

# Civil society organisations' management dynamics and social value creation in the post-conflict volatile contexts pre and during COVID-19

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The current paper aims to address the management dynamics of civil society organisations (CSOs) in volatile contexts. Along with analysing CSOs' management dynamics at a general level, it also offers specific insights into their management strategies in response to COVID-19 pandemic.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study uses a qualitative research design, where in-depth case studies are undertaken with four CSOs operating in post-conflict volatile Sub-Saharan African economies of Liberia and Sierra Leone.

**Findings** – Findings revealed that multiple stakeholder management plays an important role in social value creation by CSOs. The findings further state that, in volatile contexts, CSOs appear to have more legitimacy than state functionaries due to their capabilities in dealing with political pressures and conflict sensitivities. The findings also revealed that case CSOs operating in Liberia and Sierra Leone were quick to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic by adjusting their working routines accordingly by switching to online working where possible and repurposing their management strategies. This repurposing of management strategies focussed on minimising economic disruptions caused by COVID-19 and continuing to create social value by helping youth and farmers particularly.

**Originality/value** – This paper contributes to the extant literature by being one of the first studies, highlighting the specificities of CSO management in volatile (especially Sub-Saharan African post-conflict) contexts and contributes to the literature streams on multiple stakeholder management and social value creation. To the best of the authors' knowledge, the current paper is also one the first study



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to address the management strategies of case CSOs in response to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

**Keywords** Civil society organisations, Covid-19, Management, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Social value creation, Volatile

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Volatility due to violence, armed conflicts or civil wars is, unfortunately, a visible reality of the current times, which has implications for management strategies of both for-profit and non-profit organisations (Ruggiero, 2019; Golgeci *et al.*, 2021). As a result, several scholarly studies in recent years have tried to address different dynamics associated with organisational management in volatile contexts (Dai *et al.*, 2017; Golgeci *et al.*, 2020). One specific kind of organisations are especially important in such volatile contexts, i.e. civil society organisations (CSOs), which have been found to play an important role in the post-civil war economies, as due to governmental incapability and institutional voids, they offer a range of services to the general populace (Lován *et al.*, 2017). There is no uniform definition of CSOs in the extant literature, as they have been conceptualised in different ways (Rahmato, 2012; Bannett *et al.*, 2019; Egholm *et al.*, 2020). However, a key element in most of these definitions is visibility of social value creation aspect of these organisations. Bannett *et al.* (2019: 214) define CSOs as “individual or organisations that act with the primary purpose of creating social value”. Also, Rahmato (2012) defines CSOs as a variety of “autonomous, voluntary institutions that provide services to the individual and articulate public interest”. According to the OECD, CSOs include “[...] all nonmarket and non-state organisations outside of the family in which people organise themselves to pursue common interests in the public domain” (Atwood, 2012:7). In volatile contexts, CSOs need to carefully balance the conflicting requirements (expectations) between multiple stakeholders and deal with resource constraints while trying to create social value. Thus, the management dynamics of CSOs tend to be more complex even at the operational level (Bendell, 2017; Kontinen, 2018). Our paper contributes to the extant literature by being one of the first studies, which specifically highlights the specificities of CSO management in volatile post-conflict countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (hereafter SSA). We contribute to the literature streams on CSOs’ management and social value creation. Particularly, our exploration of multiple stakeholder management by the CSOs highlights the unique mechanisms CSOs employ to navigate volatile settings, conflicting demands of different players to survive and create social value to their focal communities. Importantly, keeping in view the topicality of COVID-19 in the current times and the critical role of CSOs in response to the pandemic (Arslan *et al.*, 2021), the current paper is one of the first studies to address the management (and social value creation) strategies of CSOs in response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic especially in the volatile context of SSA.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 offers a brief literature review followed by a discussion on the research context and methodology given in Section 3, followed by the presentation of study findings in Section 4. The paper concludes with the presentation of implications, limitations and future research directions given in Section 5.

