legal frameworks. Therefore, an interplay between local and national levels is required, perhaps mediated by legally registered and professionally staffed NGOs. However, this potential role is also influenced by the extent to which CSOs are affected by 'shrinking civic space'.

Post-cold war, in the 1990s, with the perceived triumph of liberal democracy and an emphasis on the importance of civil and political rights, there was an increase globally in the number and significance of civil society associations, inclusive of NGOs, social movements and grassroots organisations.[36] Civil society was seen as a key element of a new triadic approach that involved the state, market and civil society.[37] This enhanced role of CSOs entailed an expansion of 'civic space', defined as 'the public arena in which citizens can freely intervene and organise themselves with a view to defending their interests, values and identities; to claim their rights; to influence public policy making or call power holders to account'.[38] From the mid-2000s, however, this expansion has been followed by the opposite phenomenon of 'shrinking civic space' whereby governments globally have sought to restrict the scope of civil society activity through legal and extra-legal measures.[39] Since 2012, the annual CIVICUS *State of Civil Society Report* has identified an overall global trend of growing civic space restrictions.[40] The CIVICUS Monitor provides tracking and rating of 196 countries, with 111 countries currently identified as 'under attack' where civic space is 'closed', 'repressed' or 'obstructed'.[41]

While the opening of civic space in the 1990s was associated with political liberalisation and democratisation, its subsequent closure is correspondingly linked with the global resurgence of authoritarianism and the consolidation of hybrid regimes in the past decade.[42] Governments across the world are seen as seeking to (re-)assert state power and

push back against perceived civil society influence and power.[43] In this respect, the drivers of shrinking space are largely a function of 'wider political struggles between political, civic and economic actors', most notably in contexts of autocratic governance.[44] Such governments increasingly constrain CSO activity under the guise of security threats, for instance from 'terrorism' or migration; or assert national sovereignty against external intervention, for example by limiting foreign funding of NGOs; or simply use restrictive measures to limit the activities of non-state actors engaged in struggles for social and political change.[45] The highly political nature of *whose* space is shrunk is also highlighted in what the Transnational Institute (TNI) calls 'shades of shrinking space', noting that 'not everyone's space is shrinking in the same way', and asserting that grassroots organisations and social justice movements are bearing the brunt of crackdowns by authoritarian governments.[46] Further, TNI claims that '"shrinking space" is simply a ... way of talking about the problems of exclusion and repression that many social, political and civil rights movements have long faced'.[47] Such analysis is of particular relevance when it comes to the Cameroon case.

As noted, measures to shrink space are both legal and repressive (extra-legal). Legal and administrative restrictions include laws and regulations on registration and on foreign funding.[48] Extra-legal measures include violence and intimidation at the hands of both state and non-state actors, with the latter often acting with the *de facto* protection of state authorities such as the police.[49] Other repressive measures include surveillance and censorship by the state, for example internet cuts, banning demonstrations, and discrediting and delegitimising particular CSOs.[50]

There has been less emphasis among analysts on how to counter shrinking civic space, mainly limited to a focus on international responses.[51] One partial exception is the work of Bossuyt and Ronceray who explore the responses to closing space of local CSOs and activists.[52] They outline four types of local responses: resistance, adaptation, desisting, and disbanding,[53] although only the first two challenge constraints and claim back space. Hypothetical examples of each type of response are given.[54] For instance, 'resistance' could entail: mobilising of citizens and youth movements; or carefully choosing advocacy campaigns that avoid repression. Examples of 'adaptation' include: combining advocacy work with service delivery; less confrontational lobbying campaigns, with some self-censorship. 'Desisting' could involve moving away from advocacy to service delivery; while 'disbanding' entails closing down or going 'off the radar' and not operating publicly. Other writings on shrinking civic space only consider local responses briefly. For instance, Karaman and Cernov assert that activists are 're-imagining their strategies' and 'reclaiming democratic spaces and pushing back the backlash'.[55] Strategies are similar to those cited as 'adaptation' and include cross-movement collaboration, such as alliances between women's rights and minority rights movements, and creating spaces for movements 'to meet, collaborate and learn from each other'.[56] TNI emphasise the importance of 'solidarity', especially with 'those on the margins whose political space is being ... radically restricted',[57] although such expressions of solidarity would come mainly from external like-minded organisations. Utilising this limited extant literature, the local responses to shrinking space by CSOs in Cameroon will be examined (below) with reference to the concepts of: resistance, adaptation, collaboration and solidarity.

The 'Anglophone' conflict in Cameroon and civic space

The conflict in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon is firmly rooted in the country's colonial past. Originally a German colony, after World War I German Kamerun was split between France and Britain as 'trust territories' under the League of Nations, but in an uneven division of 80:20 in France's favour.[58] Numerous scholars[59] have explored how this unequal partition sowed the seeds of what is commonly referred to as the 'Anglophone problem' in Cameroon.[60] Here, we summarise key moments.

