



A European Perspective on Engaging and Supporting Civil Society Organisations in Local Territorial Development

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Abstract: *In an inter-connected world, having strong interdependencies, the transfer of know-how represents a blueprint for development. In a transition from global to local, in order to stimulate the challenges of local development, it is paramount to understand how to act, to connect civil society with local authorities, and to create a dynamic and multi-stakeholder dialogue. Development at the local level could lead to a more engaged civil society and more predictable governance from the local authorities; for example, developing a comprehensive set of policies could contribute to a food-secure population, but also tackle issues related to transparency and accountability. The practical experience of the author in Gabon and Sao Tome and Principe will bring an innovative and original approach to complement the existing literature with the reality of the project cycle on the ground, in two specific areas such as agriculture and good governance.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The European Union's (EU) strategy to reach local territorial development in beneficiary countries was also based on building capacities, training and empowering Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In this regard, CSOs could be seen as an essential stake in effective democracies, a means to improve decision-making processes, a factor of social cohesion and a powerful channel to legitimise local power (Keita et al., 2015).

The EU, through its cooperation with partner Governments in beneficiary countries, seeks “to scale up public authorities’ capacity to work constructively with civil society, increasing trust and competencies to build up dialogue and opportunities for partnerships” (European Commission, 2012a, p. 6). As a direct consequence of this, civil society becomes more prepared and ready to contribute to civic education by “paying more attention to developing civic capacity in a way that it is better linked to local government” (Smoke, 2013). It represents a step forward for civil society to create real synergies and to continue the fight against poverty challenges, widening inequality, social exclusion and unsustainable development (Subject 2).

The CSOs should grow in environments where political, economic, and social development is possible at the local level. Otherwise, there might be a risk of having a large number of CSOs that are not used to working in synergy, being in permanent competition. In addition, there are not enough funds for all of them, and their life become very short without funding (Subject 4). In addition, the nature of the CSOs opens a new door for discussions, especially in beneficiary countries, where the non-political nature of these organisations will lead to building the right working environment.

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Furthermore, CSOs should not be influenced, nor corrupted, as they are the main drivers of project implementation on the ground: “they should not be involved in doing politics or seeking access to power, in this respect, they should be neutral and objective in their views and actions for development. At the same time, civil society should not be perceived as an opposition in front of the political actors” (Maison de la Société Civile au Bénin, 2015). In addition, the CSOs play “an important role in service delivery, complementing local and national government provision and piloting innovative projects” (European Commission, 2012a, p. 8).

The CSOs’ true involvement in the public arena is based on “institutional support, constitutional and clear legal framework; proven technical skills; credible internal governance; capacity for mobilisation, representation, lobby and strategic communication” (Maison de la Société Civile au Bénin, 2015). Based on these criteria, the EU considers the dialogue between CSOs, local authorities, international donors and other stockholders should be “timely, predictable and transparent” (European Commission, 2012a, p. 8).

By having already this background information on the nature and role played by CSOs on the ground, the central aim of this paper is to examine the EU’s strategy to engage with local stakeholders, mainly with civil society, to elaborate action plans and to implement technical assistance programmes in line with the SDGs. From this point of view, this paper will try to answer the research question: “*To what extent the EU supports the capacity building of civil society organisations in beneficiary countries and addresses the shortcomings of the two specific areas, agriculture in Gabon and governance in Sao Tome and Principe?*”. In terms of methodology, the current paper will be based on qualitative research methods ranging from EU official documents and local strategy papers to case studies and ground interviews.

The EU’s engagement with civil society needs to foster a plan for the future, in line with the SDGs, having as main target the necessity of “building capacity targeted to proximate needs (and more demand driven) with appropriate follow up [...] getting feedback, learning from experience and adjusting policy as needed” (Smoke, 2013). The EU is well known and respected for its foreign aid (especially for a wide range of funded opportunities), but also for trying to involve as much as possible the civil society in the development of its thematic programmes and project implementation (Subject 3).

