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# Civil Society and Community Engagement in Angola: The Role of the Anglican Church

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### Introduction

The following is a summary of an event, held at Chatham House on 11 July 2016, at which Dom André Soares, the first Anglican bishop of the diocese of Angola, discussed the work of the Anglican Church in contemporary Angola and the priorities for church engagement in a post-conflict society.

The history of the various churches in Angola is intertwined with the development of civil society and community-based organizations engaged in social welfare activities, as well as in peace efforts during the civil war via the Inter-Ecclesiastical Committee for Peace in Angola (COIEPA). Alongside the longer-established Roman Catholic Church in Angola, the Anglican Church has played a key role in the provision of services in education, healthcare and welfare. The church continues to focus on poverty reduction and community engagement as Angola is faced with deepening challenges of inequality and economic marginalization.

The meeting was held on the record. The following summary is intended to serve as an aide-memoire for those who took part, and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

For more information – including recordings, transcripts, summaries, and further resources on this and other related topics – visit [www.chathamhouse.org/research/africa](http://www.chathamhouse.org/research/africa).

### Dom André Soares

The speaker is a long-time member of the Christian Council of Churches in Angola, and was appointed as a bishop in 2003. He noted that he is thankful to God to be alive still after the many years of war that Angola has experienced. During the post-independence Marxist period, the Church was considered to be an enemy of the state and was nationalized; children were not allowed to attend church services in some parts of the country. This situation changed in 1991, but the decade of civil war that ended in 2002 undermined the democratic system. After 14 years of peace Angola still has many democratic and economic problems.

The Angolan government's reliance on oil revenue has led to an economic crisis following the collapse in world oil prices. Controls on the purchase of US dollars have put significant pressure on the lives of Angola's poor, as parallel currency exchanges make importing goods very expensive. All too often, Africans remain poor because it is governments and companies that control natural resources, rather than the people themselves. This is especially true with regard to offshore oil wealth like that of Angola's. There is widespread poverty in Angola, particularly in rural communities; Cunene Province is particularly badly affected, and regularly suffers from food and water shortages.

Angola is expected to hold national elections in 2017, but, as in many places in Africa, elections are flawed with the results sometimes being clear before the election has taken place. The Church continues to pray for the wellbeing of the Angolan people and for God to transform the minds of the people to do what is good. It is the Church's desire to grow Angola through the democratic system.

The economic crisis has left many hospitals facing a supply shortage; the speaker noted that he had visited a hospital where patients had to buy their own syringes and bring them to the hospital in order for them to receive treatment. This lack of funds is a consequence of Angola's passion for oil. Angola is faced with a malaria and yellow fever crisis, and some dioceses are burying people daily. A World Health Organization vaccination programme is helping to address the yellow fever problem, but there is little progress being made on malaria.

The speaker concluded by expressing his thanks to the chair of the meeting for supporting the Church's work in tackling malaria in Angola and Namibia. The speaker also requested that more people should get involved in helping the Angolan people fight malaria. The Christian Council of Churches is arranging a conference so that the Anglican Church can share its experience fighting malaria; one church cannot do this work alone, but many churches can work together to achieve the same objective.

## Soren Kirk Jensen

The speaker began by noting that 2016 marks the 10th anniversary of the Pastoral Letter on Economic Justice by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Angola and São Tomé. The speaker wanted to discuss how well Angolan churches live up to the prophetic tradition of promoting social and economic justice through civil society.

The speaker noted that he has worked closely with Angolan churches for 12 years on projects that merge the prophetic tradition with a more technical approach. Providing the Bishop's Conference with his analysis of economic exclusion and social justice in Angola resulted in the release of the Pastoral Letter on Economic Justice, which demanded that the government take more concrete steps to eradicate social inequality and increase transparency regarding resource wealth. The Church plays a significant role in combatting poverty, but its approach to advocacy could be strengthened.

From 2010–15 the speaker contributed to supporting the Council of Christian Churches in launching the Integrated Municipal Development and Poverty Reduction Programme, which supports small public investments in the building and reconstruction of local infrastructure. Published annually, the programme has attracted much attention in holding policy-makers to account, particularly due to the low degree of implementation for planned projects. However, improvements could be made in terms of church advocacy for the programme, with increased buy-in from some church leaders.

Had Angola saved one-fifth of its 2008–15 oil revenue, the country would have sovereign wealth reserves of \$45 billion – more than nine times the current total. The government must now enforce austerity to balance the budget, and it is civil society's role to ensure this is done fairly, including through ensuring better financial responsibility in future. The Church is best placed to lead this civil society agenda; its historical roots in local communities afford it greater independence and legitimacy and thus far greater influence over politicians. To ensure success, the Church must strengthen its advocacy to achieve an agenda of economic and social justice.

