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Towards a People-Driven African Union

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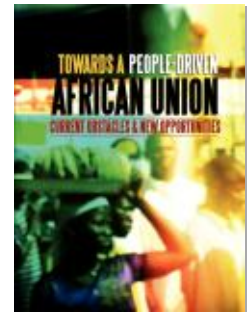
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6. THE AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION: OUTREACH TO CIVIL SOCIETY

Within the AU Commission, the African Citizens' Directorate, located in the Office of the Chairperson of the AU Commission, is the focal point mandated to facilitate civil society contributions to the decision-making processes of the AU, including the summits. Other departments of the AU Commission also independently consult with civil society and seek their views on AU policy: the Women, Gender and Development Directorate, also located in the Office of the Chairperson, has been exemplary in this regard.

Perhaps the most important consultative process of the AU Commission was the development of its 'vision and mission', led by Chairperson Konaré during the period after his appointment in 2002. Since this initial outreach, many civil society organisations have the sense that the enthusiasm of the Commission – and the AU generally – for non-state participation in policy development has waned.¹⁴⁷

The African Citizens' Directorate

The African Citizens' Directorate, known as CIDO, headed by Dr Jinmi Adisa, is the new name and status for the former unit of the OAU Secretariat supporting the Conference for Security, Stability, Development and Cooperation in Africa (CSSDCA).¹⁴⁸ It is responsible in principle with facilitation of all civil society engagement with the AU organs and processes, including in its constituency both African citizens in Africa and in the diaspora.

The CSSDCA was established by a Solemn Declaration at the OAU summit in Lomé, Togo in 2000, and reinforced by a Memorandum of Understanding adopted at the 2002 Durban summit, outlining commitments on peace and security, human rights, democracy, and governance.¹⁴⁹ The CSSDCA Unit, which was located in the secretariat of the OAU, was responsible for monitoring member state commitments under the CSSDCA memorandum, and also for promoting civil society engagement with the CSSDCA process. As part of its activities, the unit organised the first OAU-civil society conference in June 2001. The meeting examined cooperation between the OAU and civil society and recommended the appointment of a focal point for civil society relations.¹⁵⁰ A second conference took place a year later, also under the auspices of the CSSDCA Unit, and reviewed the proposed statutes to govern ECOSOCC (see below).

With the OAU's adoption in October 2001 of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), the CSSDCA began to be eclipsed in AU debates. Reflecting this change in programming priorities, as well as the new role of ECOSOCC, the CSSDCA Unit was given a new name as the African Citizens' Directorate in late 2005.

CIDO's current responsibilities fall into three areas: liaison with civil society organisations on the continent; outreach to the diaspora outside Africa; and secretariat functions for ECOSOCC. Among CIDO's activities have been ongoing work for the finalisation of the ECOSOCC interim structures; coordinating 'conferences of intellectuals' from Africa and the diaspora in Dakar, Senegal in 2004, and Bahia, Brazil in 2006;¹⁵¹ developing a plan of action for 'practical, effective and sustainable relations between civil society organisations and the peace, security, democracy and governance agenda of the AU'; and facilitating the implementation of Article 20 of the protocol establishing the Peace and Security Council allowing for civil society participation.¹⁵² As of November 2006, CIDO's staff was to be increased to six people from only two, which should substantially increase its capacity.

CIDO has played an important role in reaching out to civil society organisations, and the existence of the office has meant that the AU Commission is more open to African citizens than the OAU Secretariat was. However – perhaps for reasons of capacity which are now being addressed – it has not advertised information about its activities or availability as a liaison point to assist civil society organisations wishing to contact the AU, either on the website or at civil society meetings other than those organised by the AU itself.

The African Union-Civil Society Organisation Forum

The AU-Civil Society Organisation (CSO) Forum, an event organised by CIDO ahead of the AU summits, is an opportunity to brief civil society organisations on relevant developments within the AU. It also has the potential to be an opportunity for civil society organisations to inform AU policy by submitting recommendations to the summit. The first AU-CSO forum took place in July 2004 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; the second before the Abuja summit in January 2005, and the third in Banjul in July 2006. CIDO has funds to pay for fifty participants at the forum, and in principle self-funded participants are also welcome to attend.

The AU Commission was unable to convene these gatherings ahead of the Sirte (June 2005) and Khartoum (January 2006) summits due to 'logistical and political difficulties'.¹⁵³ Civil society actors who attempted to seek the assistance of AU Commission staff to secure visas to attend the summit were met with this helpless response: 'Dear colleagues, the Director has asked me to inform you that unfortunately due to host government guidelines, the AU will not be able to invite any more NGOs and other partners to the summit in Libya. We hope to be able to invite your Group to such meetings in future.'¹⁵⁴ Although there were reportedly genuine problems with providing sufficient accommodation for delegates to the summits in Sirte and Khartoum, it was reasonably clear that the real reason was rather a desire by the host government to exclude civil society organisations from the summit (the AU Commission does not allow host governments to determine who may be invited to such meetings).¹⁵⁵

There is an attempt at the pre-summit events to have a discussion on the prevailing theme of the AU summit. For example, the June 2006 AU-CSO forum covered the following themes: a progress report on the AU-civil society agenda including a status report on the activities of ECOSOCC; economic integration and the rationalisation of the regional economic communities; and the work of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.¹⁵⁶ National ECOSOCC chapters were not represented at the meeting, although members of the Interim Standing Committee were present.¹⁵⁷ Proceedings and recommendations from the AU-CSO forum in Banjul were incorporated into a communiqué tabled at the Executive Council of Ministers meeting of 27–29 June.¹⁵⁸ A member of the interim bureau of ECOSOCC, Ayodele Aderinwale, who participated in the AU-CSO meeting, presented the interim ECOSOCC president's report and the resolutions of the forum.