Therefore, in order to better understand this bottom-up and top-down continuous dialogue, we will further explore throughout this paper how the EU has adopted a more participatory and inclusive approach in order to structure and map the needs of the civil society in Gabon and Sao Tome and Principe. Based on the CSO Sustainability Index, the aspects usually evaluated by international organisations refer to the working environment, legal framework, organisational and advocacy capacity, financial sustainability, service delivery, infrastructure and reputation. However, neither Gabon nor Sao Tome and Principe is situated in the highest category of sustainability (Louvouezo et al., 2015).

2. THE ROLE OF CSOS IN GABON (AGRICULTURAL SECTOR)

Gabon is a small country in Central Africa with a population of 1.8 million, out of which 14% is represented by foreigners, excluding a large number of unregistered immigrants. The economy is heavily dependent on oil, being exposed to fluctuations in price and income volatility. With two billion barrels of proven reserves, Gabon is the fourth largest oil producer in sub-Saharan

Africa. Although classified as a superior middle-income country, Gabon has nevertheless all the characteristics of a poor country, with very large inequalities and more than a third of its population under the poverty line (EU Delegation, 2015).

Agriculture is not only an important sector in Gabon, but also a valuable part of further local development and SDGs achievement. Gabon is a middle-income country, which means that economic and financial aspects should not constitute a real constraint to development, and the provision of services to the population should not be affected (Subject 2). However, mining, agricultural and forest sectors, while offering enormous potential in theory, are confronted with a low level of development. Starting from this point, it is important to focus the aid actions on crucial aspects, such as agriculture and capacity building at the local level. Ranked among the richest countries in Africa, Gabon has an economy based to a large extent on the exploitation of oil resources. This is why investing in local stakeholders and CSOs, sustainable development might be achieved, as “Africa is clearly viewed as a potential agricultural giant” (SPORE, 2014, p. 17).

On the other side, the Government wants to impose a new dynamic for the sustainable development of the agricultural sector at the national level. In this way, a series of problems need serious attention, such as lack of interest and expertise in agricultural issues at the national level which makes it difficult to ensure high-level production and regular supply of Libreville in food products; improving distribution channels to sell more and generate more incomes; and improving the living conditions of women interested in agriculture by raising their income level.

The National Strategy for Poverty Reduction (NPRS, 2012-2016) has been focused on diversifying agricultural production, increasing productivity, and developing the processing and market sectors. In the agricultural field, “food and vegetable production increased by 7% in 2014, primarily due to higher demand from restaurants and hotels. Overall, the agricultural sector has increased its contribution to GDP following the launch of an emergency plan for food security based on the promotion of agro-pastoral products (cassava, banana, rice, vegetables, poultry and pork), and fruit farm development programmes. Despite this, the sector remains underdeveloped with its potential constrained by infrastructure and logistical bottlenecks; especially limited access to credit. Consequently, Gabon remains largely dependent on the import of basic goods, such as wheat and rice” (World Bank, 2015, pp. 6-7).

In this geographical area, there are good weather conditions for agriculture, but this sector has been little supported, hence the country depends heavily on food imports because domestic production is not enough for the domestic market. Improving productivity, diversifying production, securing production systems, and enhancing the value of products through improved storage, processing and distribution chains, all of these should be part of an interconnected network. Moreover, “transparent communication related to natural resources lead to perspectives of change and poverty eradication” (SPORE, 2013, p. 12).

2.1. SWOT Analysis of the Civil Society in Gabon

According to the Association “Observatoire Gabonais”, the civil society in Gabon is fragmented, and poorly structured, with an insufficient level of internal communication. They have a weak capacity for financial management, lack of qualified human resources and conflicts of interest problems that make it difficult to move towards advocacy roles (i.e.: people working at the same time for the Government and in different NGOs to exercise their influence for a particular interest and/

or cause). In this regard, Gabonese CSOs should improve their positioning in the public arena, by carrying out initiatives to strengthen the participatory democracy, considering the demand for transparent and responsible governance is increasing (Subject 2). However, realistic perspectives can be enhanced through a SWOT analysis regarding the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that Gabonese CSOs are facing, as presented in the table below.

