A Forum for the Voices: From Civil Society to President Adesina to Graça Machel and Youssou Ndour

Editorial by Vanessa Moungar, Director, Gender, Women and Civil Society Department, African Development Bank

"We will work much harder, collectively and in unison, to accelerate the impact of our work" these are the words of President Akinwumi Adesina at the opening of the inaugural session of the 2020 virtual Civil Society forum held in late November under the theme "Engaging Civil Society in Building Back Better After COVID-19", setting the tone for the high level and insightful conversation with the Honorable Graça Machel and world-renowned singer Youssou Ndour.

The words of the President must be our collective motto for the next years to overcome this pandemic and rebuild a "new" Africa with the participation of all stakeholders and particularly civil society organizations, which have incredible potential to accelerate socio-economic change at scale.

This year was the most disrupting year of the 21st century so far with a pandemic that affected the entire planet and taught us a big lesson: the world is interconnected, and global stability relies on local resilience. We must fight common challenges by breaking the silos of countries or sectors, for our response to truly be inclusive.

With champions such as Graça Machel and the Graça Machel Trust, which recently joined the Africa Development Bank- Civil Society Committee, and Youssou Ndour with the Worldwide Africa Network initiative against COVID-19, I know that we will succeed in continuing to push further for a truly human-centered approach to development interventions and enhance our focus on women and girls as drivers of change for Africa’s transformation.

The 2020 forum set a clear path for enhanced collaboration between the Bank and civil society actors, and President Adesina’s inaugural statement of the Bank’s six commitments will be our roadmap for the year to come.

Let’s listen, work with and learn from each other to enhance the resilience of our continent.

Vanessa Moungar
Reflecting on Civil Society Best Practices In Responding to COVID-19: A People-Centered Civil Society Forum

A Word from Zéneb Touré, Manager, Civil Society and Community Engagement Division, African Development Bank

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted systems and organizations leading them to adapt their way of functioning to the restrictions caused by it. For the very first time since 2009, the African Development Bank Civil Society Forum had to be organized virtually. The African Development Bank is not the only organization changing its way of working. Civil society organizations have had to do so as well. The COVID-19 crisis has once again demonstrated their ability of being at the forefront in times of crisis, and of coping with the situation to provide effective and rapid responses. Yes, the resilience of our communities was proven, as well as pan-African mutual aid and Africa’s ability to overcome challenges when it is united and rooted in solidarity.

This is what this edition of our 2020 Civil Society Forum was all about: a response enabling to improve the livelihood of populations during these difficult times was made by the people themselves. The crisis has made inequalities that already existed on the continent even clearer now. In response, institutions, states and most of all, communities, have reacted fast and conducted innovative and efficient initiatives. From designing a remote offline school that you can access to by using a radio, to limiting the spread of the virus through community engagement or to distributing health kits on internally displaced persons sites, civil society organizations have proven to act across the continent and in all areas: food and nutrition, communications, information technology, youth, health, gender…This year’s Civil Society Forum aimed at shedding light on such initiatives and provided a platform for civil society actors to come and present them.

Yes, the virus affected every country, impacting its people, its economies, its health and education systems, and much more. Yet, thanks to sharing of experience and best practices, Africa succeeded in drawing lessons from it. There is no end to learning, and this is why in this edition of our “Voices of Citizens in Africa”, we have reached out to different actors for them to share their contribution in re-shaping a post-COVID Africa and present their new way of working.

I am hopeful and convinced that we are following the right path and that we will get to this “new Africa” we are all talking about.

I wish you a great read!

Zéneb Touré


Early in March 2020, following the outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Africa, the Africa Union Economic, Social and Cultural Council (AU-ECOSOCC) team along with the African Development Bank (the Bank) Civil Society and Community Engagement Division initiated jointly a periodic webinar series to raise awareness and sensitize African citizens, civil society and diaspora at large about the pandemic. The first stage of the webinar series focused on the outbreak and the emergency response. As the continental response to COVID-19 transitions from emergency to long-term reconstruction, the webinar series has also shifted to themes central to the elaboration of new frameworks that will be required to facilitate recovery, build resilience, and adapt institutions and systems to the realities of post-COVID socio-economics in Africa, with civil society organizations (CSOs) at the forefront. Capitalizing on the Webinar first series recommendations for a more inclusive reconstruction agenda, (report available https://bit.ly/30mPpnQ), the second series has addressed accountability mechanisms and the perspectives of the reinforcement of a pan-African solidarity, the role of Youth, the resilience in education systems and the regional integration boosted by the Continental Fair Trade Agreement.

The Stakeholders participating in the webinars shared experiences confirming that keeping CSOs involved in monitoring health outcomes, in tracking budget spending and in providing user feedback is critical to reinforce accountability and ensure transparency.

This pandemic can become an opportunity to attain a Pan African Vision of an integrated, united, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens.

As for the young people of Africa, they continue to demonstrate their resilience and their creativity and spirit of enterprise, through the many outstanding youth initiatives that have emerged during this period. With 75% of Africa’s population under the age of 35, it is critical that youth be supported and equipped with the skills and resources necessary to upscale their initiatives.

The education system must be entirely re-imagined, taking into account distance learning, access to educational materials, access to the internet, and the adaptability of teaching techniques.

The sense of urgency that is coming from the crisis must translate into accelerated action on things that will make our continent less dependent on others in times like this. Accelerating Regional Integration is one of the priorities. Consuming locally has for example
The contribution of civil society in the continent path to emerge stronger is definitely essential and will enable to prepare for the next normal.

