Community Management of National Conflicts in Urban Benin

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Introduction

Conflict, defined as *"antagonism, opposition of ideas, or opinions between people or groups; opposition (to the extreme of armed struggle) between two or more states"* (Larousse, 1993), is as old as the animal kingdom, from protozoa to primates. But we are in the age of humans. Thus, such a definition shows in the broadest sense that there are several different types of conflict. For example, in the world of work one can distinguish between individual and collective conflicts. The law exists to resolve these types of situations. So it is differences of opinion which hinder economic operators (for instance, a businessman from Benin and his Belgian or South Africa counterpart).

However, there are conflicts which divide groups of individuals within a society itself, conflicts which split whole communities: civil wars in which two or more countries are in conflict; war in the classic sense of the word. These types of conflicts are the most serious due to the waste of human lives. To my knowledge there do not yet exist formal methods of management of these conflicts.

Their causes are diverse. Civil wars, like wars between different countries, can be provoked by a number of factors: political/ideological; cultural/religious/ ethnic/racial; spatial/environmental. This article describes one local conflict which, whilst it may seem trivial compared to what is happening today in other regions of Africa, provides an important lesson for future reference. It concerns the conflicts arising from space management, especially in urban Africa.

When we examine the available statistics, we can see that,

> *"...if the African population has more than doubled in 30 years (1960-1990), rising from 210 million to almost 500 million, the urban population has increased five-fold in a context of urbanisation without industrialisation" (Ilugon, 1994).*

This urban growth is not just demographic, it also relates to the territorial expansion of towns. For example, consider the town of Cotonou, once a small fishing village, cornered between a lagoon and the Atlantic and now covering area of 7,000 hectares, and stretching 30km from East to West (see Table 1 over):

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Table 1: Population Growth in Cotonou				
Year 1910	**1937**	**1945**	**1956**	**1961**
Population 1,954	6,811	18,000	56,529	81,300
Year 1970	**1975**	**1979**	**1992**	**1994**
Population 147,000	178,000	327,064	536,867	579,352

Source: IN SAE, RGPII 2, Cotonou, 1994.

One can understand clearly from these data, the pressure exerted on the land by the population. The question of how this space should be managed so as to satisfy all of the different interests of the various protagonists, has become a source of conflict. There is no doubt that one of the great problems facing Africa as we enter the second millennium, is that of space management, especially in an urban context. In this sense, African towns, and in particular the capital cities, are veritable time-bombs. *"Their over-expansion and the incoherence of their evolution makes you dizzy"* (Ela, 1983).

People began to settle in Cotonou before the housing operations were instigated (servicing of sites by dividing plots of land, road and rail layout, water and electricity conveyance, the creation of public sites for schools and hospitals, etc). As development occurred by the State, local tensions degenerated into open conflicts between the population and the urban planning services, and even between groups in the population itself. This article reflects on how these conflicts were managed.

Origins of the Conflict in the District of Enagnon

During the second half of the 19th century, several communities settled in successive waves at a site of 42 hectares, by the Atlantic Ocean and the Cotonou Lagoon. These included:
- Toffin fishermen (who are said to be native to the site);
- Popo fishermen from the West;
- Yoruba merchants from the East; and
- Ewe fishermen of Ghanaian origin (considered to be foreigners).

These people lived here peacefully for several decades, each one following his profession. In 1986, the State began to show an interest in this area with an eye to developing it. A census carried out in that year shows that 6,000 people were living

in this area, located in 1,549 homes. 710 presumed plot owners were identified, divided as follows:

- 498 owners or heirs;
- 159 owners who received the plot through a donation;
- 40 buyers of plots; and a further
- 13 plots entrusted to a third party for upkeep.

The population in this area reached 20,000 by 1994. The decision to develop this overpopulated site was taken by the State which is considered to be the owner. What with the right of ownership being far from clear-cut in Benin, especially with regards to land ownership, the texts in force today actually date from the colonial era; texts which, moreover, fail miserably to reflect social realities and which are completely removed from endogenous logic. It is the brutal, dogmatic and mechanical application of these texts, in contexts other than those prescribed, which is at the root of the conflicts that divide the population and cause rifts between it and the State.

But grass-root State support systems are also becoming targets. So, the State-launched operation in Enagnon has, on many occasions, degenerated into a steady conflict with the police force coming to the aid of the urban planners. There were, for example:

- a popular uprising in 1991 and the dismissal of a group of National Institute of Geography technicians in charge of operations;
- scuffles between the population and police in 1992 when the resumption of work led to arrests and serious injuries; and
- another uprising in 1996 against the resumption of operations.