Table 1. Gabon – Country SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
- Acceptance of political support to civil society reinforcement and development.	- Tendency to finance projects rather than processes; - Short-term vision with limited attention to build trust and collaborate with the State; - CSOs are not interested in defining a coherent strategy for action and a proper trajectory of institutional development as an actor of governance; - No use of political dialogue for advocacy, to improve the CSOs environment (especially the legal framework); - Lack of structured dialogue with the civil society.	- Complementary opportunities and synergies between the European Commission, Member States as well as Technical and Financial Partners.	- Political instability; - Restrictive policies for the CSOs formulated unilaterally by the Government; - Unrealistic ambitions to develop and support the CSOs as a governance actor.

Note: For thematic sectors, the EU insists on the importance of methodology in project proposals from the CSOs, the identification of targeted roles in the field (tasks and responsibilities), sustainable measures for project development and risk analysis. An integrated approach is needed by combining more factors such as increased household production, creating new opportunities for processing and storage, facilitating access to national markets, and better coordination between the State and civil society. Biological agriculture, such as cassava, for instance, can lead to a sustainable agri-food sector and creates agri-business perspectives.

Source: EU Delegation, 2015.

2.2. The Impact of Implemented Projects in the Field of Agriculture

The project “On mange local” was launched for a duration of three years, with the support of the EU Delegation, together with other 19 agricultural associations from the platform “Or Vert”. The implementation of this project contributed to the progress of some development goals, such as SDG 2: zero hunger, SDG 3: good health and well-being, SDG 8: decent work and economic growth. The overall objective of the project was to strengthen the CSOs’ capacities and to increase their involvement in policy initiatives for poverty reduction and the country’s sustainable development through agriculture. Through these activities, the main goal was to reduce the dependency of Gabon on food products vis-à-vis the neighbouring countries, especially for bananas, cassava, and vegetable crops (e.g.: onion, pepper, tomatoes, cabbage, eggplant, etc.).

“On mange local” was a project that showed effective commitment and ownership towards local capacities development in order to give continuity in fighting rural poverty. By setting specific goals such as (i) increasing local food production to ensure better availability of low cost food products; (ii) improving household food security through a better protein-energy relationship; (iii) reducing rural poverty through increased agricultural income of the local stakeholders involved; thus, the non-oil economy (including agri-business) can create new employment opportunities in the agri-food sector, formalise the sector through greater professionalization of the operators and consolidate the results obtained in the scope of food security projects.

The added value of the project was represented by the involvement of international experts, with hands-on experience in agriculture, in charge of the technical support provided to the farmers.

Their involvement was required especially in terms of (i) planning development for agricultural work, (ii) checking and finding solutions for possible sanitation and technical problems, (iii) monitoring compliance with the use of fertilizers and pesticides, (iv) and implementing agricultural techniques that allow the soil conservation. Another important step is to build synergies between the stakeholders involved in order to improve the production flow, to set-up trade agreements with resellers and retailers (as part of the distribution chain) and to facilitate the flow of local products on the market. Once the goods and local products arrive on the market, it is equally recommended to create a brand that needs not only promotion strategies but also marketing and communication campaigns, therefore to stimulate and increase the demand.

At the economic and social level, the project also contributed to employment schemes (especially for women and people coming from vulnerable groups), promoted the national economy through the consumption of local products and reduced the import dependency on agricultural products. In addition, defining agricultural policies at the local and national levels, organising international seminars on food security, and drafting a policy against the phenomenon of land grabbing represent some concrete measures to ensure the sustainability of the project.

The project was designed to meet the needs expressed by the target groups (farmers, civil society and local authorities) in both urban and rural areas. However, additional risks that could affect the project at different stages have been taken into account in order to make the project sustainable: natural hazards risks (adverse weather conditions, high winds dangerous for some crops, bushfire during the dry season, elephants' invasion), economic risks (thefts, difficulties in trade and economic speculation), political and social risks (conflicts between farmers and population, low motivation and knowledge ownership between the main stakeholders, internal management difficulties: land law and property law problems).

