African Union–civil society relations
Lessons for strengthening ties

Sue Mbaya
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Executive summary

The contribution of civil society to a ‘united and strong Africa’, which is highlighted in the Constitutive Act of the African Union (AU), gives civil society organisations (CSOs) a role in the development and implementation of policies in relation to governance, peace and security.

The efforts of civil society organisations (CSOs) to engage the AU in the interests of their constituencies take place in the context of the resource challenges the organisations face, the political sensitivity that characterises the work of the union and, in some states, troubled relationships between CSOs and their governments. The suspicion and mistrust that often characterise state-CSO relationships at the national level is reflected in the restricted access of CSOs to key AU processes and high-level events.

There are a number of ways in which civil society can contribute. Umbrella organisations (organised on thematic or geographic lines) enjoy the legitimacy that derives from their broad membership. They have traditionally played important capacity-building, coordination and representation roles in relation to the AU. However, they are facing sustainability challenges due to the lack of funding to support coalition building among them.

While groups of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and think-tanks generally have access to and can support the AU, local and regional organisations tend to have poor access and are marginal to agenda-setting platforms. This is largely because of their distance from AU bodies, most of which are based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where the AU has its headquarters. If CSOs are to benefit from their collective strengths and advantages, they must coordinate their activities.

Among the important segments of society that are under-represented in the engagement of civil society with the AU in the field of governance, peace and security are woman and young people. This marginalisation must be addressed, as must the impact of climate change.

The contribution of CSOs to the AU’s work covers a wide range of roles, from setting the agenda to developing policy frameworks, co-creating new policy-relevant frameworks, enhancing research and policy capacities, providing early-warning data and contributing to peace operations, mobilising stakeholder voices
and buy-in and monitoring the extent to which the union and its member states deliver on their commitments and programmes.

Civil society engages the AU in a range of ways. Key among these is through advisory bodies such as the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC). The AU has also established frameworks such as the Livingstone Formula and Maseru Conclusions for engagement with the AU’s peace and security architecture. Some CSO engagement takes the form of administrative arrangements, including securing memoranda of understanding or observer status.

Despite these opportunities, CSOs experience significant challenges in their efforts to engage the AU effectively. They expend significant resources in order to simply meet key personnel, access critical information timeously, participate in activities and contribute meaningfully to setting agendas and implementing programmes.

In the past 20 years, the African Citizens and Diaspora Directorate (CIDO) has proved to be ineffective in facilitating civil society access and ECOSOCC has done little to expedite its efforts to make an impact on the peace and security agenda. ECOSOCC must review and relax its membership criteria, particularly in relation to the General Assembly, its highest decision- and policy-making organ, which currently excludes key CSOs.

The mistrust that often characterises state-CSO relationships is reflected in CSOs’ restricted access to key AU processes and high-level events.

There is also a need to revisit the effectiveness of ‘invited spaces’ as entry points for civil society engagement. Citizens are, for instance, excluded from setting the agendas for AU summits; civil society organisations are not recognised as members of country delegations and the accreditation process for the participation of non-state actors is opaque, unnecessarily circuitous and, ultimately, a stumbling block.

There are no formal ways provided in the summit process for civil society to give evidence and the process precludes continuous civil society participation as well as access to documentation. For these reasons participation has traditionally been limited to corridor diplomacy, which has proved increasingly ineffective in the past few years, during which summit-related processes have largely been conducted virtually because of COVID-19.

Despite these problems, there are steps CSOs can take to improve their access to and participation in AU summits. These include aligning their advocacy with the governance, peace and security architecture of ECOSOCC, improving coordination
among those focusing on different thematic areas, between Addis-facing and Banjul-facing CSOs and even between AU-UN-EU-Beijing-facing CSOs.¹

However, the underlying issue that requires to be recognised and redressed is that civil society’s lack of access to AU summits is symptomatic of a broader problem – the resistance of the union to CSO participation in processes deemed to be political. To interrogate and change this culture, there must be a concerted advocacy effort by CSO actors. Despite the existence of enabling frameworks, CSO access to the Peace and Security Council (PSC) remains restricted, just like it is with AU summits.

There is a need for the PSC to undertake a review jointly with CSOs and think-tanks to identify corrective actions to address the weak coordination between the PSC and civil society and to improve civil society access to information about the work of the PSC.

There are opportunities for civil society to maximise its engagement with the AU through the Office of the Chairperson and specialised technical committees. There is also a need for civil society to recognise the AU as a multi-location entity, ‘beyond Addis’, and to engage non-Addis-based entities that are relevant to the governance, peace and security agenda, including the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) in Banjul, the regional economic communities and the African Peer Review Mechanism in Pretoria.

