ELIZABETH OHENE AND HER LONG-SUFFERING “NEUTRARLS”

By Kofi Bentil, Senior Vice President, IMANI

WHAT IS NEW?

Complaints about “neutrals”, “loudmouthed CSOs”, “naysaying Jeremiahs”, “empty critics” and the like have been coming nonstop from politicians throughout my 20 plus years of public policy analysis, advocacy and activism.

Auntie Lizzie earned her place in the annals of our country's history when she stood up to military bullies in dark days of the early 80s, and for that she has my eternal respect. She literally put her life on the line for the values of free speech and conscience, so thank God she is still with us. Imagine then my discomfort that I have to cross swords with her on the issue of free conscience, but there comes a time when we must hold people to their own professed values, and I intend to do that today.

Ms. Elizabeth Ohene is dyed-in-the-wool NPP, as is her right to be. she was not merely a Minister and a parliamentary candidate on an NPP ticket, she has been an ardent activist of the party. Which means she tows the party line, which right now is that CSOs are “worrying” NPP. It is not strange that she would take umbrage at citizens speaking up. Especially in these times when a close business associate and fellow leading member of the NPP, my friend Gabby, has been under the spotlight due to CSO advocacy.

I have been an Activist since 1991; this is standard fare, plain vanilla government clapback! Nothing strange, we take it in stride, but facts cannot be buried under emotion.

FOCUS

My first problem with Auntie Lizzie's commentary is focus. But it is standard fare. Whenever IMANI or other activist CSOs take a stance and make submissions, people refuse to focus on the specific arguments we have made. Instead they circle around, indulging in all manner of roundabout speak. Auntie Lizzie does not depart from this template, hence I struggled to understand why people kept asking me to take note.

Puzzled, I returned to Auntie Lizzie’s article again. I read it line by line. I thought I should cluster and categorise the ideas into ‘buckets’ so it would be easier to address the arguments. I often taught my business strategy students to focus on the key nodes in an issue and address them, meaning avoid the other distractions, no matter how ‘shiny’ they are.
With Agyapa we addressed the key issues, so clearly that we even put out a mathematical formula, because 2+2 is 4, whether in Adeiso, Adabraka or Alabama! The key issues or nodes in that affair were the valuation and the nepotism/self-dealing. I intend to apply the same disciplined analysis to Auntie Lizzie’s article.

1. **CSOs claim to love Ghana more than anybody in politics?**

Where or when is that from? Is there some public manifesto CSOs have issued proclaiming this special love? or is the point that complaining about government policies makes one automatically guilty of this charge?

If so, then what about the Catholic Bishops who routinely express misgivings about various social issues? The Chiefs, constantly lamenting about political decisions? The social media crowd? The Trade Unions? GUTA? Concerned Small-Scale Miners? The morning show radio hosts? Why not then say: “everyone”? What is distinct about CSO criticisms?

2. **CSOs are disdainful of politicians and think all governments are corrupt.**

Which CSOs? In 1982 when Elizabeth Ohene became Acting Editor of the then People’s Daily Graphic, there were about 80 NGOs in Ghana. In 2008, we had more than 5000 NGOs in Ghana. These are only those registered with the Department of Social Welfare.

When I speak to my friends who track these things, they tell me that there are more than 50,000 companies registered by guarantee who self-identify as NGOs or CSOs.

In 2019 alone, more than 7000 companies limited by guarantee were registered. Nearly 8% of total registrations. Over half of these self-identify as CSOs by my friends’ framework.

How many of these fall in the bracket created by Auntie Lizzie? How many does she know by name, deed or reputation? So, on what is she basing her assessments? Such broad sweeps don’t help any debate.

Groups like IMANI, CDD, IDEG and others *make it our business* to understand government activities so that we can criticise constructively. We are fair critics who *put in the work*. We spend hours conducting research and mounting advocacy to try and influence policy and shift national discourse. And we accept criticism.

3. **CSOs want to be seen as a “repository of all wisdom”.**

Who, or where has this claim been made? When we fiercely resisted the STX project, did we attack the architectural plans? Did we not focus on public interest valuation metrics, a common tool that can be applied across many contexts,
whether public housing or sovereign gold royalties? Is that not evidence that whatever we take on, we focus on public policy analysis and not “everything” as the likes of Auntie Lizzie claim?