## 2. Literature review

Management dynamics comprise a range of aspects depending upon the focus and context being analysed. From CSOs’ perspective, a key management dynamic is linked to how CSOs legitimate themselves (Meyer *et al.*, 2013; Egholm *et al.*, 2020) while operating in different

contexts. In SSA, CSOs are perceived to be more legitimate than the state (Kamara, 2019). Thus, CSOs have been highlighted as a critical mediator that can bring the citizens, donors, policymakers, local businesses and other stakeholders closer to cooperation (Albareda, 2018). As CSOs engage with a range of stakeholders mentioned in the previous sentence, multiple stakeholder management is a very visible feature of CSOs' operations (Bendell, 2017). Despite the relevance and importance of CSOs in all countries (whether developed or developing), there are a relatively limited number of studies, specifically exploring the management dynamics of CSO operations (Biermann and Koops, 2017; Bendell, 2017; Kontinen, 2018; El Haddad *et al.*, 2020). This dearth of research becomes even more visible when looking at CSOs operating in post-conflict SSA countries like Liberia and Sierra Leone (Nyan, 2011; Kamara, 2019). Therefore, our paper aims to fill this gap by conducting an exploratory multiple case study focusing on management strategies and dynamics of CSOs in SSA countries of Sierra Leone and Liberia. Both countries have gone through fierce civil wars in recent years, and still, a certain level of instability and volatility exists.

Social value creation can refer to a range of activities depending upon whether the organisation is for-profit or not-for-profit. Social value creation for CSOs refers to the necessary goods and services provided by organisations with social purpose dealing with various social issues such as advocacy, promoting community development, helping and training as well as ensuring access to basic services (Felicio *et al.*, 2013; Weber *et al.*, 2017). CSOs' management regularly interacts with state functionaries, foreign donors and other local players to address governance issues (Teegen *et al.*, 2004), which can ultimately create social value by improving conditions for the local populace (Kapyepye, 2013). In Sierra Leone, as CSOs have been recognised as forming a vital link between the disadvantaged youth and communities, as they are perceived to be more legitimate than the state (Kamara, 2019). In Ghana, Zimbabwe and Kenya, CSOs have gained credibility as legitimate stakeholders since they provide approximately 40% of all health care and education opportunities for young people and the disadvantaged (Pollard and Court, 2005). Thus, states and their functionaries give CSOs management "space" to contribute to social issues, and many for-profit firms, including MNEs, also collaborate with them to create social value (Doh and Teegen, 2002). Hence, multiple stakeholder management strategies play an important role in strengthening the legitimacy of CSOs.

A typical situation that CSOs find themselves in volatile post-conflict countries is the threat of emerging or past episodes of violent conflict between the rival local groups. Hence, managing post-conflict sensitivities is another important management dynamic of CSOs (Keen, 2003; Nolte, 2004). This requires the CSOs to balance the conflicting demands of rival groups while focusing on the core mission of social value creation (Weber *et al.*, 2017). This balancing act is closely linked with multiple stakeholder management dynamics and legitimacy of CSOs in the volatile contexts. Lobbying the developed countries to provide resources for volatile states directed to issues of social importance is another important management aspect of CSOs (Teegen *et al.*, 2004). These resources, if used properly, have enormous potential for social value creation by developing skills of the extreme poor section of society, entrepreneurship and access to basic facilities like health (Kapyepye, 2013). Summing up, CSOs management dynamics (strategies) and social value creation potential are linked to maximising their resources' value by constantly shaping functions and activities to fulfil their mission (Downes and Marchant, 2016). In developing countries, especially in SSA and similar post-conflict countries; scarce resources influence CSOs' management by making them more efficient than the public sector (Kapyepye, 2013; Ayivor *et al.*, 2020) to address social issues. Hence, this aspect is also important to consider in the context of CSOs' management and the associated social value creation dynamics.