At the time of independence in 1960/61, the British territory (named Southern Cameroons) was offered a plebiscite to join either newly independent Nigeria or French Cameroon. Southern Cameroonians voted to join *La Republique du Cameroun*, leading to the formation of the Federal Republic of Cameroon from 1 October 1961 as an indissoluble federal system composed of two equal parts.[61] However, what followed was the gradual centralisation of power and unilateral dissolution of the federal structures by the dominant French-speaking government. In May 1972, under President Ahidjo, a controversial referendum abolished the federal system and created a unitary state named as the United Republic of Cameroon.[62] Subsequently, in 1984, President Biya renamed the country as *La Republique du Cameroun*, thereby reinstating the name adopted at independence on 1 January 1960, before reunification with the former British Southern Cameroons. As Fombad notes, 'This was seen by many Anglophone Cameroonians as removing one of the last symbolic vestiges of the 1961 reunification of the two distinct communities'.[63]

During this period, protests by Anglophone Cameroonians against their marginalisation and gradual assimilation into a centralised, Francophone-dominated unitary state were met with repressive force.[64] Yet, as the wave of political liberalisation and democratisation spread across sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1990s,[65] President Biya was forced to accede to pressure for political reforms and opened up a limited measure of political and civic space. Multi-partyism was reinstated in December 1990 with the enactment of Law No. 90/053 on freedom of association, and the first major opposition party, the Social Democrat Front (SDF), was established in Bamenda, the capital of Northwest region.[66] This degree of tolerance for freedoms of expression and association in the early 1990s led to developments in both the political and civic spheres.

The degree of political liberalisation allowed for greater mobilisation and representation of Anglophone interests, inclusive of the formation of pro-federalist (the All-Anglophone Congress) and secessionist (the Ambazonia Movement) groups.[67] Law No. 90/053 also opened up space for civil society to expand, and a mushrooming of over 3,000 registered associations occurred, including development NGOs, trade unions, cooperative movements, private media, professional associations, student associations and feminist organisations.[68] Amongst these associations, however, were state-created organisations or government-oriented NGOs (GONGOs), with little independence from government. Nonetheless, CSOs became increasingly involved in various aspects of life in Cameroon, spanning social, religious, cultural, economic and political spheres.

Yet, the political space shrunk almost as quickly as it emerged, with military crackdowns on protests and violent clashes with the army across the country between March and August 1991, with many deaths recorded.[69] Nyambo notes that the attitude of the state in creating a legal space for civic action in Cameroon 'has been one of both caution and repression'.[70] Thus, politically, there were limits to CSOs' activities, constraints that remain to this day.

The current crisis (2016 to present) and shrinking civic space

Longstanding Anglophone grievances re-emerged in 2016 with rising opposition to the government's sustained erosion of the distinct legal and education systems of the English-speaking regions, notably with the appointment of ever-increasing numbers of French-speaking judges and teachers.[71] Peaceful protests were organised in October 2016 by lawyers, demanding that adjudication of court cases in the Anglophone regions should be in English and in accordance with the Common Law system. The lawyers were joined by teachers, students and parents who were similarly opposed to the appointment of French-speaking teachers in Anglophone schools, resulting in the poor performance of students in examinations. For some, the protests were a response to years of marginalisation and oppression of Anglophone Cameroonians, as noted by one research participant: 'If you trace it back, Anglophones have always felt marginalised in all aspects. So it is something that has been gradually nursing up [building up]. So the lawyers' protest was actually a catalyst'.[72]

However, government security forces responded to these peaceful protests with repression, using tear gas and bullets to disperse protesters, with several killed.[73] While the initial demand was for a return to the pre-1972 federal system and greater autonomy for the Anglophone regions, the military crackdown led to more radical separatist groups taking centre-stage, including the emergence of armed groups. In September 2017, the first attacks on Cameroon military forces occurred. On 1 October 2017, separatist groups unilaterally declared independence for the Republic of Ambazonia, alongside massive demonstrations in which 17 protestors were killed by the security forces. The Cameroon military responded with occupation of the Anglophone regions, and on 30 November 2017, after the killing of six security personnel, President Biya declared war on the armed separatists, describing them as 'terrorists' and 'criminals'.[74] The conflict has continued to date.

At the outset of the current crisis in 2016, civic space in Cameroon was limited but sufficiently open to allow various types of CSOs to register with government and operate legally. However, for organisations engaging in the broad political sphere, civic space remained largely constrained. Such organisations could operate but under strict, and at times self-imposed, limitations. This was especially so for those operating in the Anglophone regions. They understood that if they acted in a manner perceived by the state as oppositional and threatening, then they risked unwelcome attention and likely repression from state authorities.[75] This became increasingly evident when the peaceful protests occurred in late 2016, with an immediate shrinkage of civic space. Not only was there a crackdown by security forces on protestors on the streets, but the organisations leading the protests were swiftly banned. On 17 January 2017, Cameroon's Ministry of Territorial Administration issued an order banning the activities of the Southern

Cameroon National Council (SCNC) and the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (CACSC).[76] The government then arrested and imprisoned some CACSC leaders, while others fled the country.[77] The government also severely constrained civic freedoms and the ability to organise with a total internet shutdown in the Anglophone regions for 93 days from January to April 2017.[78] Since the armed conflict commenced in late 2017, the work of CSOs has been regularly impeded. Organisations face threats of de-registration and closure by the state. Individual activists and CSO leaders risk surveillance, harassment, imprisonment, injury and even death.[79] While state security forces are mainly responsible for such repressive measures, CSOs also face threats from armed separatist groups, with CSO staff at times (falsely) accused of colluding with the military and subjected to intimidation, assault and kidnapping.[80] The limitation of civic space and silencing of civil society voices also occurs against higher-level leaders. For example, the government obstructed the initiative of religious leaders, led by the Archbishop Emeritus of Douala, Cardinal Tumi, to organise an Anglophone General Conference, firstly in August 2018 prior to the Major National Dialogue in late September 2018, and then again in November 2018, thus preventing articulation of the grievances of the English-speaking population.