This accusation of “all-knowing hubris” is like many others in the article, without any clear target. Less than 0.1% of CSOs in Ghana comment on government policy or seek to impact decision making at any level beyond their immediate community.

There are also CSOs that do comment on policy but only as dispassionate analysts. E.g. ISSER, ACET or CEPA. They stay in safe spaces as they have a right to.

Others like CDD, IFS, ACEP, IEA, IMANI, and IDEG combine policy analysis with advocacy. Overall, CSOs come in many hues, along a wide spectrum. No broad brush does justice when describing what they do.

Some CSOs seek to promote “change from within” and conduct their advocacy by building long-term relationships with political actors and the bureaucracy. Others like TWN, ISODEC, IMANI, ASEPA, ILAPI, GUTA and WACAM are activist in their advocacy. They seek to enlist public sympathy against policies they find wrong. They also believe in “inoculation theory”, which is a fancy term for “immunising” the population against government propaganda.

It is this last function that is most dangerous. Less than 0.001% of Ghanaian CSOs use this tactic. It is dangerous because it sounds like accusing very powerful people of lying. No one likes to be told that they are lying. Auntie Lizzie also evidently can’t stand CSOs who do this.

Imani used this tactic when we declared after serious research, that Komenda Sugar factory was bound to be unworkable. We said publicly that the project was defectively planned. We had facts and research to back that, and time proved us right.

What is one to do when faced with the situation like the EC one where they claimed that since 2011 they have never bought electoral equipment knowing full well that it is a blatant provable lie? Or when the Ministry of Communications said that KelNi GVG has led to the recovery of evaded taxes when they knew that nothing like that has happened?

Shouldn’t Ghana feel lucky that out of the 50,000 CSOs we have in the country, about 5 are willing to openly and brazenly call out such lies so corrosive to the national interest?

It looks like Auntie Lizzie would prefer a Ghana where not a single CSO will openly call out leaders and bureaucrats when they lie. Her article is luminous with
4. CSO Financial Issues

The article then veers off into bizarre territory, asking who is paying CSOs. She insists CSO donors tend to be foreign. That CSOs are accountable to foreigners. This is yet more groundless, unresearched, claims, not fair criticism.

Of the CSOs that operate in Ghana, the vast majority are community based. Many are sponsored by churches, mosques, and even traditional authorities. Less than 1% of CSOs, have even the standing and relationships to attract overseas funding. **I hereby challenge Elizabeth Ohene to produce an alternate figure.**

Most foreign funders shy away from activist CSOs like Imani. The majority of CSOs who get funding from abroad are into development projects not political advocacy. As SVP of Imani I’m interested in raising more money for our work, and we know if we became less critical, we will attract more funding, but we have refused to change, insisting on our unique identity.

IMANI’s indomitable group of Senior Fellows are all unpaid. Its most well-known advocates run businesses that are their main sources of livelihood. The organisation maintains a research unit that competes for research projects and obtains funding that way for its day to day upkeep. Donations constitute a very small proportion of income and are almost always tied to specific audited projects. Many CSOs in Ghana are like IMANI.

Who are these CSOs then that she claims are unaccountable to Ghanaians etc? Why can’t she name names so we can deal properly with her concerns? Of course, if anyone is paid from taxes, they must absolutely be accountable to tax payers!

The International Women Media Foundation that Auntie Lizzie happily advertises as part of her credentials, may I humbly ask if it is “accountable” to Ghanaians in any way?

5. Policy Disputes & “Know it All”

If a person believes they have a challenge with policy prescriptions made by CSOs, they have every liberty to engage and address them, with rebuttals, superior alternative ideas or counterproposals. Our counter proposal in Agyapa is that the valuation must be over $2.5 billion, and we have gone to lengths to demonstrate this mathematically.

It is wrong to turn a policy debate into a platform for lobbing potshots over irrelevant matters. The various policy controversies that Auntie Lizzie refers to are deep and weighty and deserve focused engagement. For instance, which CSOs
does Auntie Lizzie disagree with over what they said or didn't say about the banking crisis? What are her specific counters?