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### 3. Research context and methodology

We adopted a qualitative research design with exploratory approach to further the understanding of our theoretical interest in a real context (Lee, 1999; Dubois and Gadde, 2002). This approach has been chosen because of its usefulness in discovering new conceptual links (Alaassar *et al.*, 2020).

#### 3.1 Research setting

The current paper aims to understand CSOs management dynamics, particularly in the volatile post-conflict SSA countries of Liberia and Sierra Leone. We sought local CSOs that are currently working in this context. The reasons for choosing local CSOs are that they continue to play a crucial role in rural economic stabilisation, governance and law rule in these volatile economies (Appe, 2017). Notably, in Liberia, local CSOs provide services in deprived communities that the government does not have access to because of limited resources (Nyan, 2011), while, in Sierra Leone, the efforts of local CSOs continue to shape public opinion from the bottom through the creation of dynamic intercultural civil activism (Kanyako, 2016). As local CSOs rely heavily on foreign donors, a key reason for choosing local CSOs operating in these volatile countries is that their management strategies, including coordination, networking relations, partnership and organisational configuration as well as funding models are similar (Pallas, 2016; Appe and Pallas, 2018). Also, given the relevance of local CSOs in Liberia and Sierra Leone, four case organisations were purposely sampled because of their contrasting missions: helping child soldiers; reducing rural-urban migration; promoting adult education; and community initiative. The brutal civil war in Liberia and its offshoot to Sierra Leone both contributed to and reflected urbanised youth, high illiteracy rate, child soldiers and deplorable communities in both countries (Richards, 2005; Hoffman, 2011). Thus, the choice of our CSOs is a strong reflection of what makes both Liberia and Sierra Leone volatile and what different social value creation activities are undertaken by these CSOs.

Since the nature of our topic is relatively clear, evaluating information from organisations with different missions and with fewer participants is useful if the topic is intriguing but difficult to grasp (Morse, 2000). Considering that in-depth interviews are not as concerned with generalising to a large population of interest; our choice of four case studies was made to maintain the quality of the information obtained in the interviews. To overcome any issues of sample bias, one of the co-authors who lived in Sierra Leone and worked for foreign CSOs operating in both countries generated a list of local CSOs with informants that can reflect on the topic and express themselves better than other local CSOs operating in both volatile countries. Morse (2000, p. 4) indicated, “if data are on target, contain less dross, and are rich and experiential, then fewer participants will be required to reach saturation”. In our case, despite the contrasting target groups of each of our case study organisations, they depict the characteristics that are highly relevant for linked to our study’s aim. Thus, the four case studies are sufficient for our study, rather than involving more participants who may be less articulated with information of sparse specificity (Malterud *et al.*, 2016).

The four case organisations were identified through two reputable data sources. Specifically, CSOs from Liberia were identified through Liberia NGO Directory, a database network founded in 2017 to enhance knowledge and understanding of NGOs/CBOs/CSOs in Liberia. The CSOs from Sierra Leone were identified through the In Sierra Leone, an online directory established in 2009, focusing on helping organisations across Sierra Leone find each other.

### 3.2 Case organisations

Our first case organisation, A, is a local CSO from Liberia that started work in 2012. The organisation's entire operation is based on helping former child soldiers marginalised in specific slum communities around Monrovia, Liberia. To this end, the organisation aims to ensure that vulnerable young people across Liberia can reintegrate into society. At the time of the interview, the organisation had only four management staff on the payroll. Our second case organisation, B, is more of an established local body in Liberia's civil society sector. The organisation was established in 2010 with crucial goals and objectives to promote community initiatives, primarily women's actions for sustainable development and natural resources management. Organisation B has thirty staff.

