

Monday 4th July, saw the opening of the 5th Ordinary Session of the African Union Assembly. The meeting came after the conclusion of the two day closed meeting of the Executive Council of the AU.

The Assembly of the AU comprises the Heads of State of African countries, most of whom were present for the opening ceremony.

While acknowledging the recent steps by the G8 countries with respect to proposals regarding the total cancellation of debt for some of Africa's countries, speakers at the opening of the meeting called for more progress particularly in the arena of trade.

The point was continually made that trade was needed together with aid and debt to advance the development of Africa.

Similarly there was consensus among the speakers that while the UK's Commission for Africa (CFA) was a welcome initiative but that more was required beyond its Report. Eyes were focussed in the direction of the approaching G8 Summit in this regard.

HIV & Challenges to Africa

Libyan leader and host of the summit Colonel Mu'ammer al-Qaddafi opened the public session. He surprised the 1000 strong meeting by expressing the view that Africa did not have a problem with HIV/AIDS.

He also cautioned Africans against making the same mistake that they made with respect to the slow development of the AU.

This was an indication of the challenge of continental integration and agreeing on priorities, concepts which dominated his speech. For instance, while an issue such as HIV/AIDS may not be considered a priority in some countries, in other, such as those countries of the Southern Africa region, HIV/AIDS which is decimating the livelihoods of millions, was recognised as one of the key challenges to development and to poverty reduction efforts.

Nigerian President Obasanjo acknowledged the developmental challenges posed by HIV/AIDS and proposed a summit in 2006, as follow up to the HIV Summit held 5 years ago in Abuja, to "raise awareness and resources from within and without against the trio of HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis - the major killers of the continent".

Civil Society

Addressing the Assembly, Professor Konare, the Chairperson of the AU Commission stressed the importance of an AU development path as deliberate, well thought-out and progressive.

Prof. Konare noted the importance of strengthening civil society and the private sector to the development of the AU. This was said in spite of the very limited civil society voice and presence at the meeting.

A further concern for civil society was the non-prominence of the ECOSOCC at the meetings. Originally included on the Agenda of the Executive Council Session, the presentation of a progress report on the ECOSOCC was excluded from the proceedings.

Youth focus

In their addresses, both President Obasanjo and Prof. Konare made reference to the importance of the participation of Africa's youth in the development of the continent.

President Obasanjo specifically challenged the AU Commission to develop and present to the next AU Summit a report on an integrated and viable youth programme which will enable the sharing of best practices and experiences within the AU.

Achievement of the MDGs

The UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan expressed confidence that Africa could achieve its MDG targets *if* the promises made by her global partners were delivered upon. He stressed that no new promises were required.

President Obasanjo and Chairperson of the African Union indicated that the AU Commission had been tasked, together with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and the African Development Bank to undertake a review from the African perspective in time for the September 2005 MDG Review.

Development issues featured strongly in the presentations made. In addition, the closed sessions of the Assembly meeting included addresses by Jeffrey Sachs on the MDGs and Sir Hilary Benn on the CFA.