It can be seen that agriculture and human rights are very close inter-connected. Agriculture is a complex sector and its development is dependent on favourable climate conditions and water access. Right to property becomes crucial not only for farmers but also for those interested in agricultural assets.

3. THE ROLE OF CSOS IN SAO TOME AND PRINCIPE (GOVERNANCE SECTOR)

Sao Tome and Principe is an agricultural country, highly dependent on cocoa cultivation, which generates 85% of export earnings. In the medium and long term, Sao Tome and Principe has also the ambition to develop the oil and the service sectors (especially based on eco-tourism). The State budget is 90% assured of international aid, coming from bilateral donors and multi-lateral banks such as the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the United Nations, the European Union, Portugal, France, Taiwan, and even Brazil and Angola. However, over 50% of the Sao Tome and Principe population continues to live in extreme poverty conditions (Campos, 2008, pp. 64-68).

Poor governance and the absence of transparency in data management of public and collective resources foster inequalities and underdevelopment. Therefore, it is important to stimulate public debate and make accessible the information in public arena, to create spaces for debate, and mechanisms for access to qualitative information, as well as to generate participation opportunities in the political and social dialogue, not only for the CSOs, but also for the citizens. Another problem is represented by the poor social dialogue on public policies, as CSOs are in most

cases only informed and not involved in the definition of policies. On the other hand, the civil society – still new and fragile in Sao Tome and Principe – lacks the capacities and resources that could allow them to become an active partner in the monitoring process, but also create their monitoring mechanisms of governance.

Sao Tome and Principe are currently included in the OECD and World Bank lists of fragile states, in particular, because of the vulnerability of its economic structure and its insularity. A potential conflict might arise at any time, considering the country is not accompanied by good practices at the level of transparency and accountability. Codes of conduct and good working practices are highly required to achieve sustainable development, but also to spend money more responsibly at the national level.

Natural resources can lead to strong GDP growth without having necessarily a poverty reduction. However, the exploitation of extractive industries, combined with good governance, can generate resources for the benefit of the poorest populations and might lead to concrete improvements in people’s lives. In this sense, it is crucial to have public access to budget information and to debate on the revenues utilisation, including monitoring capacity implementation for public policies and governance.

3.1. SWOT Analysis of the Civil Society in Sao Tome and Principe

As 90% of the investment budget in Sao Tome and Principe is guaranteed through international cooperation for development, the CSOs often manage to substitute the State – through their channels of funds absorption – especially in the social sector and governance area (Subject 1). The CSOs in Sao Tome and Principe are often replacing the State in many areas, trying to help and to provide services in governance, social and health sectors. Most of the development projects, managed by international and local NGOs, often represent how certain services are provided to the population.

To create a proper environment for cooperation and collaboration, as well as to ensure positive results and sustainable solutions, it is vital to strengthen technical capacity building and to enhance transparency in access and management of financial resources (Subject 1). In this way, the role of CSOs in monitoring and implementing public policies becomes more powerful, especially based on a SWOT analysis that identifies the strengths, the weaknesses, the opportunities, and the threats of the CSOs from Sao Tome and Principe, as highlighted in the table 2.

Table 2. Sao Tome and Principe – Country SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Acceptance of the importance of regular support to civil society; - Support offered to structure the civil society; - International NGOs play a catalyst role for the civil society. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tendency to finance projects as a service delivery rather than as a logical process; - Low level of complementarity between the various stakeholders in support of civil society; - The EU’s dominant tool for projects implementation (i.e.: “Call for proposals”) does not encourage CSOs to develop a coherent strategy for action and/or an institutional framework development as a governance actor; - Failure to take into account the concerns of emerging CSOs; - Absence of a structured dialogue with civil society. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The will of the EU and Member States to make significant steps to consider CSOs as governance actors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unrealistic ambitions in supporting CSOs (as governance actors) through the volume of cooperation and development.

Source: European Commission, 2015b.