Our third case organisation, C, is a civil voluntary youth structure established in 2014 in the rural Bombali district of Sierra Leone. The organisation aims to reduce the chain of youth rural-urban migration to Freetown, Sierra Leone, by providing skill training and attractive jobs in the agricultural sector. At the time of the interview, organisation C has ten staff. Our last case organisation, D, is a local branch of a more established civil society organisation with over 30 years of operations in Sierra Leone. In Sierra Leone, the organisation's main goal is to promote adult education, food security and livelihood among women in rural Sierra Leone. At the time of the interview, organisation D had 59 staff. [Table 1](#) summarises our case organisations, dates established and area of operations, the number of staff and informants' positions within CSOs.

### 3.3 Data collection

For data collection, we followed a semi-structured interview format with staff in these four case organisations. Three of the four interviews were conducted by phone, recorded via ASUS ZenBook 14 voice recorder. Due to poor connectivity, one of the interviewees from Sierra Leone optioned to respond to the questions via email. All the interviews were conducted in English, with detailed transcripts drawn from the audio recordings. Before the interviews, we assured our participants of anonymity towards their organisations. The questions focused on management strategies and dynamics of CSOs in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the varying reasons for operating in these volatile contexts, volatility and various kinds and strategies for dealing with other stakeholders and donor organisations.

### 3.4 Data analysis

For data analysis, we followed the Gioia method in its step-by-step procedures. In this vein, our data analysis consists of four phases. The first phase involves some excerpts from our

CSOs	Established	Mission	No. of staff	Informants' positions
A	2012	Helping former child soldiers and other vulnerable youth in Monrovia, Liberia	10	Co-Founder and Executive Director
B	2010	Promoting various community initiatives for sustainable development and natural resources management in Liberia	30	Executive Director
C	2014	Reduction of the chain of youthful rural-urban migration in Sierra Leone	10	Chairperson
D	1988	Promoting adult education, food security and livelihood among the disadvantaged population segment in Sierra Leone	59	Head of Programme

**Table 1.** Case organisations, interviewees positions and durations

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data transcripts. The 1<sup>st</sup> order and 2<sup>nd</sup> order concepts offer an abstract overview of our finding's themes, followed by aggregate theoretical dimensions (Gioia *et al.*, 2013), which provides a rigorous conceit overview of our findings by connecting the 1st order and 2nd order themes.

In the first phase, we prepared a transcribed word document that provides extractive details of each interview question in the study. Each extractive summary document included information about the interviewees' roles in their organisation and their work in volatile countries like Liberia and Sierra Leone. Also, it entails their goals and their understanding of the current management dynamics and strategies in the current volatile context. The extractive summaries across all the interviews allowed us to choose a few relevant sentences to generate the summary (Gambhir and Gupta, 2017). While coding allowed us to quickly identify patterns throughout the data set (Lee, 1999), the extractive summary helped us determine what criteria should be used to judge the concept's importance (Li *et al.*, 2006).

In the 1<sup>st</sup> order phase, we coded all the necessary text that could pattern with CSOs management strategies and dynamics. With NVIVO 12 software and rereading each extractive summary, new search codes were added to a coding dictionary to recall our codes and create themes. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> order phase, we began to draw connections between the first-order phase to develop more abstract themes. To this end, we employed selective coding procedures by purposefully selecting codes that we believed aligned with our study themes – CSOs management strategies and dynamics in the volatile context. Once we had identified our second order code themes, we assessed whether they can be linked to each other, which helped us develop grounded aggregate theoretical dimensions (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). Finally, the grounded overall themes were used to highlight the current state of CSOs management strategies and dynamics in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

#### 4. Findings and discussion

In this section, we present the main findings of the data analysed. We structured the findings section in three parts: CSOs, multiple stakeholder management and social value creation, managing post-conflict sensitivity and changes in CSOs management approaches due to COVID-19.

We identified that the forces for growth and development within CSOs management dynamics in volatile contexts are the underlying functions that motivate CSOs managers to address a range of societal and economic challenges in these two SSA countries.