The CIVICUS Monitor currently categorises civic space in Cameroon as 'repressed', indicating that 'civic space is significantly constrained', the worst but one rating from 'open' to 'closed'. While this rating is for the entire country, the constraints on civic space in the Anglophone regions are more intense than in other regions.[81]

Contributions of CSOs to conflict resolution and peacebuilding

Despite constraints to civic space, local CSOs in the English-speaking regions have responded in various ways to support populations affected by the conflict. Based on primary data, five interrelated areas are identified: humanitarian relief; peace campaigns; documentation of human rights violations; trauma healing; and peace education. It is worth noting that, while civil society actors initiate these peacebuilding efforts, the state must equally demonstrate its willingness to acknowledge and support these efforts if they are to have a national level impact in ending the conflict. As expressed by one civil society group: 'We have done quite a lot but it is important to note that the government has the primary role in solving the conflict and we come in to act as a support system'.[82]

Humanitarian action

The provision of humanitarian relief is an important conflict resolution activity.[83] Most CSOs in this study provide humanitarian relief to internally displaced persons (IDPs) and to civilians within the conflict zones. Some NGOs have reoriented their activities from development to humanitarian work. As noted by one CSO, 'With little resources, we got into humanitarian support. We have been working with other organisations going into the bushes on a regular basis to assist IDPs with health and food items'.[84] Such humanitarian relief was important for two reasons: basic needs and solidarity. First, it was imperative that CSOs responded to the urgent needs of people in most-affected communities through the provision of food, health services and shelter, for instance to IDPs who had fled into the forest and to those with less opportunity to escape the violence, such as the elderly. Second,

the provision of humanitarian assistance has been significant in expressing solidarity and enhancing the legitimacy of CSOs in their engagement with local communities and groups of IDPs. It has demonstrated concern and practical support for local people, and a preparedness to take risks by entering the conflict zones. Such risks were very real given the accusations and accompanying threats to humanitarian organisations from both warring parties that they were of providing support to the opposing side.[85] While all CSO participants strongly debunked such accusations as inaccurate and unfounded,[86] evidence from other contexts does indicate that humanitarian assistance can still be exploited and diverted by conflict parties themselves, usually without the involvement of local organisations.[87] Humanitarian efforts can then have the (unintended) effect of sustaining a conflict or doing harm. Yet data from this study suggests that this has not occurred here. In contrast, there was awareness by CSOs that perceived affiliation with either side would undermine their relief efforts and threaten their security, with agencies very conscious of the need to remain neutral and credible.[88]

Peace campaigns

The most direct contribution of CSOs to conflict resolution has been their involvement in campaigns for peace. Female-led CSOs, in particular, have been very active in various campaigns such as 'Back to school', 'Stop burning health facilities', 'Stop the killings', 'We want dialogue' and 'Ceasefire'. These campaigns have been aimed at both the government and non-state armed groups, as well as bringing national and international attention to ongoing atrocities. Such campaigns were given particular impetus by the establishment in May 2018 of the Southwest/Northwest Women's Task Force (SNWOT) by leaders of women's organisations and individual female activists. As SNWOT states, it was 'born as a result of the crisis with the mission to contribute as catalysts and agents of peace in the two troubled regions of Cameroon'.[89] SNWOT has undertaken various activities at different levels. One effective action has been 'lamentation campaigns'[90] undertaken in 2018 and 2019 in the regional capitals of Buea and Bamenda, with the participation of over one thousand women. This condemnation of violence and war by women publicly wailing is a revered conflict resolution ritual in Cameroon, and the lamentations attracted significant media coverage. Other public demonstrations have called for a ceasefire and peaceful resolution of the conflict. SNWOT has also made direct appeals to the government through holding press conferences and taking their demands to the capital Yaoundé. For example, on 10 December 2018, 150 members undertook a public march in Yaoundé calling for an immediate ceasefire and inclusive dialogue. In the lead up to the Major National Dialogue, SNWOT visited the Prime Minister on 24 September 2019 to submit their recommendations on how dialogue could best be organised.[91] When government was unresponsive, SNWOT persisted in demanding access and then took direct action to gain entry into the official Major National Dialogue sessions in Yaoundé in order to make women's voices heard.[92]

A key area of campaigning by women's organisations pertains to the gender-based violence that has accompanied the conflict, with CSO representatives describing the situation as one of 'rampant subjection to rape' and 'wanton abuse of the sexual rights of women and girls'.[93] SNWOT, for example, has consistently drawn attention to issues of rape and gender-based violence in its campaigns and public demonstrations. The

inter-related nature of public campaigning and practical support is also evident, with women-led CSOs providing safe spaces for women and girls, including with IDPs in the bush, and menstrual hygiene kits.

