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**MEETING OF GOVERNMENTAL EXPERTS
ON EARLY WARNING AND CONFLICT
PREVENTION**

**KEMPTON PARK, SOUTH AFRICA
17 – 19 DECEMBER 2006**

PSD/EW/EXP/5(I)

**MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF CONFLICT PREVENTTION
IN AFRICA – TOWARDS THE OPERATIONALIZATION OF
THE CONTINENTAL EARLY WARNING SYSTEM**

ISSUE PAPER No. 3

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AN AGENDA FOR ACTION**

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The involvement of civil society in continental peace and security agenda predates the birth of the African Union (AU). However, under the Organization of African Unity, the predecessor of the AU, such involvement remained limited. The Constitutive Act of the AU provides space for effective citizens' participation in the activities of the AU, including in the critical area of peace and security. The Act, through the establishment of the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC), an advisory organ composed of different social and professional groups of the Member States of the Union, provides an entry point for the participation of a wide spectrum of citizens of Member States in the activities of the AU – a sort of African peoples' parliament. The transformation process of the OAU into the AU also created the Conference on Security, Stability, Development and Cooperation in Africa (CSSDCA) process that culminated in the establishment of the African Citizens Directorate (CIDO), a new Department of the AU Commission that was charged with mainstreaming civil society and diaspora participation in the affairs of the African Union.

2. Concurrently, the Protocol establishing the Peace and Security Council (PSC) and its associated Rules of Procedure also envisage a greater role for African civil societies in the area of peace and security. Specifically, Article 20 of the Protocol states that civil society organizations interested in or involved in a conflict situation may be invited to participate in discussions relating to that conflict. Importantly also, the transformation from the OAU to the AU has involved a shift in the continental body's peace and security agenda – from a focus on conflict management to a broader and arguably more challenging mandate, embracing complex issues of conflict prevention. The enormity of the challenges involved in conflict prevention, particularly its early warning dimensions, together with the limited capacity of the AU, imply that more stakeholders be involved in this new peace and security agenda. Civil societies are strategic stakeholders in the actualization of this agenda because of their proximity to the grassroots (from where they can provide first hand information on conflict situations), and their expertise in conflict analysis.

3. Significantly also, Article 12 (3) of the PSC Protocol states that the Commission "shall collaborate with the United Nations, its agencies, other relevant international organizations, research centres, academic institutions and NGOs, to facilitate the effective functioning of the Early Warning System". This provision gives room for the wide spectrum of non-state actors captured by civil society to make effective contributions. The challenge in this regard is to define the method and process through which civil society activities would be coordinated and harnessed to ensure the success of the Continental Early Warning System for conflict prevention. The objective of this paper is to identify and briefly discuss the areas of strength of civil society in conflict prevention and how these can be properly channeled to support the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), in particular, and the continent's peace and security agenda in general. Our natural starting point is to identify the current challenges in the AU's peace and security agenda – focusing on its conflict prevention programme.

Challenges in Current AU Approach to Conflict Management and Prevention

4. Until recently, the AU's approach to peace and security, inherited from the OAU, focused largely on conflict management. However, this approach has been found to be reactive rather than proactive. Furthermore, it has been found to be very costly both in terms of human and financial resources. The approach does not lend itself to predictable and guaranteed positive outcomes. On the other hand, the conflict prevention approach has been found to be less expensive in terms of saving on financial resources, cutting down on the loss of human lives and protecting the sources of livelihood of those involved in conflict. It, however, requires vigilance, constant monitoring and, above all, in-depth understanding of the dynamics of conflict (including identifying potential conflict spots and preventing the possibility of relapse into conflict after an initial settlement). As mentioned earlier, these tasks are better performed by CSOs due to their closeness to the grassroots. CSOs can, therefore, assist in redressing the balance between conflict prevention and management in the activities of the AU. However, for civil society to effectively play this bridging role, there is need to identify and fill gaps in the current approach to conflict prevention.