Who said the Government was massaging figures on COVID and what were their specific complaints? Was it true or not? Which CSOs published what about COVID and have now gone “quiet”? How many Ghanaian CSOs have even issued a report on COVID? Can she bring some real case studies so we don’t have to engage with phantoms and floating arguments?

In fact, “silence” among professionals would be a fairer accusation against the CSO community. Why do we have academics at a “University of Mines” and an actuarial society, yet no academic research opinion on Agyapa? Where are the professors of finance in our business schools etc? Is this the kind of calm and peace Auntie Lizzie prefers?

Clearly, CSOs that gain the limelight do so NOT because they are deemed wiser than everyone but because they speak up bravely on issues that matter to the public, risking the onslaught of persons in power like Auntie Lizzie.

Media owners and editors are not fools. They watch their ratings. They know which CSOs “speak the minds” of large segments of society, and grant them more space to do so because it benefits everyone to hear clear voices on important national issues.

Because the areas we fall short on policy as a country tend to be repetitive and consistent, it is not surprising that the same CSOs would often be heard applying the same concepts and sounding the same cautions. What we should be worried about is why the country keep making the same mistakes!

And with Covid-19, the over 100 medical professionals who wrote about these matters, were they CSOs? Was their intervention fundamentally different from the CSO approach?

What is it about politicians like Auntie Lizzie that they can't bear to hear any other voices apart from their own? Who is on radio morning, noon and night, more than politicians? Why do politicians tend to suggest that activists must become politicians if they want to speak? Is politics the only lens to wear for an issue? What about economics, sociology, policy, religion, morality, logic, rationality, and history?

The other basis for accusing CSOs for feeling like they know it all is, according to the likes of Auntie Lizzy, is that we “don't accept our mistakes”. This is another unfair and untrue claim. Let’s take the EC issue for example.

The EC publicly announced to the whole world that they will implement safety protocols in registration centers. A tiny proportion of CSOs, notably under the
CODEO umbrella, and separately IMANI, visited these centers. We took video and photographic evidence that showed clearly that these measures were simply disregarded in many centers.

Earlier claims that the EC could not register more than 12 million people if they followed these guidelines were in support of a proposition that they increase the number of days in order to avoid disenfranchisement. Instead of doing that, the EC simply abandoned the health guidelines, proceeded to use National ID cards to register over 50% of the people registered and allow a very flawed Guarantor system to put in another 20% and then declared that we have a new more credible register. What is Elizabeth Ohene's specific argument here? Why does she have a problem with CSOs rather than taking on the EC?

5. CSOs brook no criticisms

CSOs criticise when we deem it fit, and listen when criticised. We consider criticisms as a sharpening tool, as useful feedback. Criticisms with no head or tail, on the other hand, are not useful.

When Dorothy Gordon, one-time senior ICT official in this country, questioned the lack of gender balance at the top of IMANI, we thought hard about it. Because IMANI was formed organically, this was not deliberate. But we made very conscious attempts that whenever we were hiring, gender shall play an important role.

When Yao Graham commented at a forum that we tend to flit from campaign to campaign, leaving issues hanging, we decided that on the matter of EC, we are in it for the long haul.

When some people argued that our failure to work for change from within the policy system itself could lead to a loss of effectiveness, we altered our cocoa policy advocacy effort to closely engage with Cocobod. And so on and so forth.

I could go on but this is too long already. Evidence abounds that CSOs make Ghana better not worse.

There are things CSOs have achieved which politicians have woefully failed or refused to deal with out of neglect or plain incompetence, from Auditor General Surcharging to stopping the Toll Levy, through to forcing Right to Information into effect etc.

Justified or not, there is a palpable sentiment in Ghana that our Politicians have become the same, that they band together to loot the nation, and that if we citizens don't rise up, NOT to become politicians, but to speak up and be activists, they will rob us till we drop! Whether right or wrong, articles like Auntie Lizzie's are fuelling a perception of tone-deafness.
Someone remarked that it will be a “happy day when the government accepts that criticizing them doesn't mean you are against them”. We citizens must band together and compel this reality into being by staring down bullying politicians.

The day they succeed in silencing all of us, starting with the loudest and most strident, is the day we should all pack up and leave for the woods!

Next time, Auntie Lizzie has real criticism with some actual content to offer, she should send it my way. I will send it to all the CSOs. All 50,000 of them.