

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

**BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND
LAND, HONORABLE ISMAILA SAMBOU**

**ON THE OCCASION OF THE 3RD AFRICAN UNION-CIVIL SOCIETY
(AU-SCO) FORUM**

BANJUL, THE GAMBIA, 20-21 JUNE 2005

Mr Chairman

Representative of the African Union

Representative of ECOSOCC

Distinguished Guest

Ladies and Gentlemen

On behalf of the President of the Republic of The Gambia, Alh Dr Yayha A J J Jammeh, and the Government and people of The Gambia, it gives me great pleasure to welcome the African Civil Society to our beloved capital, Banjul. The Gambia is particularly happy to host the 3rd AU-CSO forum as a pace-setter for the 8th Ordinary Session of Council Civil Society Organization and Assembly of the African Union from 25th – 2nd July 2006.

Mr Chairman

Distinguished guest

The government and people of The Gambia fully associate themselves with the philosophy of the Constitutive Act of the African Union that places premium on partnership with Civil Society, particularly youth, women and children. We recognize that the organization of African Unity (OAU) performed creditably during its period. It led the struggle for decolonization and succeeded in liberating the bulk of African countries from the shackles of colonialism and racism. We also recognize however, that as time changed, the limitations of our continental organization become also apparent. The OAU was too focused on political issues. The changing international environment associated with the end of the cold war stressed the need for development. The search for meaningful integration of political and economic demands underlined the transformation of the OAU into the African Union.

The challenge of the African Union is to accelerate the pace of integration and development. That challenge stressed the need to emphasize popular participation as instructed by the Constitutive Act of the Union. The element of popular participation has two important corollaries. The first is involvement of all segments of society in the process of making and implementing policy to foster ownership and identity. The second is to mobilize the collective energy galvanized by this process to foster integration and development. Both processes reinforce each other and they create gravity and momentum for change and growth. It is the recognition of this potential that has led to the active development of virile and potent civil society agenda and The Gambia is extremely happy to play a meaningful role in this process.

Mr Chairman

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

Since the inception of the African Union in July 2002 in Durban, South Africa, the process has grown tremendously. First, through the conference on Security Stability, Development and Cooperation(CSSDCA) and now transformed into the African Citizen Directorate (CIDO) the Union has established the institutional building block for this enterprise. The process involved series of national, regional and continental consultations in which Civil Society was embraced as active partners in driving the agenda on the Union. The development culminated in the launching of the interim Economic, Social and Cultural Council of the African Union (ECOSOCC) in February 2005 which our brothers from the Diaspora were given the constitutional option of representation in the affairs of the Union.

Distinguished guest

Ladies and Gentlemen

The people and government of The Gambia acknowledged that though the process has developed rapidly, the challenges remain. The African Union has some road to travel to becoming a fully fledged integrated organization. But we have begun the journey and are traveling rapidly apace. As long as we press on with commitment and enthusiasm, we shall reach the desired goal.

Our ability to do so, however, would depend on how seriously we confront the challenges ahead and in what spirit. By creating the conducive environment for civil society participation, African governments have acknowledged the room for mutual collaboration. The government of The Gambia has championed this course by launching The Gambia Civil Society forum at the Atlantic Hotel by Her Excellency, the Vice President of the Republic of The Gambia on 7 May 2006. There will be hesitancy on the part of some, doubt and uncertainty on others. The challenge is to move towards our goals of partnership and self-fulfillment on both sides, without moving away from ourselves.

Partnership involves dialogue and dialogue entails communications and mutual respect along with a willingness to share and give consideration to each other's point of view. Our mutual enemy is poverty, underdevelopment, discrimination and racism. Our objective is to work together so that Africa can claim the 21st century as its own. We will be able to do this together but only if everyone does his share.

Distinguished Guest

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is important in this respect that we consolidate and develop the institutions that guarantee and will nourish civil society participation. The AU has established the interim ECOSOCC. It must flower and flourish into a fully grown representative body. Civil society and the AU must share active responsibility for that. They must do so in concert, rather than independently of each other while respecting their mutual identity. The last Ordinary Session of the Assembly in Khartoum has also established as full-

blown Directorate to sustain the intervention and in-put of civil society in the affairs of the Union. Civil Society must work with this structure in a supportive and mutually satisfactory manner.

Across the range of peace and security, economic development, socio-technological and scientific enterprise, civil society must work actively to define, develop and implement the AU agenda and it must work with member states and the regional and global community. The dynamic demand of this interrelationship is constructive engagement. Constructive engagement demands the development of a new mindset in which civil society and governments see each other not as adversaries but as partners clearly ready to point out mutual errors but only in the spirit of rectification and collaboration for a community agenda.

It is our expectation that this meeting will lay the foundation for that enterprise and set the pace of the African renaissance. The agenda is full and rich and we expect concrete and workable recommendations on acceleration of the pace of ECOSOCC and

civil society participation and developing and consolidating outcomes in the wider agenda of development and integration. We expect fruitful recommendation not just on strategies but also on means, including effective ways of improving and sustaining partnership between governments and civil society.

Mr Chairman

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

The Gambia is extremely happy to be the venue for this enterprise. You will agree with me that our atmosphere is very conducive with its idyllic beaches and serene, colourful, tourist setting. We invite you to work but not just work. We ask you to partake of our hospitality and share your grace with our beautiful environment and historic places together with our human resources. The Spirit of integration is fully developed and yearning for association among our people as you will learn as you interact across culture and genders.

Finally, Mr Chairman

Allow me once again to welcome you to our beautiful country, which we are sharing with you in all forms as a mark of African solidarity, brotherhood and common destiny.

I thank you for your attention.