Documentation of human rights violations

CSOs have played a major role in documenting and reporting on human rights violations and other heinous crimes committed since the start of the conflict. This has included numerous mass killings, such as the 'Ngarbuh massacre' in the Northwest region on 14 February 2020 in which at least 27 people were killed, including 13 children and a pregnant woman.[94] Such documentation by the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) and Network of Human Rights Defenders in Central Africa (REDHAC), both founded and based in Cameroon, has led to higher-level attention and, occasionally, an investigation being undertaken. Following the Ngarbuh massacre, NGO pressure led to the President setting up an independent commission of investigation that confirmed the responsibility of government security forces in its report of 21 April 2020, contradicting initial denials by the government.[95] The documentation of human rights violations and campaigns for investigations into war crimes makes the urgent need for a peaceful solution more visible, especially where mainstream media coverage, especially by the Francophone media, has been limited.

The work of CSOs has reminded the warring parties of their obligations under human rights law and afforded some protection, albeit limited, to the civilian population. One CSO representative stated that this may have prevented more atrocities through increased awareness of the consequences of violating international human rights.[96] Some human rights organisations have delivered statements on Cameroon's Anglophone conflict in important international policy spaces. For instance, in June 2018, CHRDA presented a paper on the Anglophone crisis to the US House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs.[97] Barnes contends that civil society initiatives are sometimes 'crucial in directing attention to a situation that is unacceptable but which has been avoided by the wider public, a silence that effectively underpins the status quo', adding that 'the very act of public disclosure and/or denouncing the situation can make the truth evident in ways that are very difficult to ignore and may empower people to take action to change the situation'.[98] The work of local human rights NGOs in Cameroon appears to have contributed in such ways.

Trauma healing

The trauma associated with contemporary wars can make peacebuilding difficult, and CSOs have endeavoured to provide support to trauma victims. Egbejule has indicated the degree of trauma suffered as a major consequence of the Cameroon Anglophone conflict.[99] Our research confirmed this, with the leader of one youth-oriented CSO stating that 'there has been an increase in mental health problems among youths as a result of the conflict'.[100] Another CSO leader noted that: 'the elderly, people that have experienced kidnapping, those with gun wounds, people whose houses and/or businesses have been destroyed, all are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders'.[101] The

pervasive incidents of rape and gender-based violence is another source of trauma. Workshop participants agreed on the widespread trauma caused by the lived experiences of the Anglophone population since the start of the conflict, and of the healing processes required to relate with wider society in a peaceful manner.[102] In response, CSOs have provided psychological and mental health support to those affected by the conflict, especially to women and children.[103] For example, a consortium of four CSOs has established a network in the city of Kumba to provide psychosocial support and the referral of victims/survivors of gender-based violence.[104] The objective of such healing is to help those affected to get relief from their pain and prevent potential conflict behaviour. Although there is limited research on the relevance of psychosocial relief in resolving conflicts,[105] Bigdon and Korf identify trauma therapy as one of the activities by which NGOs can contribute to long term transformative change in conflict situations.[106]

Peace education

CSOs have designed and implemented peace education/sensitisation programmes. One organisation, for example, carried out training on peace education in the village of a staff member which had been burnt down by the military, with the aim of convincing the youths not to retaliate. The same organisation also organised a 'seminar to educate the victims and try to make them understand that all hope is not lost'.[107] Another participant reported that, 'CSOs have been training youths and women on community mediation skills to be able to talk to their brothers, sisters and children in armed groups to drop their arms'.[108] Findings from other studies, for instance that by Awinador-Kanyirige[109] in northern Ghana, have argued that peace education by CSOs helped to de-escalate ethnic-based conflicts. Similarly, Fischer reported that some CSOs in post-conflict Bosnia became 'active in cross-border peace education, striving to establish norms of tolerance and deal with prejudices and enemy images'.[110]

Challenges faced by CSOs

CSOs in Cameroon have faced significant constraints since the mass protests in 2016, notably administrative restrictions and intimidation and violence, inclusive of both legal/regulatory and extra-legal/repressive measures. Internal discords within the CSO sector are an additional constraint noted here.