##### 4.1 Civil society organisations, multiple stakeholder management and social value creation

Our findings show growing awareness and appreciation by the general population of CSOs operations for the first category. These appreciations are set for various CSOs functions that act as forces for rural and local community growth and development, including community engagement to empower locals. The multiple facets of engagement with various stakeholders, particularly the local people and community, were also made clear within our interview data. For instance, the co-founder and executive director, organisation A, stated that:

[...] every year, we take in 30-35 youth that we support. We provide skill training, and in the end, we create a job placement for them. We have different cooperatives that we engage with throughout our programs [...] our beneficiaries, they will come to us sometimes and thank us. They appreciate our work.

In theory, these findings reflect how social value creation established in the management context is a force for CSOs management to build social inclusion (Muddiman *et al.*, 2019).

The findings above are in line with those observed in the growing literature on the dynamics of CSOs management and its influence in society on the issues they work with (Kalogeraki, 2020; Scaramuazzino, 2020). Hence, concerning CSOs management dynamics in Liberia and Sierra Leone's volatile contexts, these findings deepen our understanding of how local recognition is a force for CSOs management commitment. We found support for this explanation in the analysed data, which stressed the importance of beneficiaries and local community recognition. The executive director, organisation B, said:

[...] our local people and particularly our beneficiaries do appreciate our work [...] the communities appreciate they have a voice [through CSOs], and they also recognise our work. [For example], through our work, communities now benefiting from micro-credit loans. That is our motivation.

However, our findings do not always show support that local people and communities' value all CSOs operations and engagements. The head of the program, organisation D, felt the local population have different views for CSOs in Sierra Leone. The same head of the program added that "whilst some CSOs are held to high esteem; some are not applauded for their work mainly because of lack of accountability or being affiliated with party politics". An explanation for this finding is that most local CSOs only get support from the local government. The majority of CSOs that get foreign donor support and aim to hold local governments accountable face restrictive laws on foreign donor financing (Mathenge, 2020).

There is an ongoing global recognition of CSOs functions in different societies and contexts (Van Dyk, 2018), especially due to the Covid-19 impact in low and middle-income countries (Brynjolfsson *et al.*, 2020). For example, in Liberia and Sierra Leone, our second category offered evidence on CSOs recognition and their engagement on societal policy matters. With their contributions to social value creation, CSOs have strong engagement with state functionaries across these two countries. The executive director, organisation B, explained this as follows:

In most cases, the government do engage CSOs on different discussions that have a societal impact on youth, particularly, girls. The community like that a lot, that shows our work is appreciated.

The enabling roles of local CSOs commitment to societal growth and development are those of recognition and effective engagement with state functionaries (Micheletti, 2017; Sherlock, 2020). Thus, it is evident that the states' role is also a focal incentive for management effectiveness and social value creation. The executive director, organisation A expressed this overwhelming incentive as follows:

We collaborate with the local government, and they cannot stop appreciating what we do. They call us to the parliament to express their gratitude for the work we are doing. For us (local CSOs), that is the goal; to see the local government and people appreciate our work.

This kind of recognition has profound meaning in the context of local CSOs operating in these volatile countries. For example, it strengthens local CSOs as an essential "third" sector group, dominated by foreign CSOs operating in these post-conflict countries. It also strengthens local CSOs legitimate stance and increases their options for foreign donor fund (Kamara, 2019).

#### *4.2 Civil society organisations managing post-conflict political sensitivities*

For the first category, the empirical findings show that CSOs managers working in these volatile contexts had to manage tension among young people because of political incitement. We found support for this statement as the head of the program, organisation D, echoes,

“they [politicians] are part of the problem why youth are vulnerable in this country with double standards concerning dealing with crucial state issues.” The same head of the program continues that:

[...] what happens is that we are much more aware of volatility beyond the civil war. This is precisely the reason that CSOs in Sierra Leone have been very much proactive to intervene in many state issues.

The chairman, organisation C, perceived political incitement as a critical factor to youth violence:

[...] supporting youths have become politically influenced in this country [...] opportunities are limited for youth. If youth are engaging in work, they will not be involved in violent acts [...] youth unrest is affecting our day-to-day operation. [That is why] we continue to organise seminars to sensitise the youth on current issues.