Civil society’s lack of access to AU summits is symptomatic of a broader problem – the AU’s resistance to CSO participation in political processes

The intention of the African Union to include civil society in its work has been accompanied by the establishment of institutional and policy frameworks to facilitate engagement. Although there is evidence that the AU’s governance, peace and security agenda has benefited appreciably from technical input from CSOs, in reality the extent of civil society engagement and its contribution remains less than optimal.

There is equally a need to establish a time-bound action plan for priority organs such as the PSC to address persistent obstacles to CSO contributions. Such a process would reveal whether the AU can truly transform itself from its predecessor, the state-driven Organisation of African Unity, into a union that accommodates the growing demand by citizens to be at the centre of defining its development agenda.
# Acronyms

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACCORD</td>
<td>African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACDEG</td>
<td>African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACHPR</td>
<td>African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights</td>
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<td>AGA</td>
<td>African Governance Architecture</td>
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<td>ALC</td>
<td>African Leadership Centre</td>
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<td>APSA</td>
<td>African Peace and Security Architecture</td>
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<td>AU</td>
<td>African Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEWARN</td>
<td>Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism</td>
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<td>CEWERU</td>
<td>National Conflict Early Warning and Response Unit</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEWS</td>
<td>Continental Early Warning System</td>
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<td>CIDO</td>
<td>African Citizens’ and Diaspora Directorate (of the AU Commission)</td>
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<td>CSO</td>
<td>Civil society organisation</td>
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<td>CSVR</td>
<td>Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation</td>
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<tr>
<td>EACSOF</td>
<td>East African Civil Society Organisations’ Forum</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECOSOCC</td>
<td>Economic, Social and Cultural Council</td>
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<td>ECOWAS</td>
<td>Economic Community of West African States</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECOWARN</td>
<td>Early Warning System of ECOWAS</td>
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<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>FEMNET</td>
<td>The African Women’s Development and Communications Network</td>
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<td>FIDH</td>
<td>International Federation for Human Rights</td>
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<td>IGAD</td>
<td>Intergovernmental Authority on Development</td>
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<td>INGO</td>
<td>International non-governmental organisation</td>
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<td>IPSS</td>
<td>Institute for Peace and Security Studies</td>
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<td>IRRI</td>
<td>International Refugee Rights Initiative</td>
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<td>ISS</td>
<td>Institute for Security Studies</td>
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<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Full Form</td>
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<tr>
<td>KAIPTC</td>
<td>Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre</td>
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<td>MoU</td>
<td>Memorandum of Understanding</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organisation</td>
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<td>NRC</td>
<td>Norwegian Refugee Council</td>
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<td>OAU</td>
<td>Organisation of African Unity</td>
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<td>OSISA</td>
<td>Open Society of Southern Africa</td>
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<td>PALU</td>
<td>Pan African Lawyers Union</td>
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<td>PRC</td>
<td>Permanent Representatives Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSC</td>
<td>Peace and Security Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>REC</td>
<td>Regional economic community</td>
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<td>SADC</td>
<td>Southern African Development Community</td>
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<td>WACSOF</td>
<td>West African Civil Society Forum</td>
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<td>WANEP</td>
<td>West Africa Network for Peacebuilding</td>
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<td>WATHI</td>
<td>West Africa Think Tank</td>
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Africa has come a long way on its journey towards a peaceful and prosperous union of member states. The numerous revolutionary decolonisation wars of the early 1960s have given way to intrastate conflicts predominantly driven by electoral imperfections, challenged relationships between the centre and the peripheries, and issues related to diversity management.

However, the implications for African citizens remain the same: forced migration in the form of flows of refugees and internally displaced persons, curtailment of essential services, economic instability and entrenched poverty. These situations have increasingly become the breeding ground for deeper crises such as terrorism and transnational crime, as seen in a range of countries from Mali to Mozambique.

The African Union (AU) recognises the growing expertise within civil society and therefore the importance of incorporating civil society into processes and programmes within the governance, peace and security agenda. For this reason, and on the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the AU, this monograph considers the history of CSO engagement with the union, examining lessons learned and challenges encountered and identifying the prospects of enhancing the relationship.

Civil society plays an important role in the peace continuum, particularly in terms of conflict prevention and conflict management.

Ongoing global shifts provide the context for a review of the contribution of civil society organisations (CSOs) to the AU. Changes in approach and norms in international development, development cooperation and diplomacy have increasingly pushed citizens – particularly women and young people – closer to the centre of decision making. These changes reflect and must keep up with the radical transformation of state-society relations that is sweeping the continent and the globe. The same trend is observed in the governance, peace and security sectors, where the importance of the contribution of all citizens is increasingly recognised.
and where the involvement of ordinary citizens in early warning, mobilisation and reporting through the use of social media plays an increasingly significant role.

In terms of democracy, the continent is at a crossroads. While AU instruments such as the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) have been ratified by a number of countries, few of them have been implemented and citizens are increasingly demanding democracy in their countries. Perhaps the most significant development in the field of peace and security in the past two decades has been the evolution of security. Informed by the position articulated in the Common African Defence and Security Policy of 2002, there has been a gradual reorientation from the traditional, state-centric definition of security to one that embraces the notion of human security in general.