Administrative restrictions and control

Administrative restrictions were noted by participants as a major means of limiting CSOs' access to conflict-affected communities. These included discretionary measures accorded to military and government personnel that enable them to restrict movement in the conflict zones. For example, a recurrent issue for most CSOs was that 'Divisional [administrative] Officers do not issue authorisation for CSOs to carry out activities in their various constituencies'.[111] In other words, local officials could refuse to grant access to CSOs to visit conflict-affected areas, especially remote locations. This impedes CSOs' ability to address the needs of the most marginalised and vulnerable people in the

conflict. Even when granted access, CSOs were often faced with surveillance and control. One representative noted that: 'The military interferes in the humanitarian deliveries of CSOs by sometimes wanting to accompany them to the field and by so doing endangering the lives of their staff through crossfire exchange with the Amba [non-state armed groups] boys'.[112] While the military frames its accompaniment of CSO teams to rural locations as protection of CSO staff, the main intent is seen as surveillance of CSOs and their engagement with local communities, thereby exerting indirect control over their activities. As noted, some CSOs have been accused by government of being 'separatist sympathisers' or working with separatist fighters, with staff monitored and questioned by the state secret service.[113] Such (false) allegations are intended to stigmatise and de-legitimise CSOs. Human rights NGOs, such as CHRDA, are particularly prone to attempts at de-legitimisation through accusations of bias when they document atrocities committed by state forces.[114]

Another administrative restriction is the censorship imposed on CSO activities. Participants noted that the government, through officials at the sub-district, district and regional levels, prevent CSOs from sharing information on the situation of people in the affected communities. A respondent noted that CSOs face a 'communication challenge [where] CSOs are not allowed to provide relevant information emanating from the field'.[115] This could be an attempt by the state to remain as sole provider of the narrative on the Anglophone conflict, silencing the voices of civil society actors. The consequences of violating such state censorship range from fines to imprisonment or an outright organisational ban, as meted out to CACSC.

Intimidation and violence

Governmental administrative restrictions on movement also have an intimidatory effect on CSOs. Such challenges are heightened when there is a direct threat to life and property, which can come from both warring parties. Discussions with CSOs' representatives revealed that such risks are high in situations where 'the military on their part considers everybody as an enemy and they shoot indiscriminately and do not seem to protect members of civil society'.[116] In addition, CSO premises can be targeted. For instance, offices of the Network of Human Rights Defenders in Central Africa (REDHAC), based in Douala, has been broken into by unidentified armed men on several occasions, with documents and equipment confiscated on other occasions, and staff subjected to harassment and intimidation. Although reported to the police, no formal investigation has taken place,[117] and this fate has also befallen other CSOs in Cameroon.[118] Such threats come not only from state forces, or unidentified provocateurs acting on its behalf, but NGO staff are also targeted at times by the non-state armed groups. The real nature of this threat was evident in that two members of CSOs present at the workshop had been kidnapped by separatist groups.[119] Very frightening experiences for both individuals, they had required time to recover from physical injuries and, especially, from the mental trauma.[120] Such risks clearly impact on CSOs' ability to effectively carry out their activities towards conflict resolution, echoing evidence from other studies that a threat to basic security for CSO staff makes it 'difficult for them to engage in and support peace making'.[121]

CSO-government relations and sector discord

While most challenges come from external sources, another constraint was the internal divisions between CSOs, often provoked by governmental manipulation and shrinking space. This relates to what TNI describes as 'shades of shrinking space: not everyone's space is shrinking in the same way' and to the politics of shrinking space.[122] The representative of a teachers' organisation noted that CSOs' autonomy and ability to contribute to peaceful change was partly dependent on CSOs' own decisions concerning their relations with government. The participant stated that some CSOs are effectively government-sponsored or at least maintain close relations with government and that: 'under such conditions, it is difficult for such CSOs to make meaningful contributions because they dance to the tune of the government'.[123] However, some workshop participants went further in their critique, suggesting that some CSOs seek to strengthen their own position through closeness to government. Participants suggested that such CSOs 'don't have the spirit to look beyond a selfish, self-centred perspective'.[124] This was also referred to as the 'pull him down syndrome', in terms of seeking a competitive advantage for your own organisation through the denigration of other organisations.[125] Perhaps the banning of CACSC and imprisonment of its leaders has intimidated others, enforcing compliance and conformity, and resulting in a successful 'divide and rule' strategy by government. Another interpretation could point to clientelism within civil society and the attractiveness of being close to government patrons.[126] Nonetheless, this 'lack of synergy among CSOs' in conflict resolution efforts makes the collective voice of CSOs weaker and undermines effective collaboration.[127]

It is undeniable that CSOs in Anglophone Cameroon operate in a difficult environment. Civic space was already restricted pre-conflict and has become increasingly constrained in the context of conflict. There are risks to the personal security of staff and existential threats to the organisations. Such threats come from powerful, armed actors, both state and non-state. In such circumstances, CSOs have little choice but to work within government-imposed parameters, while being somewhat creative in their interpretation. Yet there are also difficult choices. Some CSOs opt to gravitate more towards government as a way of promoting their own interests, but resulting in disharmony with those that remain more critical and independent.

