

## **Collective Action Is The Best Way Forward**

*By: Amos Sawyer*

*From April 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> 2000, the Africa Leadership Forum held an international conference of civil society organizations from 20 African countries in Lome, Togo. The focus was the Conference on Security Stability. Development and Co-operation. Several seminal papers were delivered at the conference by eminent scholars from different parts of the continent. Two of them were **Professor Amos Sawyer**, former President of the Republic of Liberia at a most turbulent period in that country's history and Professor Abdoulaye Bathily, formerly of the Universite de Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar Senegal and now a serving minister in the new government of Abdoulaye Wade in Senegal. Both of them spoke with the Editor of **Africa Forum**, **Bolaji Abdullahi** on different issues related to Africa's search for security stability, development and co-operation. Excerpts:*

***You were the head of the interim government in your country at a most critical period in that country's history. What do you think recommended you to the people?***

Actually it was an arrangement among the political parties and civil society organizations and not actually an election as such. I think I was selected because I did not have presidential ambition, so to say, at that time. There was the proposal of the seven man committee on the election that the head of the interim government would not be eligible to run in the elections and many of the people who were then members of the interim government had for long had such ambitions. That was why I was selected, nothing more than that.

***You also played a crucial part in the reconstruction process in Liberia. What is the situation like since the end of the war?***

The reconstruction process is still going on and I'm sorry to say that it's rather slow, much too slow for my own liking. Even though the war ended three years ago we are not necessarily moving as fast as we should. There are several reasons. The peace process is slow because of the nature of the settlement that we had. If you recall, we were at war amongst ourselves and the intervention of the international community, and the sub-region led to the quick process; a very brief process of disarmament and demobilization followed immediately by elections in which three out of four leaders of the warring factions contested and one of them won. There has not then been a serious reconciliation process since the elections and you can see the results of that because right now, all of the opponents of the leader that won (Mr. Taylor), all of the other military people have left the country and in many cases some of their chief lieutenants have also left! So it is a situation where we need a reconciliation policy in which people have confidence, as the breaking of confidence is the major crisis on earth.

***Talking about confidence, I guess that would involve creating a kind of grievance ventilation structure for the people, or something in that direction. Would you suggest a Truth and Reconciliation Commission like that of South Africa perhaps, for Liberia?***

You know, every country has to find its own path to reconciliation. My problem with our approach is that we don't seem to have an approach. We have said: let bygones be bygones and some of us have said: well, let us take the slogan as a rallying point, but let us now put some substance into this. What does it mean to say that bygones be bygones? Does it have something to do with the rule of law and equal justice under the law? Does it have to do with access to economic opportunities? These are the issues we are grappling with at the moment and I don't think we are grappling with them very well. That is why reconciliation is still a critical problem.

Considering that at 56, you are still very young to be president of your country, do you have such an ambition at all?

No, I'm not ambitious along that line I like what I'm doing presently. I have done these sorts of things for over thirty years you see. Before the war I was not a regular politician. I mixed academic work with social activism, grassroots organization. I worked with labour unions or peasant organisations or student movements. The question of empowerment has been my life work. I like to continue doing this.

You were once the chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee under the late President Samuel Doe; in spite of that you were arrested in 1984 on the charges that you were trying to import commotion into Liberia. What would you say happened exactly?

Let me tell you what happened. First there were two factors driving the constitution-making process. One was that the constitution as an organic law was one of the sources of our problems and so there was a need to democratize, beginning with the constitution. The second was that after the coup, it became evident, very clearly, that Mr. Doe and his people were embarking on a wrong path and so that constitution-making process provided an exit through transition. That was why we set a timetable for a return to constitutional rule as a way of getting the military out of office as quickly as one could in a reasonable time. Now when we were through with the constitution and there had been a referendum, Doe was under conflicting influences. There were some people telling him that he should go back to school. There were other people saying he was president already, why not go through elections and find away? But it was clear that for Doe to win, he would have to rig the election and there would be trouble. I was foolhardy enough to go and tell him this, that he should not run for the presidency; that he should go back to school, all the things he did not want to hear! Of course! I paid the price but I still think that, had he taken my advice, things would not have been like this. The road was rugged. I spent some time in jail and under house arrest, but I hope we can begin to build now.

The anti-poverty group, Movement for Justice in Africa, the Liberian People's Party, Centre for Democratic Empowerment; you were involved in all of these. What exactly do you want?

I told you it's my life's work, the question of empowerment, helping people to develop their own potentials. There is power in organization, you must realize; human artisanship, human engineering knows no bound! I believe in the power of human beings, if properly organized, to grapple with their own problems and pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, so to say. The organizations are used for this and I think that we should always try to help people do these.

