

Empowering CSOs to Participate in the Implementation of CARES will be Good for Ghana

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The Minister of Finance in the mid-year review presented to parliament on 23rd July announced Ghana's CARES (a.k.a. "Obaatan) Program costing 100 billion Ghana cedis in 3 and half years.

Ghana's CARES, according to the Minister, will "anchor the comprehensive transformation of our society". Details of Ghana's CARES Program as indicated by the Minister on the floor of parliament will be provided by Mr. President to the nation in the coming weeks. The reason for this large-scale financial investment program is not farfetched. COVID-19 has significantly disrupted Ghana's economy that was projected to grow by around 6-7% is at best recording close to below 2% growth in 2020.

Evidence from the past several decades shows that civil society is playing a strategic role notably to combat poverty and inequality. Even more importantly, civil society is a leader in the fight to prevent the misuse of public resources by politicians in alliance with civil servants and private contractors. It is for these reasons that the Minister of Finance ought to be reminded that during the Kufuor Administration, Ghana adopted a national development framework in which civil society was incorporated as a Watch Dog. Without strong accountability mechanisms in the public sector, complemented by civil society, accompanying the 100 billion cedis investment program, Ghana, in particular, the poor and vulnerable will be shortchanged. A collaboration of civil society and government-led social accountability mechanisms in the execution of the CARES, should be strengthened at the national, regional, and district levels.

Are we suggesting that the Government of Ghana (GOG) allocate in the national budget funding for civil society to hold it accountable? Not at all! Civil society as we say in SEND is capable of fundraising to partner Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDA) to "Make Ghana Work for Equity". Ghana is a lower-middle-income country, and in the midst of the COVID-19, it cannot afford to fund civil society projects. Therefore, borrowing money from the international financial markets, and soliciting grants from the global development community to invest in Ghanaian owned enterprises (small, medium, and large) so that they can get back on their feet is the right strategy. This is the surest way to create viable jobs, restore income, and bring dignity to hard-working Ghanaian families.

We agree with the Minister, if Ghana's CARES is to meaningfully turn the economy and social sector around, it should be massive. And so, we shout kudos to the Minister and his team at the Ministry of Finance.

How then can GOG support civil society to remain independent, principled, and an evidence-based ‘Watch Dog’ in the implementation of Ghana’s CARES?

The implementation strategy of CARES should include an unambiguous policy statement reaffirming GOG-civil society partnership with emphasis on the latter’s Watch Dog role. In addition, civil society should be encouraged by the government to participate in the CARES projects as service providers and duly compensated. As service providers, CSO will bring to CARES, grassroots, and community planning and management systems to foster participation and sustainability. A joint government and civil society engagements will encourage international civil society funding agencies to have the confidence to invest in their Ghanaian partners to participate in the CARES. A key responsibility of the government, therefore, will be to create an enabling policy and political environment to mobilize all the nation’s development stakeholders to maximize their contributions to Ghana’s CARES.

SEND Ghana has two good examples of a civil society-government relationship that empowers the former to successfully market Ghana to the global international civil society financing community. In 2006, the Civil Society Forum on Aid Effectiveness was acknowledged by the government as its partner to organize the Accra Conference that reviewed the Paris Declaration on AID in September 2008. SEND’s partnership with the government made it easier and faster to independently fundraise to support civil society hosting of the parallel conference on Aid Effectiveness. More than 300 civil society delegates participated in the parallel conference. Even more importantly, the secretariat hosted by SEND Ghana funded regional and national consultations that enabled Ghanaian civil society to discuss aid effectiveness in Ghana. Not only did the Aid Effectiveness Forum promote accountability for international development aid to Ghana, but it mobilized and trained regional, district, and community CSOs to use budget advocacy to demand equity in the allocation of the country’s resources.

Similarly, the GHANA Civil Society Coalition on the Sustainable Development is touted globally as a “role model “of civil society government partnership. This is because the government and civil society are sitting across the table in all the implementing structures of the SDGs. Civil society even produced a shadow monitoring report, which is used by the government to validate its data and to improve the implementation strategy of the SDGs. After all, in his very first speech on COVID-19, Mr. President declared a Whole Ghana Approach (WGA). By the WGA Mr. President meant the mobilization of all social groups to participate in the prevention of the virus from tearing apart the economy and disrupting essential services. Unfortunately, government civil society engagements especially, research and advocacy organizations, including the policy think tanks on COVID-19 mitigation programs, have been minimum.

The Ghana Statistical Services (GSS) released in July 2020, the key findings of the first national survey that assessed the impact of COVID-19 on over 1500 households. These findings among others underscored the importance of the not-for profit-making organizations (NGO) as key sources of income for households since the eruption of COVID-19. According to the report, of the 11 sources of income of the households surveyed, NGOs/charity organizations recorded the highest increase of more than 20%. GOG ranked second place to around 10% increment.

Additionally, assistance from NGOs was counted among the 16 coping mechanisms of households during COVID-19, even though it accounted for only 1.3%.

It is, therefore, most unfortunate, that GOG has not yet taken any meaningful step to mobilize Ghanaian Civil Society organizations (GCSOs) in the prosecution of the fight against COVID-19. As the GSS survey found out, GCSOs are definitely among the key front liners in the fight against COVID-19. For example, the Ghanaian Civil Society Coalition on the Sustainable Development Goals, raised more than 150,000 Ghana Cedis to support COVID-19 relief. The coalition used the money to provide relief (food supplies and personal protective equipment-PPE) to vulnerable groups.

The challenge of revitalizing the national economy to make post-COVID-19 Ghana inclusive and equitable requires all hands-on deck. It is the obligation of GOG to empower all stakeholders, including GCSOs, to make a robust contribution to the post COVID-19 transformation agenda envisaged in Ghana's CARES a reality in the lives of all citizens especially, the poor and vulnerable groups.