Responses to counter shrinking civic space

CSO participants shared ways they have sought to counter shrinking spaces, identifying the following: awareness raising; documentation; mobilisation; networking and coalition-building; dialogue and communication. We examine these efforts with reference to the categories of responses to shrinking civic space outlined above. These local CSO strategies also highlight examples of both 'claimed spaces' and 'created spaces' by civil society actors. As defined by Gaventa, these are spaces for political participation where 'claimed spaces' are those 'claimed by less powerful actors from or against the power holders', while 'created spaces' are 'created more autonomously by them [less powerful actors]'.[128]

Awareness raising by CSOs

Participants felt that hostility towards CSOs by both warring sides was sometimes due to limited knowledge and understanding of their role. Difficulty in obtaining support outside of the Anglophone regions for CSO conflict resolution initiatives was also explained by the limited awareness of the conflict within Francophone Cameroon. For this reason, women's groups took their demands to Yaoundé on 18 April 2019 to raise awareness on the need to end the fighting and engage in conflict resolution efforts.[129] Increased understanding of the legitimacy of their activities was also considered crucial by two human rights organisations. They suggested that CSOs needed to raise awareness of the conflict and simultaneously of the legitimacy of their role among both stakeholders and the wider citizen body using various channels, including social media and traditional media.[130]

Such attempts fit well with the concept of 'resistance' in which CSOs seek to increase their accountability to citizens and thereby to strengthen their legitimacy.[131] It also tends to confirm the argument of Ayvazyan that raising 'awareness for the plight of civil society with the public is of great importance'.[132] Similarly, in a study of CSOs' efforts to prevent civic space restrictions, Baldus et al. found that awareness-raising campaigns, together with advocacy and targeted lobbying, were key to success.[133]

Documentation and quality of data

The closure of civic spaces can serve to conceal the atrocities that occur in civil war situations. Therefore, sustained documentation of violent events, including human rights violations, was seen as crucial, despite the risks posed to individuals and organisations. Two aspects were considered key to enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of such efforts, as well as protecting personal security. The first was to link documentation of abuses by both warring sides to international human rights law, and to send information of violations to international human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Relating abuses to international human rights law makes the information more comprehensible for international human rights organisations.[134] Networking with international human rights organisations can draw the attention of the warring sides to the consequences of violating international law and the legal requirement to prevent atrocities.[135] Such networking also provides some protection to local human rights organisations against retaliation from both warring sides in a context where their work is perceived as 'confrontational' and their security regularly threatened.[136] The second aspect was to ensure the accuracy of all such data. The representative of one human rights organisation noted that 'facts' obtained from social media sources should always be checked for accuracy, and emphasised the importance of having reliable local people on the ground to verify reports of atrocities. Another workshop participant stated that CSOs 'cannot speak until they have the facts' and 'when government knows that what they [CSOs] are saying is true, then they cannot contest it'.[137]

In such ways, organisations seek to counter the attempted de-legitimisation of their role by government. This response provides examples of 'adaptation', 'collaboration' and 'solidarity' rolled into one. Framing violent atrocities as human rights abuses, especially those suffered by civilians, sends a clear message to perpetrators concerning legal obligations and potential repercussions. Being scrupulous about the accuracy of

information, especially in an age of misinformation on social media, enhances CSOs' credibility and legitimacy. Sharing the information with international organisations increases its dissemination to a global audience, and enables international groups to display 'solidarity', as noted in the TNI report,[138] with those local human rights defenders whose personal security is threatened.

Mobilisation, networking and coalition-building

Mobilisation, networking and coalition-building are closely related, with the aim of creating more effective agency in the face of constraints and attempted de-legitimisation by the state. Workshop participants emphasised the benefits of working together and conversely it was perceived as difficult for CSOs to achieve impact if they operated in isolation.[139] Networking took place locally as well as nationally and internationally, including strong links with international organisations.[140] One outcome of networking can be the creation of coalitions of like-minded organisations, with successful examples being SNWOT and the Civil Society Platform for Peace in Cameroon.

SNWOT was formed in May 2018 as a coalition of over 150 representatives of women's organisations and individual activists. By bringing together a number of organisations and individuals to focus on one issue – the conflict and its adverse impact on women – SNWOT has made a significant impact at various levels. At the local level, SNWOT has 'mobilised grassroots women's groups in areas plagued by current conflict'.[141] It sensitised such groups 'on different issues related to their security, health, reproductive health, sexual rights, especially within the context of conflict', with local women 'becoming more aware of their rights', notably around gender-based violence.[142] At the regional and national levels, SNWOT has engaged in imaginative public demonstrations and sit-down protests, notably the 'lamentation campaigns', as well as direct action, for instance to gain access to the Major National Dialogue. Representatives stated that self-organisation and mobilisation as women given them the courage to take such direct action.[143] Further, SNWOT's activism 'drew a lot of media attention at both national and international levels'[144] to a largely neglected conflict. SNWOT certainly provides an excellent example of what Karaman and Cernov[145] referred to as activists 're-imagining their strategies' and 'reclaiming democratic spaces'. The formation of the Civil Society Platform for Peace in Cameroon created a coalition of over 30 youth-led organisations, bloggers and journalists. Its strength in numbers has reinforced its calls for an immediate ceasefire and genuine inclusive dialogue, and provided impetus to its 'Back to School' campaign.[146] There was general agreement among workshop participants on the importance of coalition building in order to influence policies and decision-making. It was suggested that each CSO should focus on a particular 'niche' area and then come together in a united coalition in a synergistic way where different areas of expertise can be complementary. This corresponds with the 'adaptation' strategy of 'building alliances with peers to exchange information and coordinate responses to repression'.[147]

Other CSOs have also engaged in local-level mobilisation, particularly thorough training. For example, workshops on peacebuilding and economic empowerment for women have been organised by Mother of Hope Cameroon,[148] and on peacebuilding and countering violent extremism for young people by Local Youth Corner.[149] Other women-led organisations have undertaken rights education with young women and

girls on gender-based violence (GBV) and other sexual rights.[150] In such ways, CSOs have created local spaces for discussion and education on pertinent topics with the aim of strengthening local people's ability to intervene and reduce incidences of violence.