And this has driven me virtually all my life. That is why leadership has always been for me a question of enlightenment, a question of organization.

***Is this the same thing you are doing now with the Centre for Democratic Empowerment?***

Yes. In the Centre we are doing some things that I connect to how people exist in moving from war, through a kind of humanitarian emergency stage, to the reconstruction of their own lives. Some of the things we do now for example, include a study of residual conflicts. The war is over but there are still pockets of conflicts, fueling conflicts, mobilizing ethnic sentiments and ethnic resources, of one group against the other. We are investigating peace and we are coming up with recommendations as to how best these problems can be addressed. We are doing some things about children, as far as promoting the implementation of the convention on the rights of a child is concerned. There is a panel of eminent persons involved; our group serving as the secretariat. We set the task of raising children's issues in the national debate putting in all the gender issues and advocating a reconstructive approach that put children issues center stage; a sort of Child Development Centre approach, if you like. We are working on women's issues with respect to *Micro-credits* and male sensitization. As I was saying, we are also working on elections issues, largely from the point of view of trying to improve the electoral system so that it can become a better instrument for the democratization process. So, I see the empowerment issue as an extension of the democratization process and not only an extension but as an integral part of it. So you may have your electoral democracy but you have to go beyond that, so that power really resides with the people, and with their own resources and their own ingenuity they can take charge of their own destiny.

President Doe came to power through a coup in 1980. But it has been variously argued that, that coup was made possible by the stage you set; that you were trying to revolutionize the country and Doe took advantage of that to carry out his coup. What do you think of that assessment?

You know, when you have an oligarchy in place, any comment about democracy is seen as revolutionary and destabilizing. When we began in 1979, it was with an initiative to rescue the electoral process from the fraud and farce it had become, in the hope that we could avoid violence. Back then we were holding elections under an electoral cult that

reserved the right to vote only to property owners. There was a large property clause law! I mean, how many people own land and why should land be the basis? In 1979 we had an electoral machinery that had become so corrupt and rusty that there was no vote at all! In fact for years what was supposed to be the voters laws had not been updated! The voting process was a sham! One could see in the society, the growing frustration of the people! One could see the agitation as a result of economic hardship, and poverty. One could see the repression that was being visited on the society by the oligarchy! However, the electoral process in my own view offered some hope. So, reforming that electoral process was the agenda, that I was involved in 1979. It was a reflection of that effort by the on – going events that led to the problems we are talking about now. So, this is the kind of dynamics that has to be understood in order to fully appreciate the Liberian situation.

***In the course of this conference, we have been talking about how to operationalise the CSSDCA process. Some have suggested that the OAU should not be left alone with it. I want you to look at the working mechanism between the OAU and ECOAS particularly the perspective of the role they played during the Liberian crisis.***

I think, clearly, ECOWAS was the more immediate mechanism in the efforts to resolve the conflict, the OAU played a rather supporting role but ECOWAS was the main player. And frankly, it speaks to a large extent on the question of the role of the sub-regional organizations, and the regional organization. I think regional organizations are closer to the problems ECOWAS has an added advantage of having Nigeria as its main stay, so the possibility of collective decisions to be acted upon are greater at least at the level of the ECOWAS. I think what came out of all of these, the Liberian crises as far as the conflict resolution approach is concerned, is a situation where a sub-regional power takes the lead and receives some back-up from the regional organization. Perhaps now that the war is over ECOWAS will be turning more to the economic related issues. I think it has possibilities now. I cannot say this as a general rule that is happening the same way across other sub-regions. But I do know that there are some specifically distinctive characteristics of the West Africa sub-region that is making all of these possible and one of these is that successive Nigerian governments have been interested in a relationship with West African countries.

There is a question of Nigerian leadership, there is also a question of the preparedness of other countries to see what we are seeing in the CSSDCA process; that there is an inseparability of the issues and therefore collective action is the best way forward.

***You raised the issue of ethical code as a central issue in governance. Now the issue of ethics has had a problematic recurrence in Africa whether we are talking of corruption, the sit-tight syndrome and so on. How do you think we could go about dealing with this issue of ethics in governance?***

You know, looking at some of the most pressing problems, it seems to me that African leaders and Africans generally have been very clear on what values they say they want to project. Our own document, the African Charter on Human and People's Rights for example, is a very rich document stipulating what we see as the values we want to

project. I think we face the challenge of having the courage to begin the task of promoting these values ourselves, I think we need not wait for our leaders to champion those causes. We may have to rely on the same ordinary people, people from civil society that are becoming the driving engine in the democratization processes across Africa. We have to take up the challenge of constituting their own codes and beginning to apply it to their own society and to the behaviours of leaders. In the same way that they have begun to say No to dictators! And in a way they have begun to insist on proper elections, proper monitoring, and proper voting. I think people have to take proper ownership of the social and political processes and I think that will have to be the way forward. It will not be through legislation in parliament or the yardsticks provided by the government that might drive these processes forward. I don't think so.