Filling Gaps and Possible Responses

5. The Commission has to improve on its current capacity to undertake in-depth analyses of conflicts that could provide it with a basis for informed decisions on intervention. This is understandably so, because limited research goes into the current conflict prevention and management work of the AU. One of the critical gaps in the work of the organization in this regard is the lack of African-sponsored and African-owned research and analysis. There are also other organisational constraints. For instance, the AU and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) lack adequate capacity to manage and cope with the continent's numerous conflicts. Managing conflict demands a huge amount of human, material and financial resources. None of these is currently available in sufficient quantity and quality at the AU and its RECs.

6. There are also additional requirements in terms of the ability and capacity to monitor post-conflict situations to prevent the possibility of relapse into conflict. These resource gaps have received wide acknowledgement and considerable donor attention. Ironically, though, increased donor attention, in terms especially of higher resource flows, has often been hampered by AU human resource capability constraints that have tended to limit the organisation's absorptive capacity.

7. The AU would also need to develop frameworks that would allow for independent analytical briefings to its relevant organs on the situations in conflict zones. The absence of regular and informed briefings adversely affects decisions and ultimately the effectiveness of AU actions. The work of relevant CSOs engaged in analytical studies and that are active on the ground would be invaluable in this respect.

8. The AU must also improve on mechanisms for disseminating information about the decisions and operations of the Organisation, a problem that is also shared by the RECs. Exposure to, and knowledge of, the work of the AU, NEPAD and the RECs seem limited even among educated African publics, and current training and related research on these structures seems low in academic institutions. This responsibility must also be shared by the larger civil society community. CSOs should

place premium on the activities of their regional and continental organisations and familiarise themselves with these activities and decisions that have implications for their life and well-being.

9. Ultimately, overcoming these gaps and challenges would require commitment from both the AU and civil society. The AU should make better use of the wealth of resources, in terms of expertise, talent/experience and data that some African CSOs and NGOs working in the fields of peace and security possess. In turn, CSOs have to make a conscious effort to take advantage of the opportunities and challenges of the framework of engagement offered by the AU. They must do so with a sense of duty and commitment that goes beyond self-interest and opportunism.

II. CIVIL SOCIETY AND CONFLICT PREVENTION IN AFRICA: IMPLICATION FOR CEWS

10. African civil society organizations are active in two broad areas of conflict prevention that could be useful to the CEWS, namely conceptual and analytical research and peace building activities.

Conceptual and Analytical Research

11. A number of African CSOs are active in the areas of analysis, research, publication and advocacy, with a huge potential to contribute in the conceptualization and designing of a new security architecture for the continent. Their analyses of conflicts deriving from indigenous sources would be valuable tools for in-depth analysis of such conflicts and the development of appropriate response mechanisms. They could also alert the regional body to the likelihood of incipient conflicts, the factors that encourage their escalation and the trigger mechanisms that provoke the deterioration into violence.

12. Active collaboration with such CSOs would also assist the process of profiling and database. Some progress has already been made in this regard because a number of indigenous think-tanks have actually made positive and practical contributions to policy development at both the regional and sub-regional levels, through active collaboration with the AU (and OAU before it) and other sub-regional bodies. Several African CSOs and think-tanks are building considerable capacity in this area. Such think-tanks can be mobilized to conduct research for, and on behalf of, the AU in current and potential conflict zones. Importantly also, they can help to disseminate the work of the AU among key constituencies through their publications and other outreach activities.

Peace-building Activities

13. A number of African civil society organizations, particularly those working at the grassroots, continue to play important roles in promoting and building peace. In Sudan, civil society groups have spearheaded some of the most significant advances towards peace, in particular at the local level. In Sierra Leone, CSOs have also played an important role in the peace process and the formulation of the country's security sector reform policies. One can also cite the role of CSOs in the negotiations leading to the transitional government in the DRC, as well as in the peace negotiations in Somalia. The role of women's groups in conflict mediation in South Africa, Somalia, Mozambique and the Mano River Union (where the Mano River Women's Network has played a pivotal role in spearheading peace efforts) deserves

particular mention. CSOs have also played more diffuse roles in peace education, curriculum development, early warning, delivery of relief, and disarmament activities.