3.2. The Impact of Implemented Projects in the Field of Governance

Good governance, guided by the principles of transparency, accountability and responsibility, can contribute to the country's development and improve the level of well-being of the whole population. Good governance is a window of opportunity for multilateral cooperation and a dynamic environment of synergies, complementarities and achievements (European Commission, 2016). The project "Civil Society Development through communication, training and advocacy" sought to address issues such as institutional dialogue to improve governance and transparency, communication and good monitoring practices. The implementation of this project contributed to the progress of some development goals, such as SDG 11: sustainable cities and communities and SDG 16: peace, justice and strong institutions.

The main goal of the project was to reinforce advocacy skills and capabilities of public policy management that could allow active participation in the political and social dialogue. The effective participation of the CSOs is a prerequisite to ensure that the benefits gained from natural resources are distributed more equitably: "when you try to influence policies and legislations, you are forced to work with the central government; you have to work with the central government" (Romeo, 2013). Moreover, the mechanisms of inspection and regulation should respond more to international worries than to the internal will of good governance and therefore require a real national appropriation: "appropriation is one of the mechanisms in place to ensure financial sustainability once the project support has come to an end. Without it, projects cannot be sustainable" (Subject 3).

Good governance and transparency are imperative, especially when a large amount of foreign aid is received by a beneficiary country: "if we have to choose who to help from a financial perspective, then it is very difficult, because there is no discrimination in development and aid should be provided to everyone. Practically speaking, giving priority to a particular category of the society, automatically means to disadvantage another social category" (Subject 4). Thus, advocacy initiatives, transparency and monitoring practices must be offered in return, as a guarantee that the aid provided has a positive impact on the ground.

Furthermore, the successful implementation of the project was based on a series of strategic pillars as follows: (i) the active participation of different target groups; (ii) the adhesion of the target groups to different social media channels; (iii) the ability to progressively build a collaborative environment between the Government and the civil society; (iv) the information disclosure in a timely and clear manner by the Santomean institutions; (v) good capacity for communication, organisation and coordination, by all the stakeholders that have been involved in the process of project implementation; (vi) the availability of trainers with the necessary requirements for the successful implementation of the planned activities.

The project sustainability depended on the financial, institutional, political, and environmental sustainability frameworks:

- a) financial sustainability: the project increased its visibility over time and became a bridge for new partnerships, enabling the possibility of receiving more funds for financing the whole spectrum of the designed project activities;
- b) institutional sustainability: the project allowed the direct involvement of target groups in various exchange opportunities and greater awareness through national campaigns of information and advocacy, therefore enhancing the multi-stakeholder cooperation on different layers;

- c) political sustainability: the management of public finances and the investment in development have been an open discussion in the Santomean society, so as to influence the practices of the Santomean government at the level of accountability and transparency through the publication of various documents such as the proposed budget, the approved budget, the audit reports or the utilisation plan of natural resources;
- d) environmental sustainability: some topics included reflection on the management of natural resources, not only in financial terms, but also on how to avoid negative effects and promote environmental sustainability in order to positively contribute to the country's development in short, medium and long term.

4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The current paper could represent an interesting starting point for further research and analysis, mainly on the role played by the key drivers of local development correlated with climate change and the achievement of SDGs by 2030 (i.e. agriculture in relation to climate change and governance as a catalyzer for climate policy initiatives). The impact can be reached by empowering local stakeholders and strengthening their capacity to improve their national environments. In addition, promoting regional dialogue and engaging in strategic thinking on issues related to climate change - as a cross-cutting factor of extreme poverty acceleration - will facilitate a gain in terms of technical expertise and will ease the process of environment protection and disaster prevention.

Civil society, local authorities and line ministries - in beneficiary countries - should contribute to inclusive economic growth and development of the green economy through the capacities of professional organisations and foreign aid, budget support and monitoring, awareness at all levels on the challenges of climate change (i.e. as it is already mentioned within the SDG 13 on climate action). The global architecture of aid requires more and more involvement of civil society, as they represent the closest category of the society able to solve the problem together with all international stakeholders that are committed and engaged to reach the development goals.