These findings appear to be in accord with [Hoffman \(2011\)](#), who found that space, sociality and life are coordinated among young people available for all kinds of dangerous work in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Given this consistency, our empirical findings may have profound importance on the issues of post-election violence and political unrest and its effect on management operations to advance or to perform their meaningful role ([Keen, 2003](#); [Nolte, 2004](#)). Another explanation for these findings is that post-conflict Liberia and Sierra Leone had led to chronic unemployment among young people, and thus these regions are prone to violence.

For the second category of state officials’ broken promises, the evidence reveals the role of unfulfilled promises by state functionaries in Liberia and Sierra Leone to young people. Deprived communities are a key driver of political unrest in these regions. The co-founder and executive director, organisation A, said:

[...] we have a whole lot of vulnerable people and a complete set of rich politicians and state institutions that are offering little support to the poor [...] politicians only visit some of these deprived communities when they want to be elect in office. They offer little money and food, and once they are elected in office, they never support the poor people who voted for them [...] we want a government that will take the initiative to create institutions ready to support the poor. So, they will contribute positively to the development of communities [...] we continue to provide comprehensive vocational training programs for growth across the country because that is our goal.

We also found evidence suggesting that state functionaries’ broken promises continue to challenge CSOs management dynamic operations in this volatile context. As the executive director, organisation B, pointed out:

[...] the lack of support from state institutions is definitively hurting our day-to-day operations and achieving our goals. The government says they will provide support packages for the deprived citizens due to the COVID-19, They exhausted everything, and nothing was left for the local population.

The above findings suggest political incitement and unfulfilled promises continue to affect youth taking to the street to raise their dissatisfaction over the lack of social facilities and low delivery services, which hinder management operations ([Managa, 2012](#)). For example, we found empirical evidence that unfulfilled promises continue to trigger more youth unrest in Sierra Leone. As the chairman, organisation C, stated:

[...] there is so much unrest among youth, politicians, and other state functionaries in this part of the country [...] some of our stakeholders think that we should not pay too much attention to youth in this country. For example, the riot we experienced here in Bombali between youth and police officers was due to a lack of communication with CSOs managers who are often dealing with young people. It presents challenge to our operations.

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#### 4.3 Changes in civil society organisations' management due to COVID-19

4.3.1 *Quick adjustment to remote working.* The Covid-19 outbreak in Liberia and Sierra Leone has put an unprecedented strain on management and societal operations. Our findings reveal that Covid-19 has either expressly or by implication, force CSOs management to reduce staff at the office. We found that strategically reducing management staff at the office, directly and indirectly, impacts the dynamics of CSOs management operations in these volatile SSA countries. Directly, this is said to have happened by forcing existing staff to perform additional tasks. Indirectly this is reported to have hinder staff output in terms of efficiency and productivity. For instance, the co-founder and executive director, organisation A, stated:

Covid-19 is affecting our overall management operations [...] we must cut down on our management team. We let go of six members of our team who are active and doing work in the field.

The same co-founder further added that “we also must ask people within our [current] management team to do jobs that they were not doing before to save on cost and resources.” Also, the executive director, organisation B, reiterates that:

[...] the first thing we had to do due to coronavirus is that reduced the number of staff at the office, which makes it exceedingly difficult to work. [Current] staffs work on multiple tasks and under unfavourable conditions at home [...] accessing office data from home is difficult. [For example] some of our staff members do not have an internet connection to be able to work effectively at home, and then the challenge of completing a project or a particular task becomes worrisome.

These findings above reflect how Covid-19 established in the management context, shows most staff switch to remote work, while others are laid off or furloughed (Brynjolfsson *et al.*, 2020). Our findings show that most CSOs operating in these volatile economies in SSA countries continue to play constructive roles in crisis response to COVID-19. As the executive director, organisation B, stated:

We must continue to monitor our staff to abide by the rules and regulations [of the Covid-19] because sometimes it is difficult due to the close connections we have with the communities.