14. African CSO's and NGO's have demonstrated their commitment and ability to contribute to peace building in the continent. It is in recognition of this reality that the AU and RECs have, in the past couple of years, made conscious efforts to incorporate CSOs in some of their conflict prevention and peace building efforts. One example of this is the ECOWAS Civil Society Forum and its involvement in ECOWAS missions in the sub-region and its role in the development and operations of the regional early warning mechanism. Such initiatives need to be refined, deepened and applied at the continental level.

An Agenda for Action

15. Coordinating and harnessing the expertise of civil society in the challenging task of preventing conflict in the continent is definitely a priority agenda. It is encouraging to observe that the AU is committed to developing a concrete framework for systematic and meaningful engagement with the African civil society in this regard. The undertaking, which began with the convening of two OAU/AU-CSO Conferences in December 2001 and June 2002, respectively, is now far advanced and has more recently focused on the specific area of peace and security through the assistance of the Danish Peace Programme for Africa. This involves a number of processes initiated through the joint efforts of CIDO and the Peace and Security Department (PSD) of the AU. Since 2005, the two Departments have been collaborating to bring together various CSOs working in the field of peace and security across the five regions of the continent, to discuss the modalities for ensuring their effective participation in the continental peace and security agenda, including the Early Warning System. Three consultative workshops organized by these Departments in different parts of the continent have identified key areas in which civil society could be useful in the AU's conflict prevention work along with a work programme and an agenda for action that would facilitate concrete action in this area.

Establishing a Focal Point for Civil Society Relations with the AU

16. The first critical step for the involvement of civil society in the AU's conflict prevention strategy is the establishment of a focal point within the AU Commission, to coordinate civil society inputs into AU's Early Warning System, in particular, and the larger AU's peace and security agenda in general. The Situation Room is already operational, gathering and collating data to meet some of the needs of the early warning mechanism. As indicated earlier, CIDO has been very active as the focal point for civil society activities within the Commission. CIDO and the PSD could, therefore, further strengthen their collaboration to ensure that credible CSOs Non-Governmental Organizations, Community-based Organizations and other non state actors are given the opportunity to brief, address or make submissions to the PSC within the framework of Article 20 of the PSC Protocol on urgent and demanding continental issues.

17. In this regard, both CIDO and PSD should work out the details of Rules of Procedure and Code of Conduct that will guide CSOs' contributions to the PSC, including procedures for making requests for submissions to the PSC, how these inputs can be processed, the format of presentation and recommendations for processing outcomes.

18. Article 8 (10-c) of the PSC Protocol, which states that “any regional mechanism, international organisation or civil society organisation involved and/or interested in a conflict or a situation under consideration by the Peace and Security Council may be invited to participate, without the right to vote, in the discussion relating to that conflict or situation”, would be a useful entry point for this process. Moreover, ECOSOCC provides another window for structured engagement of civil society with the PSC through the prerogative of offering advisory opinions to all organs of the African Union. CIDO and PSD could, through further collaboration, make use of this ECOSOCC channel to evolve a subsidiary or complementary methodology for receiving and utilizing inputs from CSOs to specifically serve the needs of the CEWS and broader issues of peace and security issues.

Need to build CSOs capacity in conflict prevention

19. Several CSOs engaged in conflict prevention activities lack the requisite skills. There is, therefore, the need for the AU to assist in building the capacities of these organizations in areas where these gaps are noticed and especially in areas that will enhance the CSOs’ ability to contribute to the effectiveness of the CEWS for conflict prevention. In this regard, the AU has to do a “needs assessment exercise” to determine the needs of the different end users of its Early Warning System in order to identify the key areas in which it requires support from CSOs. Data gathering is a major area in which the CSOs have a comparative advantage given their proximity to sources of potential conflict, therefore training and other forms of support should be provided to them in this critical area to increase their proficiency. Ultimately, there will be a need to establish a database of CSOs and experts in the area of conflict prevention that would provide easy access to credible experts and CSOs that could support AU’s work in this area from time to time. Such a database will be invaluable to the Early Warning System.