However, it must be noted that such examples of mobilisation are generally uncontentious, and remain within the limits of what is acceptable to government. SNWOT is probably the foremost example of resistance to the unprecedented violence in the Anglophone regions, yet its actions and public protests have been largely tolerated by government, without mass arrests or disruption. It may be that SNWOT learnt from the fate of CACSC at the beginning of the crisis. CACSC was established as an alliance of CSOs in December 2016 to be a voice for the Anglophone population and to lead the peaceful protests. However, CACSC's advocacy of a return to the two-state federation, as created at independence in 1961, could not be countenanced by the government. In response, as noted above, the state reverted to brutal suppression of the protests, with the banning of CACSC and detention of its leaders in January 2017. Subsequently it was evident to CSOs that there were limits to their mobilisation, and any advocacy that questioned the present form of the state would result in severe repression. SNWOT and other CSOs appear to have adapted accordingly, adopting strictly non-violent methods and limiting their advocacy to ending the violence. This concurs again with the 'adaptation' strategy of 'adopting less confrontational lobbying campaigns, applying a degree of self-censorship and working within the framework of . . . (formal or informal) agreement with the authorities'.[151] This strategy of SNWOT and others has made it difficult for the state to respond aggressively with arrests and suppression of protest, but leaves them unable to address the root causes of the conflict and the longstanding grievances of the Anglophone population.

Dialogue and communication

Dialogue and communication at various levels was another important strategy pursued by CSOs that aimed to counter shrinking space by creating alternative space. Dialogue occurred with different types of stakeholders. Dialogue with people in local communities was prioritised by some organisations, while others focused on encouraging government officials to organise a more inclusive dialogue towards a peace agreement.[152] Community-level dialogue has engaged particularly with women. One focus of local dialogue has been on getting 'armed groups to drop their weapons'.[153] Despite government restrictions, some CSOs have been able to access areas where the conflict is intense and undertake dialogue with most affected communities about the conflict, its impact and how to resolve it. Workshop participants agreed it was imperative that local people's voices should be heard directly – what is necessary is 'not a dialogue in Yaoundé but in communities'.[154] CSOs then saw their role as feeding back the perspectives of those most affected people to government officials at local and national levels, not least because political representation has failed. There is evidence here of the strategy of 'combining advocacy work and service delivery',[155] with the added aim of channelling local people's perspectives and experiences of the conflict to governmental authorities and to the world at large.

Some CSOs have also met with representatives of separatist groups and with government officials in attempts to persuade them to cease fire and negotiate. CSOs have initiated discussions with regional governors in the Northwest and Southwest regions aimed at bringing local perspectives to their attention.[156] Such efforts at open communication and

dialogue were considered important for countering the suspicions of both warring sides – those of the armed separatists of CSOs working for the government; and those of the government of CSOs being oppositional and/or working with the armed groups. In this way, CSOs have 'claimed spaces' through seeking dialogue with powerful actors, talking with both sides in a peaceful manner in which NGOs can be the 'voice of the people'.[157]

Conclusion

Through the case of the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon, this paper has explored a paradox – the role of CSOs in peacebuilding from below in the context of shrinking civic space. We asked three questions, and findings are as follows.

First, in examining contributions towards conflict resolution, we noted how Cameroonian CSOs in the two English-speaking regions have responded with humanitarian assistance, documented the violence and atrocities experienced daily, and engaged in peace campaigns and conflict resolution activities. Some NGOs have entirely refocused their activities on the conflict setting, while new coalitions have emerged, most notably SNWOT, with the specific aim of ending the violence. We regard the various conflict-oriented activities as contributing to conflict resolution, both indirectly and directly. The provision of humanitarian assistance is an expression of basic humanity and solidarity with most-affected communities, essential for any attempt at peacebuilding from below. The traumatic experiences of civilians in the conflict zones are articulated by CSOs in various fora, enabling local people's voices to be heard. The documentation of atrocities and human rights violations by the warring sides, most notably against civilians, is vital in creating an accurate record of this neglected conflict and drawing international attention to it. Peace campaigns and protests, such as the lamentations campaign, have contributed more directly to conflict resolution efforts, maintaining pressure for a negotiated settlement through inclusive dialogue. Therefore, particularly in a civil war context like Cameroon where the government has been unresponsive to international mediation attempts, it is evident that peacebuilding from below by CSOs can play an important role, though one whose effectiveness is limited while government remains wedded to a military outcome.