The CSO forums are evidence of the AU's openness to civil society engagement with its processes. However, the quality of the debate is often poor, with a lack of substance, and there are some concerns that the forums are rather used to endorse decisions that have already been taken than to provide a real opportunity for civil society organisations to influence decision-making at the summit – especially since the forums take place some time in advance of the official meetings, making it difficult for participants to stay long enough to engage in direct advocacy with government delegations. In addition, the criteria applied by CIDO in selecting participants to attend forums are not clear; many of those who are invited are quite closely connected to governments, and there have been cases where self-funded participants have been excluded from the meetings, even though they would appear to fulfil the qualifications to attend.¹⁵⁹

The Women, Gender and Development Directorate and the Women's Forum

The Women, Gender and Development Directorate has convened a two-day women's forum before the AU summits held in July 2004, January 2005 and June 2006. (However, there have been meetings focusing on gender around the time of the OAU/AU summits dating back to the 1998 summit in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.) The women's forum brings a number of civil society organisations, particularly but not exclusively from the gender sector, to discuss various items relating to AU policy relevant to gender issues. Ahead of the Banjul summit, the theme for the forum was 'Promoting gender responsive governance in countries emerging from conflict', with the aim of influencing scheduled summit discussions of the AU's strategic position on post-conflict reconstruction and development.¹⁶⁰ The resolutions from the forum – which related to the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, human security, gender parity principles and monitoring and evaluation – were transmitted to the Assembly of Heads of State and Government. For coalitions such as Solidarity for African Women's Rights (SOAWR), these events are an opportunity to raise awareness and advocate on a key campaign issue: the speedy ratification and implementation of the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa.¹⁶¹

Initially, those invited to attend these meetings arranged by the AU Commission, including the pre-summit forum, tended to be the more high-level women's advocates likely to be attending the summit already in their official capacity. Later, a wider range of autonomous women's rights organisations became involved, especially those known to have an interest in working with the AU; the meeting thus tends to be more representative of interested civil society organisations than the general AU-CSO forum. Thus, the women's forum in Banjul demonstrated both a higher quality of debate and a greater sense of strategy in relation to the summit than the main CSO forum. Nevertheless, the criteria for selection and requesting an invitation are still not clear.

The Women, Gender and Development Directorate has led the way in wider consultations with civil society organisations on AU documents and summit preparations, especially in relation to the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa and the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa. The Gender Directorate has worked closely with SOAWR for several years: it helped to provide space for the coalition to hold a press conference at the Abuja summit in January 2005; hosted a joint meeting with SOAWR in September 2005 to strategise on ratifications and next steps after the Protocol came into force; collaborated with SOAWR in holding a symposium on women's rights and Islam held in Omdurman during the January 2006 Khartoum summit; and jointly produced with SOAWR a document on 'Breathing Life into the African Union Protocol on Women's Rights in Africa', which was launched at the July 2006 Banjul summit.¹⁶² The Women and Gender Directorate has also worked with Femmes Afrique Solidarité and the Africa Leadership Forum to hold consultative meetings in Abuja in January 2005, Libya in July 2005, and in Addis Ababa in May 2006, to put in place strategies for the implementation of the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa.¹⁶³ The Directorate has also used the African Union website to solicit inputs on its work more widely.¹⁶⁴

Women's rights organisations lead the way in advocacy at the African Union

Women's organisations have probably been the most successful in engaging the African Union, thanks to coordinated strategies and continent-wide coalitions. Following the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna, with its slogan 'women's rights are human rights', and the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, women's rights organisations were galvanised around the world, including in Africa. Their organisation and persistence is reflected in the adoption of the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, by the Maputo summit of the AU in July 2003, followed the next year by the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa, at the Addis Ababa summit.

The Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa arose from a process that began at the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, which has traditionally been very open to civil society contributions. At the African Commission session in Nouakchott, Mauritania, in April 1997, a group of women's rights activists, led by Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF) and the African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies, with the support of the International Commission of Jurists, prepared the first draft of what ultimately became the Protocol. Endorsed by the African Commission, and supported by the Commission's special rapporteur on women's rights, this draft was submitted to what was then the OAU Secretariat, merged with existing texts there, and thus became the foundation of what is one of the most far-reaching documents on women's rights globally.

Meanwhile, the organisation *Femmes Afrique Solidarité* (FAS) led an initiative to form an African Women's Committee for Peace and Development, with a secretariat located at the UN Economic Commission for Africa (now at the Women and Gender Directorate of the AU Commission). FAS, working with this committee and with civil society networks such as the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), coordinated action leading to the AU adopting the principle of gender parity in appointments to AU organs and the first ever open debate on gender equality in Africa among heads of state, held at the July 2004 summit in Addis Ababa. The summit adopted the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa, committing African leaders to action to address a range of issues affecting gender equality, including the impact of HIV/AIDS on women. FAS has remained active in working with the AU Women and Gender Directorate to devise follow-up strategies to bring the declaration into effect.

Coming together under a coalition named Solidarity for African Women's Rights (SOAWR), Equality Now, FEMNET, the African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies and Akina Mama wa Afrika among others, have also successfully advocated for the speedy ratification and popularisation of the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa. SOAWR has produced a range of advocacy materials, including red, yellow and green cards rating African states on their progress towards ratification; engaged the responsible officials of member states at AU summits and at home; worked with the AU Commission and the special rapporteur on women's rights of the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights; and joined forces with local organisations to hold African States accountable to their commitments to women. As a result of these efforts the Protocol on the rights of Women in Africa came into force in November 2005, setting a record for speed for OAU/AU human rights instruments.