Elements of Contention and Demands of the Population

Part of the population oppose the claim that the site upon which they have settled, supposedly belongs to the State. They believe that the land belongs to their ancestors, the family trees of the first occupants being drawn up with their origins. According to these, the occupation of this terrain dates back to before the creation of the colony of Dahomey itself (former name of Benin). The question of Right of Ownership has thus never been settled conclusively, especially in the case of land ownership. The Revolutionary period (1972-1989), further confused the matter.

According to the people, the land is theirs to do with as they wish. They consider State intervention to be an intrusion into their affairs. For the inhabitants, what is worse is that this intrusion is seen as part of a plan to scupper the site and steal the plots of land. So, the community intends to fight the authorities tooth and nail, on their own land. These are the underlying motives of the conflicts.

Attempts to Resolve the Conflict

Several interdepartmental commissions have been set up to study this question. There is no doubt that the few recommendations made by these commissions which inspired any response from the population, only reached fruition on paper. The main aim of these commissions has been the creation of a local housing committee, the idea of which is to create a structure of dialogue and discourse. This would involve bringing together:
- representatives of the prefecture of Cotonou;
- representatives of the urban district of Cotonou;
- structural technicians in charge of urban housing projects; and
- elected representatives of the people.

However, this committee, initially accepted by the people, was later accused of playing into the hands of the authorities. As a result, local people refused to be involved.

The next attempt at resolution involved the creation of a new community-based structure. The authorities realised that in order for the committee to be credible, it was not sufficient that the members were elected, but they should also represent the various social characteristics of the local population. So, as well as the State representatives, the new structure also comprised people's representatives, as follows:
- 2 people per linguistic community (including those from communities considered to be foreign);
- 2 people per association (because the associations were formed in the district without ethnic distinctions); and
- 2 people per age group (young and old without ethnic distinctions).

This structure thus aims to appoint representatives by election/co-optation, but following an approach prescribed by collective sentiment and popular logic. In Enagnon, the right to popular practice was applied following the type of formula which best reflected the wishes of the local community. Since the new structure was created (whose activities have yet properly to be evaluated), not a single uprising or confrontation has been recorded. All of the problems raised by the housing operation are discussed and resolved by the committee which enjoys total public confidence and great popularity. The case of Enagnon has been emulated in other areas of Cotonou. In the same way, the authorities have taken note of the case as a model of a dynamic approach to conflict management in the town.

Analysis and Conclusion

The case of Enagnon brings to the fore the acuteness of the question of space management in African towns, and therefore the necessity to settle the thorny problem of the right of ownership without delay. This problem, if ignored, could lead to serious conflicts in the future. This case also underscores the fact that these concerns can only be dealt with through a dynamic approach which makes those involved aware of their social responsibilities and which favours social dialogue rather than meaningless, self-conscious verbosity. But this process cannot take place mechanically. Rather it should be in a harmony with the proposals of the community and take into account their particular understanding of their reality.

It is here that the role of communities in resolving conflicts themselves comes into play. If we are dealing only with conflicts of interest, that which is at stake in the conflict cannot be of greater importance than the conflicts of the community. That is why community management of conflicts appears to be a practical and efficient means of conciliation and reconciliation. Community development in its educational capacity, enables people to avoid these types of conflicts, or at least contain them quickly. Here, the approach of community development appears to be a social vaccine, or rather, a means of preventing tensions and providing immediate solutions to conflicts.

But the case of Enagnon has also highlighted the following issues:

• The role of confidence/trust as a measure of peace. In Enagnon, there was a time when the majority of people lost confidence in the State and all of its structures, and even in a sector of their own community. Even the legality of the State in this district, was greatly slurred. Part of the community perceived the intervention of the police force in the area to be a form of harassment. This aspect of the Enagnon case leads me to suggest that some thought should be given to:

   – the role of confidence in the construction of peaceful and lasting social relations;

   – the limitations of treating the rules of social organisation as unchanging and uniform;

   – the reality that human beings, if faced with no alternative in order to survive, will become savages;

— that conflicts can be caused by anything (in this particular case, the occupation of space). To that end, we should understand and bear in mind that it would be difficult to contain or control the causes or origins of conflicts, in a systematic manner. Perhaps a more feasible approach is to propose types and/or modes of organisation which enable us to contain social crises, or even better, prevent them.

References

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