***Another issue raised was that of religion and ethnicity. You talked about how we could factor these in as some of the realistic issues. In relation to Nigeria, this is a little bit contentious because the pattern of opinion is that religion and ethnicity are two major issues that have retarded politics in Nigeria, therefore we should learn to separate them completely from politics. Your view seems to be diametrically opposed to this, what do you really mean?***

First, I am saying that we made a big mistake when we tried to outlaw, or side-step the critical issues that are causing problems for us instead of addressing them. We cannot solve problems that are considered difficult by ignoring them. There is no way you can outlaw religion as a factor in daily life and politics. It is a part of daily living, there is not way to do so in my own view.

The question then is how can we factor it in without it having a disruptive impact? I don't think that is good enough because it doesn't work. I see it this way. I subscribe to that school of thought that it is not ethnicity as such that causes the problem, it is when political leaders mobilize ethnic sentiments and ethnic based resources in contestation. Similarly with religion, if people feel that religion is an issue that is retrogressive and if the only way they find to redress it is through the political process, then why don't we have a forum in which we can address this question, clarify ourselves, ventilate our views without having it become the source of violent contestations?! I think what we have to do is to begin to address these problems first by opening debate and let people talk on what is it that makes religion such an issue. What is it that people find so unfulfilling in other spheres of life that they have to bring the religious factors on the table? Can we have a political arena of some sort where we can debate these issues? But we rush to legislation, we rush to elections on these issues without having them sufficiently discussed. In my view I think getting them properly addressed is the starting point. I don't know where that takes us thereafter, but I think we should start somewhere and it should be outside electoral politics and outside of parliament's law enactment process. Simply, that is my view.

It is interesting when you talked about the mechanism for realising this aim as in situating it outside electoral politics. Could we locate a function for the Civil Society in all of this and How do we articulate it?

Now, this is good because what I am actually proposing here is an approach to governance, without legislation. An approach that ranks government, the Civil Society, and perhaps in some cases, other levels of governance, sub regions perhaps, into a forum, perhaps an institutionalized one in which we will decide to grapple with these problems. At least as a starting point there is no reason why religious leaders, ethnic leaders, government, people's leaders or captains of industries, student leaders or representatives of the cross section of whatever the spectrum looks like, cannot draw up an agenda ns being to talk about this as to what they are! How are they affecting our well being and social processes? What are the contending views? Why are these issues so problematic? Let us talk about them, may be we can do that at all levels, from the community level up to the national or sub-regional levels. My point is that we are not giving enough opportunities for discussion on these issues, before we rushed to legislation only then to have problems.

***I remember that at the height of your country's crises, the Bank in New York was still asking you to pay \$8m...as repayment for loans That's very significant! What does this tell us about the kind of relationship that should exist between African countries and the International Monetary bodies, the global economic control bodies, WTO, and the rest?***

First, let me say that we need to think through what our response to globalization should be. And if we are not careful, globalization may be a new imperialism. Once again we find ourselves grappling with a phenomenon to which we have been invited without our having any say. I think our own approaches to sub-regional development, and regional development are to be taken more seriously, I have a feeling that if our response to globalisation is not an intensification of regional cooperation. Then we are doomed. It's as simple as that. And as you said, one unforgettable point on this occurred during the war in our country. Then, banks and in fact, there were people in London and other places who were putting real pressures on our lean resources; calling off loans even in the midst of our crises, requiring us to pay, in other cases, and even taking us to court in New York and elsewhere. Of course this was contingent upon so many things, but the sad fact of it all and what we are saying is that, right now, coupled with all the turmoil and crises we have gone through, we still have all these debts overhang...on us

If you put all of these together, what should be the response of African Leadership?

The response should not be in bad governance nor in the illusory protection of "sovereignty". It's in the strengthening of our institutions, rooting those institutions, in our people, improving our relationships amongst various elements in our society and building linkages in our sub-regions and in our larger regions. I think this has to be the way forwards.

In 1991 you said that there is a bright future for Liberia after the war, now do you see the country moving in that direction?

Not yet, I'm sorry to say, because we don't seem to have our heart together sufficiently to justify an earlier optimism. This is not to suggest that I do not believe that we will get on course but I think we still have to do a number of things including coming to terms with ourselves by way of dealing with issues reconciliation, perhaps along the same line. We have to be on, talking terms about regional and ethnic conflicts, dialogue among ourselves. Liberians are not talking sufficiently; we are not finding common grounds sufficiently, as a result there is still a confidence problem and we have to get beyond that.