This is important, especially for local civil societies operating in these regions, to ensure that the Covid-19 pandemic does not provide a convenient cover for the government further to flit the balance of power in their favour.

4.3.2 *Repurposing civil society organisations' management strategies for social value creation during COVID-19.* Finally, our analysed data revealed a common goal with a collective understanding of shifts in CSOs from planned projects to emergency relief in response to COVID-19 pandemic. CSOs already knew that deprived communities are at a disadvantage with measures to confine people to their homes and seize their ability to meet, organise and advocate. As the head of the program, organisation D stated:

Covid-19 diverted every plan in 2020, and CSOs must repurpose their expectations and wishes in line with the pandemic [...] we have now diverted our attention to fighting corona and advocating for state accountability during the process.

We also found evidence suggesting that there is a repurposing of CSOs management operations in these volatile SSA countries due to COVID-19. As co-founder and executive director, organisation A, asserted:

So far, Covid-19 has increased the number of youths in our centre. This has forced us to seize on projects to focus on the present challenge [...] nevertheless, we [are] engaging with our partners on these issues, because we rely on their funding.

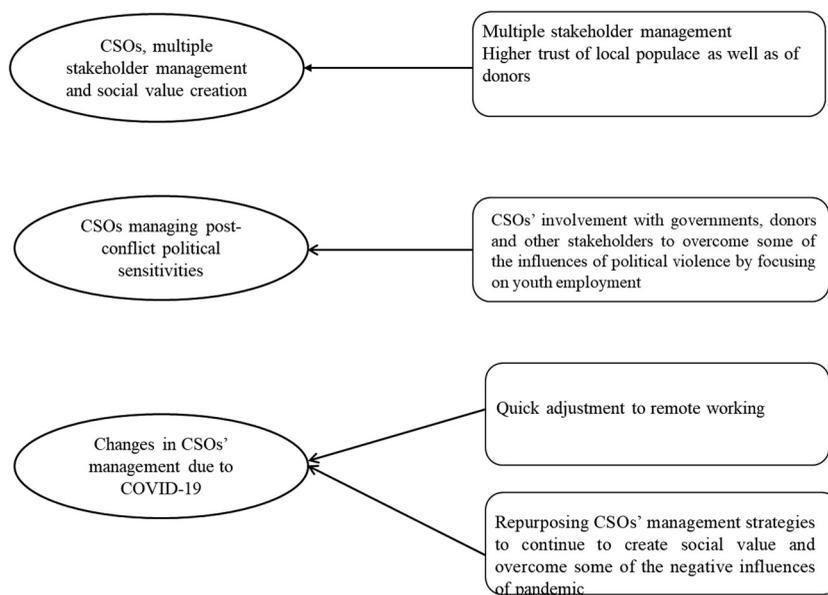
Our findings show that Covid-19 has forced many civil societies to change their management operations that highlight the vital role of CSOs in maintaining vibrant and healthy communities in these volatile economies. For instance, the executive director, organisation B, pointed out: “Due to the current [Covid-19] situation, we must seek an extension of the work plan from our donor partners”. The same executive director further added that “some donors are flexible enough to provide support. [And now] we provide protective kits such as face masks to communities.” Similarly, the chairman, organisation C, stated:

As I am talking to you right now, young farmers are doing absolutely nothing right now due to Covid-19 [ . . . ] So, for these young farmers, what we do is to encourage them to go to the farm and prepare the land for the second phase of the farming season. So, we provide some [farming] materials and other support for some farmers to go back to the farm.

The findings illustrate that during an emergency, the idea of “Dynamism despite Disruption” within projects is notable (Brechenmacher *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, our empirical findings show a strong commitment between completing existing projects to achieve set goals in these volatile economies and maintaining strong engagement with donor partners. We believe that for CSOs management working in these deprived economies, such commitment has profound meaning for ensuring trust with beneficiaries and donor partners alike. Thus, our findings are in line with existing literature examining interactions between CSOs and strategic alliances with other stakeholders (Mullins, 2013). The study findings are summarised in the following Figure 1.

