

THE POWER OF ACTING TOGETHER

National Dialogue and
Guinea's Civil Society Movement

Through dialogue, IFES' Guinea program brings diverse civil society actors together to work for the country's political, economic and social development.

by Elizabeth Côté

Elizabeth Côté, IFES' country director in Guinea, has been empowering civil society in Africa for over 10 years. In an interview with democracy at large, she discussed IFES' program in Guinea (funded by USAID), whose participants advocate for democratic reform.

How did IFES' civil society work in Guinea start? After six years in Mali, I arrived in Guinea in 2001 to conduct civic education activities prior to the expected legislative elections. Initially, I was amazed to find widespread ethnic tensions in virtually all sectors. Mali had all the problems in the world, and a mosaic of ethnic groups, but it had avoided the kind of cleavages I found in Guinea. It was quite a sectarian society; everyone worked in their own political and social niches. Following attacks on the border with Liberia, it became immediately clear that elections were on indefinite hold, and I began thinking that the most important thing IFES could do would be to get the different components of Guinean society sitting together to talk.

The topic of civil society seemed to provide a good opening for dialogue. At that time, donors were lining up to help strengthen civil society, but no one in Guinea really knew what it was. Everyone—political parties, NGOs, the civil service—thought it meant them. (Actually, when the idea later emerged during a national forum about forming a civil society council, the administration insisted on being part of it. When the majority of people attending protested that state administration and civil society were different, some government representatives walked out. The fact that now the government is both not part of the council and consults the council with some regularity shows how far the process has evolved.)

We organized a national dialogue that included the political parties, NGOs, unions, religious leaders, security forces and the army—basically all the components of society—with the goal of creating a common understanding of the concept of civil society and what its role should be in Guinea in 2001. Our bottom-up approach started in Guinea's eight regions, and once each regional roundtable had consensually whittled all possibilities down to one definition, we met in Conakry to consolidate these into a national definition.

Civil Society consists of all organizations with a common objective—modern and traditional, non-political and nongovernmental—working towards economic, political, social and cultural development, with a view to promoting lasting peace and effective democracy. It plays the role of intermediary between the state, political parties and citizens, in accordance with applicable laws and regulations.

We asked participants at the regional roundtables to identify the strengths and weaknesses of civil society and what its role should be in the political, economic and social development of the country. Our programmatic approach was based on the idea that civil society is the motor of the development process—which includes the democratization process—and its role is to defend the basic interests of the population.

The national forum that followed in Conakry was important (and even considered historic by many) for several reasons. It was the first time since the liberalization of

Guinea in 1984 that over 250 people from all walks of life had gathered in one room to discuss an issue of national concern. The meeting also produced an unexpected bonus when participants decided to create the Guinean National Council of Civil Society Organizations (CNOSCG), an umbrella organization with decentralized components. The regional and prefectural councils were formed during the restitution tours, when the results of the Conakry forum were brought back to the regions.

Given the stressful atmosphere you described, how were you able to get everyone talking? I think we had a couple of things working in our favor. First of all, we invited all parties to a dialogue about a topic they did not view as political. Unlike so many other things that needed to be resolved, civil society was not a sensitive issue.

Second, IFES partnered with an important government institution, the Social and Economic Council, and its dedicated president who facilitated the participation

Sous l'arbre à palabre: In 2003, Guineans gathered in villager's rights and responsibilities during an election.



of the government. We were also able to gain the support of other innovative opinion leaders both at the government and civil society level. For example when we first went out in the regions to start the dialogue over the definition of civil society, our facilitator was a former minister of the Interior and Decentralization who had been pushed out of government but who was very much respected by Guineans. This helped us a lot in the regions and perhaps made local leaders, governors and administrators more willing to participate.

Third, our inclusive approach gave us a lot of credibility. We looked beyond the capital for input, and we invited all political and social groups to participate in the process. Moreover, the restitution tours provided another opportunity for Guineans to express themselves and further the process of defining the domain of civil society.

What factors have shaped IFES' successes in Guinea? One key factor is the longevity of our program—we're in our fifth year now—but paradoxically we've also been helped by the fact that we've thought each activity would be our last. It's really enabled us to adapt as we went along, and follow up on the recommendations identified in previous programs.

For example, when participants in the national dialogue were asked what role civil society should play in Guinea's political development (taken in the broadest sense), the number one priority they identified was the need to educate citizens about their rights and responsibilities. Eighty-five percent of Guineans are illiterate, and we were told that many people didn't know how the government worked,

let alone what the constitution said. This triggered our first civic education campaign in 2002, which we designed and

implemented in close partnership with 10 Guinean organizations. We sent trainers to 3,000 communities, where they used local languages to engage people in dialogues on the themes of citizenship, rights, responsibilities, and democratic rule. The trainers then returned to the same localities during a second campaign that focused more specifically on the electoral process. We found that in some villages, citizens had no idea there was more than one political party.

In 2004, as the highly sensitive question of liberalized media became a focus of international aid and political dialogue, IFES attempted to de-politicize the issue while engaging the Guinean population in a debate about information from a development perspective. In Guinea, the state controls the radio, and so as not to intimidate the government, we defined information in its broadest terms—radio, newspapers, archives, libraries, the telephone and the Internet. In partnership with the CNOSCG, we held a series of regional fora to raise citizens' awareness of their rights to quality information and of the role of communication in political, economic and social development. The regional roundtables encouraged participants to create advocacy committees dedicated to solving identified problems. These committees received small grants (usually under \$500) and were very successful in achieving goals such as lobbying for a new generator, fixing a community radio or making local archives easily accessible to the public. These initiatives brought about sustainable improvement in people's access to information and thereby showed them that there are many things that can be accomplished without major funding.

Of course, major challenges remain in Guinea. At one of our youth conferences, a young man said, "Last night when the army came and picked us up, I said I had rights, and I got five kicks in the head more than my friend who said nothing." Without an independent judiciary that enforces the law, it is difficult to ensure rights are respected. Our current project

focuses on raising awareness about the rule of law. We are working with professional associations (lawyers, notaries, ac-

countants, pharmacists, etc.), reinforcing their capacities and helping them identify ways they can ensure the laws that regulate their professional environments are respected. These groups have decided to federate and created the Union of Professional Organizations of Guinea. Guineans have really learned the importance of building a network and the strength that comes from acting together. 

Elizabeth Côté is IFES' Country Director in Guinea. For more information, visit www.ifes.org.

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LESSONS LEARNED

- 1. DEVELOP A LONG-TERM VISION.** It builds trust between the target population and program implementer and makes results more sustainable.
- 2. PROMOTE A DYNAMIC PARTNERSHIP WITH LOCAL CSOs** based on participative decision-making. This encourages autonomous action, builds capacity and enhances analytical skills.
- 3. SUPPORT SMALL-SCALE ADVOCACY INITIATIVES** in tandem with project activities to promote significant change and development.
- 4. CONDUCT CIVIC EDUCATION ACTIVITIES BETWEEN ELECTIONS** rather than before a specific election. This increases the population's receptivity.
- 5. USE A NATIONAL APPROACH TO PROGRAMMING;** it has a unifying effect in countries with social divisions.

ages and towns throughout the country to discuss



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