***Liberia has had a peculiar or unique link with the United States for a very long time. Now when we talk of Africanisation, how can we describe the attitude of the United States to the problems of Liberia? How can we compare that to, the attitude of United States to post-war Liberia?***

You know this link is interpreted differently at this point in time Liberia and the United States. For the United States, since the fall of the Soviet Union, this linkage is considered a link of history or some residual elements of culture and therefore, is not to be taken seriously. To some major elements in the Liberian society, this is the trunk link and it has been one of the points of tension in the relationship since the civil war; Liberians felt abandoned by the United States in their hours of need particularly so when the United States had been a contributing factor to the problem. But you see, for many of us, being that we believed in the relationship, whatever it has been. So, for the United States to now says to Liberia; well you are better off linking yourself with your colleagues, within your sub-region. Well, it is for the United States a new realization but for many of us, this is what we should have been doing many years ago, from the time ECOWAS was founded and we played a role in its founding. We would have wanted our governments to take ECOWAS a little bit more seriously and worked harder for the integration, for sub-regional cooperation. But of course Liberia has two tendencies that came through its history, and in a way you can call this the identity crisis. There is the perspective that Liberia was supposed to be founded as an outpost of Western civilization. Then of course there is the other view, that Liberia was supposed to be perhaps an enriching element in an African civilization. And if one chooses to look at the latter then, one would see that Liberia ought to speed up its own involvement in the sub-region and in fact in the entire region.

Frankly I think that is where our future lies and I think we can resolve this question of our identity which continues to plague us, I would say. Many will disagree with me though. They will talk about the proud Liberians struggling to be Americans or trying to be a productive element in this region. So this problem continues for us and we pray that something will happen and we will grapple successfully with it. Again it is one of those issues that in my view has to be debated, and resolved by Liberians but as long as we sweep it under the carpet, we will continue to have this problem.

***If we could define the problems in African countries or the African continent in terms of the mechanism that the CSSCDA is trying to promote, could the CSSDCA offer us a way out of the problems?***

I think so. I think that the CSSDCA brings with it a number of strengths. First in the conceptualization; by seeing the inseparability of security, stability, development and cooperation, CSSDCA provides us an opportunity to build a mechanism that reflects the inseparability of our interventions and is equally necessary both in terms of the interrelationship amongst the various concepts as well as the integration, in a vertical kind of manner, from the community up to the regional level. The community; meaning the local up to the regional. I think this process helps us to see the global village which Africa really should be and what happens at the level of the OAU should be either way driven by what the people in the village are all about and I think that CSSDCA helps us, at least theoretically, in conceptual terms to find a mechanism to bring all these about. We would have made major contributions to ourselves this way. It does one other thing, more over as it uses a governance approach, and by this I am talking about this partnership i.e between civil society and government. This is why I believe the suggestion about a mechanism outside the OAU but related to it is important because if nothing else the paramountcy, the highest visibility of Civil Society should be evident in this kind of mechanism we are talking about and it cannot be so within the OAU structure as it's currently organized.

***We just talked about the WTO and here we are again proposing yet another round of negotiations of the Charter. What do you think Africa should do this time around?***

I think Africa has to put its own agenda together and we need to negotiate the relationship that will get us beyond mere export of coffee and cocoa. We must begin to do our own value added scheme here and let there be market for us, for our own finished products outside. I have yet to see a situation in which we can transform ourselves by just producing cocoa bean for Swiss chocolate plants or rubber for American tyre factories and all that. So, I think it's a very serious issue and perhaps our major challenge at the turn of the century in our relationship with the North. And if we miss this opportunity and let this arrangement solidify, I think we will be doomed for a while because we would now have to begin to undo what has already been done. Now we have the solidarity among ourselves to make this difference. I am not quite sure yet. There are still some residual strings, bilateral strings to European countries that are retarding some of these progress but again, I know it may sound to some a little bit difficult but in these matters, we expect at least, I expect that a country like Nigeria will take a significant lead. You travel around West Africa now, where in West Africa are there not Nigerian plastics? The naira is used in many markets any where in the sub-region; our women are moving up and down trading in all of these products manufactured in Nigeria moving across the West African sub-region. So, which country has the resources and potentials, as does Nigeria? So, which country has the resources and potentials, as does Nigeria? So, I think there is a kind of organized and creative leadership that has to come out of Nigeria to help us put our house together on this WTO. Now South Africa is another power. In this respect we should all get together and see how we could mobilize our own initiatives and try to stem the tide that could be problematic to us as a people.