Luther Yaméogo, Principal Civil Society Engagement Advocacy Officer, Civil Society and Community Engagement Division, African Development Bank

The African Development Bank Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the the Bank’s Response to COVID-19

In the wake of the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, the populations of the African continent, already vulnerable due to various economic difficulties, have found themselves even more vulnerable with the stagnation or even the cessation of economic activities and lack of sufficient medical resources to accommodate the needs of the populace. To mitigate these effects, the African Development Bank, its Board of Directors and the Staff Council decided to set up the COVID-19 CSR Campaign aimed at providing basic necessities to the less fortunate and to support local communities across our continent. The initiative involved the collection of voluntary contributions from the Staff, Board Members and Retirees of the Bank and focused on i) the provision of the basic requirements to foster personal hygiene, ii) provision of food supplies to the needy, and iii) circumventing contagion.

Since Bank staff are confined to working from home, the donation has been made in kind through NGOs and CSOs specialized in humanitarian work. These NGOs and CSOs were selected by the CSR working group with the insight knowledge of the expertise of the Civil Society Division of the African Development Bank. These organizations are well entrenched in Africa with the requisite experience and knowledge on the ground. They also have the facilities to channel the donation from urban cities to the rural areas and the needy. The donation seeks to bolster already set-up efforts by the various NGOs to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 to African Countries and to prevent further spread of the disease.

The recipient countries were selected based on various criteria such as fragility and the impact of COVID-19. The Staff Council has worked with the Country Managers of these countries to ensure the successful execution of the project.

Esther Lehou-Dan, Chairperson, Staff Council, African Development Bank

Bouncing Back from the Coronavirus - Civil Society Organizations Share their Experience

Three organizations tell us more about how the pandemic impacted their way of working and how some re-oriented their activities.

“The pandemic has rather comforted us in our fundamental choices”

One of the numerous webinars Dr. Gilles Yabi has been taking part in during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In fact, the pandemic has created everywhere in the world an unprecedented demand for new reflection on the political, economic and social choices of our human societies and of course on the state of health systems. It is WATHI’s purpose to permanently and thoroughly debate these substantive issues in the
context of our continent. We had just released a document with recommendations on improving health systems in West Africa when COVID-19 was taking its toll in our part of the world. The pandemic has rather comforted us in our transversal and eclectic approach”.

Dr. Gilles Yabi, Economist and political analyst, Founder of WATHI, a citizen think tank from West Africa

“In the midst of all this, learning, working and life in general has had to continue”

“We are living in unprecedented times due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Social and economic activities have been brought to a literal stand still as health experts around the world battle day and night to find a permanent and lasting solution for the pandemic. Measures to control the spread of the virus – including school closures, working from home, physical distancing and restrictions on movements have been put in place in majority of African countries.

In the midst of all this, learning, working and life in general has to continue. FAWE has not been an exception. At the Regional Secretariat based in Nairobi Kenya, staff continue to work remotely as they maintain close communication on a daily basis through platforms such as Zoom and Webex, increased emails and phone calls. International air travels to and from Kenya resumed on 1st August, 2020 therefore, there is hope for FAWE staff to conduct field visits in the near future but for now, these have been put on hold until further notice.

Regionally, FAWE National Chapters have also had to adopt new ways of working. Just like the Regional Secretariat, most of the chapter staff work from home while others report to work past peak hours to minimize contact in transit. Notably, FAWE Malawi was appointed in the national task force on reopening of schools, colleges and universities while FAWE Kenya has been involved in debate and decision making on reopening of schools”.

Emily Buyaki, Communications Officer, Forum of African Women Educationalists (FAWE)

“People were becoming so afraid and worried especially that the healthcare and social amenities in the country could not sustainably contain the spread of the pandemic”

“We are a Cameroonian Youth-led Civil Society Organization and support peace-building initiatives especially in the Far North, Northwest and Southwest regions of the country. As a group of young peace builders, we observed that people were becoming so afraid and worried especially that the healthcare and social amenities in the country could not sustainably contain the spread of the pandemic. We also observed that the availability of Personal Protective Material (PPE) became scarce and very expensive as some individuals created an artificial scarcity and were focused on making money. To further compound matters, fake news and misinformation about the pandemic were on the rise with potentially disastrous consequences.

Despite our limited resources, we decided to form a coalition with medical personnel on the frontline by launching the Operation One Person One Hand Sanitizer campaign. Rather than closing our office, we decided to transform it into a Rapid Response Lab for the production of PPEs. This campaign focuses on mobilizing young people from different occupations to serve as champions against COVID-19, on producing PPEs locally (hand sanitizers, facemasks and soap) and on donating to vulnerable communities. It also focuses on online and offline (door-to-door) sensitization to counter misinformation and fake news, and provision of free counselling and mental health support to victims through phone calls and text messages. It also collected data on the perception of individuals vis-à-vis the pandemic, vaccine and other community issues. Local Youth Corner’s COVID-19 response has mobilised over 2000 young volunteers, produced and donated over 100,000 bottles of hand sanitizers, 30,000 facemasks and 25,000 bars of soap. Over 370 communities in 9 regions with over 2 million people have been sensitized. The initiative was recently recognized by the government and UN system in Cameroon as the Best Youth COVID-19 response in Cameroon during the commemoration of the International Youth Day”.

Christian Achaleke, National Coordinator of youth-led civil society organization Local Youth Corner Cameroon

This year, the Girls’ Conference on Education was also organized virtually, due to COVID-19 restrictions