Encourage the formation of regional networks for Early Warning

20. The AU should encourage the formation of regional CSOs networks for early warning. Member organizations of these networks would be encouraged to undertake impact assessment studies on ongoing conflicts, including comparative analysis in order to provide input into peace negotiations and decision-making. In this connection, support in the area of IT for proper networking will be invaluable to the efforts of the CSOs. A number of CSOs already have informal and formal networks of country and regional experts to gather ideas and provide information and analysis that could assist the AU decision-making in peace and security.

Advisory Council of CSO Experts to Support on Peace and Security Agenda

21. One of the key recommendations of the AU-CSO regional consultative workshops conducted under the aegis of the Danish Peace Programme for Africa is that the AU Commission should set up an Advisory Council of Experts from CSOs working in the area of peace and security to support its peace and security agenda in general and its conflict prevention work in particular. The experts would provide informed analysis of data gathered on a regular basis as part of the Early Warning System and serve as a broader part of the wider mechanism of regional alert and warnings on incipient and developing conflicts. Members of the Advisory Council should be drawn mainly from among CSOs regional networks in the area of peace and security, individual CSOs with distinguishable track records in the same area, prominent research and academic institutions, as well as other relevant CSOs. This advisory

group will also support the use of research and analysis for decision-making processes.

Use of Research and Analysis for Decision-making

22. It is important to make use of the expertise of civil society in this critical area. In this regard, the South African Parliament has been experimenting with this approach for some time now – reputable research and academic institutions are called upon to prepare and present papers on critical national and foreign policy issues with concrete policy recommendations. The Pan-African Parliament (PAP) has also tried this practice. Outside the continent, a good example of such practice is the periodic reports prepared and presented by the International Peace Academy (IPA) to the United Nations on critical international issues. Beyond this, however, it would be useful for the Commission, with the support of the Advisory Council, to explore the possibility of setting up a Journal of Peace and Security that will solicit articles from the general public on major security issues and present different scenarios associated with their development and attendant consequences as advise for policy makers. In addition, the use of research and analysis can also extend to the provision of policy briefs and advises for meetings of the PSC as appropriate. In particular, there is also a need to establish a forum for policy seminars by experts to engage in periodic or annual reviews of the Continental Early Warning System in order to improve its operations.

III. CONCLUSION

23. A major shortcoming of the OAU's peace and security architecture was that it emphasized conflict management as opposed to conflict prevention. More importantly, it focused on the state as the player in conflict management almost to the exclusion of other actors, including civil society. However, over time and with the transformation of the OAU into the AU, increasing emphasis has been placed on the participation of non-state actors, particularly in civil society. Nonetheless, much remains to be done and the outcome of this meeting will play critical role in ensuring the successful development of this process. There would be need for some CSOs to change mindsets from one that emphasises criticisms and an adversarial relationship with states and regional organizations to a cooperative model that assumes that all Africans are part of the same stakeholder society. Such transition would not be easy but it is nonetheless imperative if the interest of African citizens are to be met. In turn, the AU must strengthen and adequately resource its focal point for civil society engagement to enhance the process of coordination with the African civil society community.

24. In the final analysis, African civil societies are partners with the African Union and other stakeholders in the efforts to address Africa's devastating conflicts. And this battle will only be won if various stakeholders recognize and make good use of each others' comparative advantage. The African Union has recognized the comparative advantage of the continent's civil society. The African civil society, in turn, must recognise the value of the African Union, its structures, obligations, responsibilities and onerous duties. This sense of mutual recognition and mutual purpose will lead to result-oriented outcomes, with clear dividends for peace, security and development on the African continent.