5. CONCLUSION

The EU is seen by the Governments of the beneficiary countries as a genuine partner, mainly because the EU could deepen democracy and play an important role in the implementation of national development policies (Subject 1). The EU is “a major global development player implementing most of its external assistance spending through a large, decentralised network of country and regional EU Delegations. They play therefore a crucial role in translating the EU's broad international cooperation and development policy objectives into effective action and results in the field” (European Commission, 2015a, p. 11).

This paper started in light of the main research question: “To what extent the EU supports the capacity building of civil society organisations in beneficiary countries and addresses the shortcomings of the two specific areas, agriculture in Gabon and governance in Sao Tome and Principe?”. We've seen that the EU's commitment, through its EU Delegations and its Member States, should be reflected through the impact on the ground and to bring CSOs at a higher level of professionalism (including better internal governance, results-based management, mastery of techniques and development tools, monitoring and evaluation of public policies, etc.). There is a need for a greater involvement of CSOs in political life and it is equally important to increase

the transparency in access and management of the resources. This is supposed to strengthen the CSOs role, both in terms of monitoring and implementation of public policies.

The two cross-cutting areas such as agriculture and good governance have been chosen according to the most specific needs of the African countries that have been analysed during the field research. In the case of Gabon, it was explained that it is a particular country, with emerging ambitions to develop its agricultural sector through the involvement of civil society. On the other side, Sao Tome and Principe is a country that counts on the support of international donors and technical assistance, which means that transparency and accountability in managing funds should be achieved through good governance to carry out development activities, projects and programmes.

However, it has been observed “the ‘affectio societatis’ of the African countries, beyond their great declarations, continue to remain weak” (Subject 3). The national CSOs, despite their activism in the country, have difficulties in presenting projects under the calls for proposal launched by the EU or other international donor-funding agencies, not only in terms of writing but also from a technical and financial capability point of view, which is generally insufficient to apply.

A tailored vision needs “an understanding of the actors, the environment they operate in, the national / sectoral / local processes of change they are engaged in, their interrelation with other relevant actors (the State, the private sector) and their own dynamics and governance systems” (European Commission, 2012b, p. 41). This shows the importance of the strategic approach, both in Gabon and Sao Tome and Principe, in the process of structuring civil society, as well as the importance of creating links between the local authorities and the technical and financial partners.

Based on what has been proved and highlighted in this paper, we can consider development as a “process directed at outcomes encapsulating improved standards of living and greater capacity for self-reliance in economies that are technically more complex and more dependent on global integration than before” (Kingsbury et al., 2004, p. 22). Good governance plays a key role in various development actions and should be taken into consideration by all actors and stakeholders involved in the SDGs implementation:

“to support the domestic efforts, tailored to the needs and context of each society to build sustainable democratic states, resilient to external and internal shocks [...] to promote accountable and transparent institutions, participatory decision-making and public access to information [...] to promote effective multi-level governance, with the participation of vulnerable groups, through partnerships between national, sub-national and local governments [...] to support and promote an open and enabling space for civil society, inclusive approaches and transparency in decision making at all levels” (European Commission, 2016, pp. 16-17).

As explained by the European Commission, all development efforts should be in line with the local needs and the country context. Increasing the level of resilience in developing countries can decisively contribute to avoiding possible shocks and being better prepared in terms of communication means, transportation systems, population movements, and shelters for food and water. Good governance leads to democratic systems and transparent institutions, making easier the identification and common management of resources at the national level. If these criteria are fulfilled, then CSOs can play an important role in decision-making processes at all levels. However, they need training to increase their capacities and capabilities, and the EU can transfer its know-how in the field.

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Guiding Interview Protocol

Subject 1, representative of the NGO Federation of Sao Tome and Principe, interview held on 12 January 2016, Sao Tome and Principe.

Subject 2, member of the Association “Observatoire Gabonais”, interview held on 19 February 2016, Libreville, Gabon.

Subject 3, former representative of the EU Delegation to Gabon for Equatorial Guinea, Sao Tome and Principe and ECCAS, interview held on 12 August 2016, Brussels, Belgium.

Subject 4, Romanian diplomat with vast experience on the African continent, interview held on 28 August 2016, Bucharest, Romania.