Secondly, it is clear that peacebuilding from below can be constrained and limited under conditions of shrinking civic space. Despite some political liberalisation in the early 1990s, civic space in Cameroon has remained restricted under President Biya's autocratic rule. Oppositional space has been closed in particular for organisations that question the marginalisation of Anglophone citizens within Cameroon. In many respects, the exclusion and repression associated with 'shrinking space' has long existed for these organisations, confirming the point made by TNI.[158] Yet the closure of space has intensified since the present crisis emerged in 2016, and CSOs have experienced significant additional constraints, many pertaining to the characteristics of 'shrinking civic space' identified in the scholarly literature.[159] Freedom of expression has been curtailed, with open discussion of the form of the Cameroonian state, such as a return to a federal system, effectively prohibited. CSOs self-censor in the knowledge that to do otherwise would lead to existential threats to their organisations and to personal

security. CSOs have been subject to state surveillance, stigmatisation and de-legitimisation through intimidation and accusations of bias, as well as kidnappings by armed separatist groups.

Further, as noted earlier, although peacebuilding from below can be crucial to sustainable peace, it is not without imperfections and is saddled with complexities. Actors within this sector can be fragmented, enforce harmful practices, be politicised or become channels for violence.[160] The DRC, Burundi, and Syria are cases in point.[161] Such incidences have also contributed to criticism of the 'local' as undemocratic and illiberal.[162] In this study of Cameroon, any suggestion that local humanitarian actors have taken sides or enabled violence were soundly rebuffed by CSO participants. Despite the warnings of Ramsbotham et al., there was no evidence that CSOs here were anything other than benign actors.[163] Yet the fragility and complexity of violent contexts indicates the susceptibility of CSOs to be manipulated or exploited by violent actors, and the need for constant vigilance against this.

Yet, thirdly, despite these challenges, CSOs have responded in various imaginative and peaceful ways in attempts to reduce the impact of shrinking space and to create new spaces in which to advocate for peace. Freedoms of assembly and expression have been reasserted by women's groups like SNWOT through peaceful public protests. Mobilisation into coalitions has strengthened campaigning activities. International linkages have been leveraged, notably by human rights organisations, in order to disseminate information on atrocities to international audiences, as well as to provide some self-protection against possible reprisals. Spaces have been created to interact with most-affected communities, inclusive of young people at risk from both the security forces and the armed separatist groups. Spaces have been claimed in attempts to dialogue with the protagonists in the conflict. CSOs' responses have chimed with the 'resistance' and 'adaptation' measures outlined by Bossuyt and Ronceray,[164] and also entail CSOs creating spaces 'to meet, collaborate and learn from each other', as noted by Karaman and Cernov.[165] 'Resistance' has been evident in the mobilisation by women's groups, inclusive of non-violent street protests, while it is notable that such advocacy campaigns have sought to avoid repression by focusing on ending violence and the abuses experienced by women. CSOs have steered clear of advocacy of potential political solutions to the conflict that would likely result in arrest and detention. 'Adaptation' has been displayed by NGOs that have shifted to humanitarian relief work, thereby meeting essential needs and also providing first-hand evidence on the conflict's impact on most-affected groups to utilise in lobbying campaigns.

This research has contributed to scholarly literature on 'peacebuilding from below' and on 'shrinking civic space'. Peacebuilding from below is not without its difficulties, and the phenomenon of shrinking civic space in authoritarian contexts adds to its complexities. This particular type of civil conflict, where the Cameroon state is unyielding to international pressure and apparently intent on a military solution, is especially challenging. The space for civic action is limited in various ways. The most significant constraint is on CSOs' freedom of expression. It is impossible for them to openly discuss the root causes of the conflict and therefore of possible political solutions, such as a return to federalism or greater autonomy for the English-speaking regions. Yet, despite such difficulties, this study highlights the importance of the contributions of CSOs working for peace. Our findings are that CSOs' role has been at least three-fold: to

engage with most-affected communities and build an evidence base of the conflict's adverse impact on citizens; to draw national and international attention to the conflict; and to maintain pressure for a negotiated settlement through interactions with both warring parties. CSOs play a key role in facilitating the expression of a variety of voices from below and in mediating between local communities and regional and national-level peace negotiation processes.

The research has also contributed to our understanding of local responses to shrinking civic space in conflict situations. Recent literature has conceptualised different types of local responses. The Cameroon case has largely confirmed the relevance of these categories, providing empirical examples of 'adaptation' and 'resistance' and thereby giving substance to Bossuyt and Ronceray's theoretical framework.[166] The research has also demonstrated instances of CSOs' 're-imagining their strategies',[167] and the importance of international solidarity.[168] Further, this research has provided evidence that the formation of coalitions of CSOs to specifically campaign for conflict resolution is a particularly effective and appropriate organisational form, both strengthening advocacy and providing some self-protection. Additionally, the unique contribution of women's organisations in advocating for peace is especially significant. The study has highlighted the severity of the constraints on CSOs and the real existential threats they face, limiting what they can say and do, while simultaneously indicating how CSOs in Cameroon have demonstrated a determination and an ability to advocate for peaceful resolution of conflict in flexible and imaginative ways as opportunities emerge.

Notes

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39. Brechenmacher and Carothers, 'Defending Civic Space', 1.
40. CIVICUS, State of Civil Society Report 2020′, 12.
41. CIVICUS, 'People Power Under Attack'.
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