### 5. Implications, limitations and future research directions

The findings of the current paper offer both theoretical and managerial implications. A key theoretical implication concerns the need for CSO specific theorisation, especially concerning management strategies in volatile contexts and social value creation. Our findings revealed



**Figure 1.**  
Summary of study findings

that multiple stakeholder management plays an important role in social value creation by CSOs. However, multiple stakeholder management dynamics in volatile countries like Liberia and Sierra Leone are very different from multiple stakeholder management in relatively stable contexts. In volatile contexts, CSOs appear to have more legitimacy than state functionaries as well as they need to be creative while dealing with political pressures and conflict sensitivities. Hence, organisational scholars should try to develop frameworks or paradigms which incorporate these elements specific to volatile contexts, thereby setting bases for future studies to enrich our understanding of CSO operations, management strategies and social value creation. The findings further revealed that case CSOs operating in Liberia and Sierra Leone were quick to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, adjusted their working routines accordingly by switching to online working where possible, and repurposing their management approach. This repurposing of management approach focused on minimising economic disruptions caused by COVID-19 and continuing to create social value, e.g. by helping farmers concerning the forthcoming farming seasons and engaging more closely with youth to develop new projects for them. This “dynamism despite disruption” depicted by CSOs calls for scholars to engage in theory development exercises to link the recently introduced academic concept of “resilient agility” (Golgeci *et al.*, 2020) to CSO operations and management strategies.

From the practice and policy perspectives, an essential implication of the current study relates to CSOs being a bridging gap between the governments, donor agencies and the general populace in volatile post-conflict economies such as Liberia and Sierra Leone. It is evident from the findings that CSOs can balance conflicting requirements of different stakeholders, including conflict sensitivities, relatively better and tend to be viewed as trustworthy by the general population compared to the public sector. Hence, these aspects can be used to enhance the efficiency of public sector programmes by using CSO managers as trainers for public servants on these issues and outsourcing some functions to CSOs, so that the goals associated with poverty alleviation and social value creation can be achieved.

Like all academic studies, our paper has several limitations. First, it is based on four case studies from two post-conflict volatile countries in SSA. Hence, the generalisability of findings is rather limited. However, keeping in view the relative dearth of research on CSO operations and management dynamics in volatile contexts, our paper sets bases for future studies to explore other contexts to compare the findings as well as attempt to undertake quantitative analysis if possible. It should be noted that different CSOs with different missions may have different resource needs, as well as different social value creation focus. However, due to general volatility in post-conflict context, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and its consequent - lack of donor funding and increasing societal challenges, there is a common contextual problem confronting all four CSOs. As noted by our informants, because of Covid-19, local CSOs were forced to divert each mission and repurpose their plans to meet social expectations and wishes in line with the pandemic. Also, our framework includes a one-way, one stakeholder (CSOs management) knowledge process. Although this is crucial to understand CSOs management effectiveness, contributions from beneficiaries, communities, and even state officials can affect more than one (CSOs management) knowledge process. In fact, contributions from other stakeholders could also legitimise CSOs management responses. Also, at the same time, it reduces the issues of biases and predictability. We focus on local CSOs with an unequal number of staffs, an undertaking that might affect our findings. Thus, replicating our study with local CSOs operating in similar volatile contexts with matching staff might provide more detailed insights regarding changes in CSOs management due to Covid-19. Finally, due to limitations associated with access as well as other practical restrictions, we could not undertake an in-depth analysis of

CSO responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in those specific contexts. However, CSOs are very important players, as highlighted in recent studies on COVID-19 (Arslan *et al.*, 2021). Future studies can specifically probe cross-sector collaboration strategies of CSOs while dealing with COVID-19 pandemic and creating social value in post-conflict volatile countries.

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