African civil society, ‘blood diamonds’ and the Kimberley process

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‘People are very angry. They want to say, ‘God, why did diamonds be, you know…? Why did you let diamonds be put in Sierra Leone?’ We do not know how come ... Sierra Leone with such a wealth can be, you know, in such a global mess.’

Abu Brima, National Coordinator, Network Movement for Justice and Development, Freetown, Sierra Leone; Interview with Voice of America (VOA), 13 January 2000.

The campaign against ‘conflict’ diamonds – those defined as having been illegally mined and sold by rebel armies to fund wars in Africa – was a singular phenomenon of NGO/civil-society activism in Africa. Beginning inauspiciously with research by little-known and poorly funded groups, the campaign quickly attracted the attention of dozens of governments and the diamond industry and came to dominate discussions on the civil wars in Sierra Leone, Angola and elsewhere in Africa. It provided material and background for books, journal articles and academic dissertations, development programmes; an award-winning song by the American rapper Kenye West; a major Hollywood blockbuster and several documentaries and films (including a Nigerian one). In both its intensity and effect, the ‘conflict diamonds’ campaign qualifies as a highly successful social movement – a campaign which, though loosely organized and coordinated, was sustained over a significant period of time and was geared towards specific social goals, namely economic and social justice and peace.

This chapter examines how the campaign started, the role of African civil-society groups in sustaining it and why it was so successful and led to sanctions against rebels in Sierra Leone and the Liberian government (thereby no doubt significantly
helping the peace process in both countries). It was also involved in the introduction of the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme (KPCS) – a global, UN Security Council-endorsed system requiring the tamper-proof certification of all rough diamonds traded (worth annually at the time about US$ 7 billion).

[The] high influx of foreign mining companies and the lack of pro-poor mining policies coupled with inadequate implementation mechanisms reinforce the powerlessness of the people and undermine their livelihood goals. Artisanal [diamond] mining is largely uncontrolled and uncoordinated resulting to [sic] high rate of smuggling, environmental hazards and poor living/working conditions. The government is largely promoting the economic agenda of the International Financial Institutions to the extent that the real livelihood needs of the poor are compromised in favour of foreign mining companies/investment. [Our] programme seeks to promote good corporate governance, environmental protection, community benefitation and strict adherence to international standards.

Statement by the Just Mining Campaign, Freetown, 2001

The ‘conflict’ or ‘blood’ diamonds campaign effectively lasted for a little over three years, probably a shorter lifespan than any other comparable campaign in history. Largely because of its short duration, the highly successful social movement it generated as a global human-rights campaign was rather inchoate. Many observers and some of its leading participants primarily experienced its international dimension. As a movement, it was mainly driven by Western activists and NGOs and it led to the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme (KPCS), the international system of control for the movement of rough diamonds. From this vantage point, the campaign was of a largely intellectual nature, driven by well-researched reports, manipulation of media reporting, and high-level lobbying by NGOs and liberal Western politicians. What has been almost completely ignored in the assessment of the phenomenal success of the campaign is the great impetus that it enjoyed from the very beginning by the involvement of African NGOs operating in such troubled spots as Sierra Leone and Congo,¹ two countries where resource-driven warfare came to attract massive international attention. In these two countries, the issue fed into important local concerns about social justice and economic development, and became a rallying ground for civil-society activists spearheading peace movements. As a

¹ Following Crawford Young, I refrain from using the official designation ‘Democratic Republic of Congo’. As Young writes, the ‘democratic’ title remains ‘a grotesque misrepresentation of political practice,’ making the designation ‘Congo-Kinshasa’ or simply ‘Congo’ the most appropriate in the circumstances. See Crawford Young, ‘Contextualizing Congo conflicts,’ in: John F. Clark (ed.), The African Stakes in the Congo War (Fountain Publishers, Kampala, 2002), p. 29.