## Summary of Question and Answer Session

### Questions

A joint statement was released this year by Angola's Catholic bishops who were critical of government corruption and lack of transparency. What has been the response to this in Angola, and are we seeing a re-emergence of the prophetic tradition?

Does the fact that Angola has a non-English colonial background make a difference to the character of the Church there?

Do the speakers have any information about partnerships or encouragement for reform from Portugal or Portuguese churches?

### **Soren Kirk Jensen**

Catholic Church statements can be vetoed by any bishop, and must therefore be agreed unanimously. As such, it always resonates when churches speak out in this way. There is a question over whether statements of this kind are effective, and there is a need for stronger follow-up from church institutions in forming concrete policies that put words into action. For example, churches must decide on a process by which church officials can report attempts to solicit bribes.

Looking more broadly at institutions, Angola was colonized by a Portuguese dictatorship and became a one-party state after independence, so given the lack of any democratic tradition it is hardly surprising that there is such a lack of transparency and accountability. Access to enormous oil revenues compounded this problem by enabling the continuation of an opaque institutional set-up. The increase in GDP per capita led to the withdrawal of donor funding, despite oil wealth having little impact on the lives of Angola's poorest people. The speaker noted that when he managed a development programme with the Catholic Church, this was funded by seven Catholic relief agencies, but now only two remain. Spaces in which civil society can push an accountability and development agenda must be slowly opened, and in some areas things are changing. The success of this will depend on partnerships that introduce mechanisms through which civil society can achieve better influence over government.

There is very limited institutional collaboration between Portugal and Angola, but congregations do play a significant role; one example is a Portuguese congregational organization that works on social service delivery programmes.

### **Dom André Soares**

Nobody in Angola could deny the existence of corruption; the minister of the interior has even said that workers don't need salaries as they can fund themselves entirely through corruption. The president maintains that every country has corruption, but it is clear that corruption benefits the rich at the expense of the poor.

British missionaries founded the first Protestant church in Angola in 1877. They were very active in northern Angola in changing the mindset of the people, which is why that area was the most affected by the war of independence. There are more than 1,000 denominations in Angola, but the government recognizes only 87 of these. The speaker stated that his church is part of the Council of Christian Churches, which has 22 traditional Protestant member denominations, as well as of the Alliance of Churches, which has 14 denominations. During the civil war, a further organization was formed connecting the Council of Christian Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, which constitutes Angola's largest denomination.

Portuguese Protestant missionaries have a long history of interaction with Angola from colonial times, and sent Angola's first prayer book in 1955. The Lusitanian Church is a Portuguese church that is part of the Anglican community. The church has created a network of Portuguese-speaking Protestant churches with connections to Brazil, with the network coordinated by the Bishop of the Lusitanian Church.

### Questions

Local church leaders in Uganda have fostered good relationships with municipal politicians, but there remains a difficult balancing act between challenging government and maintaining these relationships. What is the situation in Angola, and how antagonistic is government towards the Church? If irregularities were found in the speaker's budget analysis, how would that affect these relationships?

If the speakers had to choose between working on the ground to address concrete problems like malaria, or advocacy to pressure the authorities to make structural changes, what would be the priority?

### Dom André Soares

The Anglican community has worked with churches from many other African countries, particularly Nigeria; but the two countries' very different colonial, linguistic and cultural histories mean that Angola is culturally very different from Uganda.

The Church believes in standing in solidarity with the people of Angola and helping them in any way it can. It is very important that oil wealth is used to support the well-being of all Angolans; it is difficult to understand how 8,000 people can die in one month from a preventable disease outbreak. Only God knows whether the future of Angola will be good or bad, but at the present time Angolans are suffering and it is vital that churches come together to tackle these problems collectively.

### Soren Kirk Jensen

The acceptance of advocacy is rooted in cultural tradition, which greatly influences the way in which it can be formulated effectively. Historically, antagonistic relationships between civil society and political elites have been alien to Angolan culture, and could even more broadly be considered quite un-African. A significant contribution that the Church can make is by fostering good relationships with public officials. In the case of the Integrated Municipal Development and Poverty Reduction Programme, access to municipal budget documents was facilitated amicably between the Church and public officials, rather than through antagonistic demands. This process isn't perfect, and progressing these relationships can be slow, but somehow the municipal administration does end up being held to account to a certain extent. As there was no accountability mechanism already in existence, the approach represents real progress; there exists a real sense that the projects that are being monitored are being prioritized, and there is broader awareness. Donors must learn to be more patient in working towards the long-term goal of greater transparency.

It is possible to provide services to the entire population only if the state takes responsibility; Angola has access to more than sufficient resources to provide services such as yellow fever vaccines. If advocacy can add 1 per cent to government healthcare expenditure, then a lot more has been done to enact permanent and sustainable change than could be achieved through charity. However, there will always be gaps, and the Church plays an extremely strong role in ensuring that Angolan citizens have access to vital services that the government is not providing.