

IS THE AFRICAN UNION ECOSOCC A NEW DAWN AND A NEW DEAL?

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‘You are not African because you are born in Africa but you are an African because Africa is born in you’

Introduction

The African Union made history on the 29th of March 2005 as it launched the interim Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) in Addis Abba, Ethiopia. ECOSOCC is an advisory organ of the African Union consisting of a variety of civil society groups from member states; these include professional groups, non-governmental organization, social groups, community based organizations, workers, traditional, religious and cultural groups. ECOSOCC is headed by a bureau of five regional representatives, a standing committee and then the general assembly of 150 members.

Members of the bureau are; the Nobel Peace prize winner, Prof. Wangari Muthai (Presiding Officer and East Africa representative), and Deputy Presiding Officers; Professor Maurice Tadadjeu (Central Africa), Dr. Ayo Aderinwale (West Africa), Prof. Fatima Karadja (North Africa) and Mr. Charles Mutasa (Southern Africa).

ECOSOCC was established under the provisions of article 5 and 22 of the Constitutive Act of the African Union. ECOSOCC gives civil society in the continent an opportunity to interact with all organs of the AU and influence policy decisions and chart Africa’s future together with the heads of states and governments. In the words of His Excellency Mr. Alpha Oumar Konare, Chairman of the African Union Commission (pictured here), “the creation of ECOSOCC is against authoritarian regimes, hostile external efforts and the negative waves of globalization.....You should be by the side of those who suffer injustice and are deprived of their basic human rights.” ECOSOCC is the solid foundation of democracy; it will guarantee the observance of the rule of law, human rights, democratic transformation and good governance. It is through ECOSOCC that civil society



organizations in Africa have to define itself and prove to skeptics that they are not the conveyor belts of western interests.

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Interim ECOSOCC Mandate

ECOSOCC is a potential resource-base yet to be tapped by the political powers but it is also the mechanism by which their own governance shall be weighed. ECOSOCC is a reservoir of human knowledge that should be taken seriously in building African economies. The greatest challenge for civil society in ECOSOCC will be to claim its legitimacy, demonstrate its ability and value addition to the continent by bringing in implementable solutions and alternatives to Africa's challenges of disease, the lethal impact of AIDS on food security and livelihoods, poverty, conflict, authoritarian tendencies, heartbreaking events in Sudan's Darfur region as well as in the beleaguered regions of Ituri and the Kivus in the Democratic Republic of Congo. There is a need for both civil society and African leaders to work hard together and to convince the people of the continent that the lives and safety of their fellow Africans are sacrosanct and that there can be no substitute for the fruits of peace. The fledging support of the civil society in the building a people's Africa was long overdue. Turkur Bamanga described the launch of the interim ECOSOCC as a new dawn and a new deal².

The mandate of the interim ECOSOCC is for two years, from March 2005 to March 2007. It is interim in the sense that all its national and regional structures have yet to be fully constituted. The two major tasks for the interim ECOSOCC are, first, to ensure that ECOSOCC sub-regional and national structures are in place and, secondly, through ECOSOCC civil society must begin influencing policy changes within the African Union by engaging the sectoral clusters of the African Union. These clusters are peace and security, political affairs, infrastructure and energy, human resources, science and technology, rural economy and agriculture, economic affairs, women and gender related issues and cross-cutting issues such as NEPAD.

The year 2005 itself is a historic year for Africa considering that the United Kingdom has prioritized Africa's backwardness and poverty for the G8 summit to be held in Scotland in June. The United Kingdom Prime Minister, Mr. Tony Blair, has put up the Commission for Africa with the core purpose of ensuring that alternatives to change Africa's development face be put forward and discussed in 2005. Both the United Kingdom and the United States have issued statements regarding canceling poor countries multilateral debts with the aim of freeing resources for development in Africa. The 2005 September United Nations Millennium Development Goals review also put Africa at the top of the world's development agenda. Within this scenario, the ECOSOCC is expected to play a major role and bring change to the face of Africa. There is much hope that another Africa is possible!

There is a need to respect, acknowledge and accept that we Africans have a contribution to make to our own development and to the development of all humanity. Partnership of civil society with their governments as one citizen put it happens "when they care about our gains as they do about theirs".

²Turkur Bamanga - African Business Roundtable executive president addressing ECOSOCC Assembly, Addis Abba, Ethiopia, 29th March 2005.

Context

The birth of the African Union in July 2002, forty years after the creation of the OAU, reflected an historic reaffirmation that Africa itself bears the primary responsibility for shaping its fate and future; and that the best way -- the only way -- for Africa to carry out that mission is to unite around the needs and aspirations of its people.

The role of African civil society in the development of Africa has been recognised for a long time. This is based on the fundamental premise that Africa's development must be about development of people. As early as 1990, the *Arusha Charter on Popular Participation* recognised the need for African governance to fully integrate African civil society in various governance structures of key institutions in order for them to fully participate in defining the long-term development policies of the continent. While the charter of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), had made no reference to African civil society, the OAU increasingly began to invite African Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to participate in some of its meetings and structures, as observers.

