

CSMD – Discussion Paper
The legitimacy of civil society representatives in crisis situations
Reflections based on the Congolese experience

Author: Michel Noureddine Kassa – Member of the EE Scientific Council
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Abstract

Drawing on extensive experience of dialogue and mediation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, this paper reflects on the legitimacy of those called upon to represent civil society in crisis situations. It shows that this legitimacy cannot be taken for granted: it is built, transformed and undermined through interactions between political, institutional, community and international actors.

A preliminary question: who speaks on whose behalf?

The representation of civil society is often approached from the perspective of selecting the organisations or individuals called upon to participate in forums for dialogue. The Congolese experience shows that the real issue lies not so much in the selection of representatives as in understanding the mechanisms that establish, reinforce or undermine their legitimacy over time. The issue is not merely a question of who is appointed to speak on behalf of a community or an organisation. It's also a matter of understanding what underpins, strengthens or gradually weakens that person's legitimacy in the exercise of their mandate.

This responsibility can become a real source of power, depending on the meaning the representative attaches to their role and the circumstances in which they are called upon to exercise it.

Legitimacy under constant review

In contexts of serious, violent and often recurring crises, the legitimacy of a representative is never stable. It is subject to constant review by various groups of stakeholders, whose assessments may converge or, conversely, conflict with one another.

Three perspectives appear to be particularly decisive.

1. The State's perspective

How do central, provincial or local authorities view the appointed person?

This perception varies depending on the relationship the appointed person has with the authorities and on how they respond to any attempts to influence or put pressure on them.

2. *Le regard de la société*
Legitimacy is also assessed by the various sections of society: the representative's community of origin, other communities, civil society organisations, national leaders and local stakeholders.

These perspectives do not necessarily coincide.

3. Perspectives on relations with the international community

The way in which the state, communities and other actors perceive the relations between the mandate holder and the international community is also a key factor in the mandate holder's legitimacy. In crisis situations, these relations are never neutral: they influence the trust placed in the mandate holder and, consequently, their ability to create or maintain spaces for dialogue.

The Congolese experience: the value of steadfastness

These various dimensions have always played a decisive role in the dialogue initiatives we have led amongst Congolese stakeholders. The Congolese experience also demonstrates just how much the steadfastness of those involved constitutes a rare asset. In a context where the balance of power is constantly shifting, the ability to remain true to one's convictions and commitment becomes an essential factor in building trust. This steadfastness thus gradually builds the trust placed in those entrusted with a mandate and, in the longrun, determines the strength of the forums for dialogue and negotiation.

A line of thought for the CSMD initiative

This line of thought leads us to consider the legitimacy of representatives not as a consequence of their appointment, but as an ongoing process, shaped by their interactions with the state, communities, civil society actors and the international community.

It invites us to shift our perspective: the question is no longer simply who speaks on behalf of civil society, but rather to understand under what conditions that voice is recognised as legitimate, retains its credibility and enables the creation, maintenance or strengthening of spaces for dialogue, negotiation and decision-making.