Past Organization of Africa Unity (OAU) approaches to cooperation with CSOs included the criteria for observer status and outlined essential prerequisites. In cases where observer status was not possible, cooperation agreements or Memorandums of Understanding could still be concluded as internal mechanisms for cooperation in specific areas. It is important to note that there were some serious limitations inherent in the OAU framework as it did not allow for direct participation of CSO representatives at the meetings and had no reporting or follow-up systems.

With the birth of the African Union in 2002, the importance has been recognized for CSOs not to be observers of the African Union proceedings but be an integral part of the organization's decision and policymaking process. The African Union's Assembly of Heads of State and Government Decision AHG Dec. 160 (XXXII) of July 2001 in Lusaka, stressed the importance of involving African Non-governmental Organizations, socio-economic organizations, professional associations and civil society organizations in Africa's integration process, as well as in the formulation and implementation of the programme of the Union. In that same decision, the Assembly requested the Interim Chairperson of the AU, in consultation with a group of experts and CSO Working Group Representatives to submit a comprehensive report during its 2003 Maputo Summit on ECOSOCC with recommendations on:

1. Its structure, functioning, areas of competence and relationships to other organs of the Union;
2. The procedure and criteria for selecting the members of ECOSOCC, including their terms of office;
3. The relationship between ECOSOCC and African regional non-governmental organizations and professional groups;
4. The Rules of Procedure of ECOSOCC and the preparations of its work programme.

The Economic, Social and Cultural Council of the African Union (ECOSOCC), established under Article 22 of the founding charter of the African Union, defines African civil society as an advisory organ and explicitly invites African civil society through its various organisations to fully participate in the institutions of the Union, in particular, the Economic, Social and Cultural Council. The establishment of this important organ is to enable the African people and institutions, not only to contribute to the programmes and decisions of the AU, but also to assume ownership of these programmes and be responsible for their implementation. This has now been extended to participation in various other institutions and committees such as the African Parliament, the African Court of Justice, the Conference on Security, Stability, Development and Cooperation (CSSDCA) and specialised Committees, all of which are required to involve CSOs in their work.

The first African union Civil Society Conference was held in June 2001. During this conference, the general framework of cooperation between the African Union (AU) and about 400 CSOs was elaborated. Later, a Civil Society Desk was established to deal with civil society matters. It was initially agreed that the CSOs are to meet once every two years. In June 2002, the second OAU-Civil society Conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, decided to establish a Provisional AU-Civil Society Working Group to coordinate and work through the modalities of African civil society interface with the organs of the AU. The Meeting elected some 20 regional representatives and the AU Secretariat nominated three sectoral representatives. The terms of reference for the working group are to:

- Prepare criteria for accreditation and affiliation of African CSOs across the continent;
- Participate in the formulation of possible modalities relating to the participation of civil society in ECOSOCC and other relevant AU organs;
- Develop a code of conduct and ethics for CSOs;
- Assist the AU in elaborating a plan of action relating to CSO activities and contributions to the OAU/AU and forging networks; and
- Assist in resource mobilization and the popularization of the AU.

The statutes of ECOSOCC were then adopted by the heads of states and governments in July 2004. Since then two meetings of the provisional Working group were convened in Cairo (Egypt) and Abuja (Nigeria) to strategize on how to launch the ECOSOCC, especially finalizing its rules of procedure and the Code of Ethics.

The Challenges ahead

* Poverty, HIV/AIDS, malaria, instability, conflict, human insecurity, corruption, bad governance and marginalization of Africa peoples are among the contemporary enemies of the African Union. Citizens hope that the collaboration of government and civic groups will enable them to develop appropriate strategies to deal with Africa's daunting challenges.

* In many African countries the relationship between Government and civic organizations have been characterized by conflict and counter-accusations. To turn this around and work together may be easier said than done. Most governments scoff at the idea of civil society groups watching over their undemocratic practices, especially in the area of the rule of law, human rights; civic and voter education.

* Civic organizations have to prove that they live by what they say and they should not condemn government for the very things found amiss in their own camp. They will have to prove that they can offer alternatives to Africa's economic quagmire and political despondency if they are to remain relevant as an advisory organ to the African Union.

* CSO's have to effectively champion a proactive popularization of the new Africa Union among African people within the context of potential resistance to change. Members of ECOSOCC have to work hard not to be perceived as an alternative club of elites in its operations and collaboration with the African Union.

Final remarks

The Africa Union, unlike its predecessor the OAU, seems determined to graduate from a "politicians club" to a people centered and driven regional organization. The ECOSOCC process is a historical opportunity for the formulation of a new social contract between African Governments and their people. Involving CSO's in African Union endeavours is a positive move and is a way of involving ordinary citizens of Africa in decision and policy-making processes of issues that concern their daily lives.

More to this is that involving CSO's is key considering the role they would be expected to play as watchdogs of their governments and that CSO's have the ability to reach out to grass roots level people in African communities. There is more to be done by both governments and civil society if Africa is to pull itself from the quagmire of poverty, tyranny and corruption. Democracy that goes beyond mere periodic elections seems to be the missing link. As Mandela noted, we all need to say "Democracy is an ideal that I would like to live for, it is an ideal that if necessary I am prepared to die for"