As Africa’s apex policy-making body on security and development, the AU is a significant target for CSOs wishing to influence its policy.

This has necessitated an appreciation of the importance of a wider range of security-related factors in efforts to achieve peace and stability. Examples of these factors are governance, human rights, the right to equitable development, basic services (such as health and education), and protection against poverty. The focus on human security has also brought issues such as women’s empowerment and gender as well as resource governance (including the effects of climate change) to the fore of the security discourse. These new areas of emphasis have made the contribution of CSOs more central to the responses of member states.

Civil society plays an important role in the peace continuum on the continent, particularly in terms of conflict prevention and conflict management. CSOs often have a wider grassroots understanding of the local context, and usually have more established links to vulnerable groups. Their contribution is particularly significant in relation to conflicts that are non-military in origin and multi-dimensional in nature. In these situations, they are able to bridge the divide between mainstream development processes and new ways of working.

The AU’s centrality to development, peace and security as the continent’s apex policy-making organisation positions it as a significant target for CSOs wishing to influence its policy. Evidence of this is in the ballooning number of organisations supporting and/or working with the AU in a variety of ways.

**Support for capacity building**

The AU has capacity challenges on several fronts. Budget constraints at the AU Commission and the Addis Ababa-based missions of member states result in
staffing shortages, which means employees are overburdened. CSOs such as the Life Peace Institute, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and The African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) have developed sufficiently trusted relationships with organs of the AU to provide support in the form of staff secondments to the organs of the AU, including the Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department (PAPS).

Think-tanks also provide support in the form of executive courses for professional development. For instance, the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping and Training Center (KAIPTC) offers post-graduate academic programmes in peace and security, focusing on regional and continental policy makers. Similarly, the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS), an Addis Ababa-based think-tank and academic institution, offers an executive master’s programme in peace and security in Africa. It also offers training programmes aimed at strengthening the political, strategic and organisational abilities of those engaged in the field.

In addition, the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), ACCORD and NUPI, under the auspices of the Training for Peace programme, offer training to peace support operations (PSOs) and develop courses on dealing with sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in PSOs.

**Policy development**

Civil society has become an integral part of the policy-making process in Africa. CSOs play various roles in setting agendas, raising awareness and contributing to prioritising important issues. The agenda-setting role involves researching and compiling evidence and undertaking advocacy activities to build momentum behind proposed policy changes. Several CSOs have successfully established highly respected agenda-setting platforms. Among these organisations is the IPSS, which hosts the annual Tana High Level Forum on Security in Africa. The forum, which attracts African heads of state and government, leading think-tanks, researchers and selected CSOs, has become one of the highlights of the peace and security calendar, hosting high-level discussions about political challenges and possible solutions. It is a prime example of a continental agenda-setting platform driven by a think-tank.

The ISS has successfully established an agenda-setting platform for peace and security. It hosts two meetings a year with the member state whose leader currently occupies the presidency of the AU. These take place at the start and conclusion of each one-year term and offer CSOs, diplomatic missions, development partners and AU officials an opportunity to engage at the highest level of AU governance, highlight their concerns and hold the AU accountable. They give the representatives of the state a chance to secure support for their vision for the year. The ISS’s contribution to the AU – apart from capacity building – ranges from research
support, to policy development, technical support, facilitating dialogues and raising awareness through targeted platforms.

CSOs also play a key role in advocating for and supporting the establishment of mediation structures. One example is the contribution of ACCORD to the establishment of the AU Mediation Support Unit. ACCORD staff were also instrumental in supporting the institution of the Panel of the Wise, a key pillar of the AU’s Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). At the level of implementation, CSOs played visible roles in support of the negotiations that led to peace in South Sudan and in Sudan (2019), including efforts to ensure the participation of women in the peace talks.

Most of the recent policy frameworks developed by the AU have had support from CSOs, either during the consultative or drafting stages

Civil society plays a critical role in highlighting the importance of complementing military responses with political interventions. Conflicts are frequently caused by a complex mix of socioeconomic and political interests and considerations. Although the AU has become proficient in using its institutional mediation mechanisms to convince parties to reach a peaceful settlement, both it and its member states rely too heavily on military solutions at the expense of diplomatic or political responses.

The work of CSOs makes the AU more aware of the multifaceted nature of conflict drivers, as happened in the Sahel region. In the face of a predominantly militaristic and specifically anti-terror approach taken by the AU and its international partners in response to the burgeoning crisis in the region, CSOs waged a multi-pronged campaign to create awareness that such a narrow response would not succeed in resolving the conflict. This contributed to commitments to deepening political intervention to complement the ongoing military responses.³

**Technical support**

In addition to setting agendas, CSOs play an important role in providing technical backing for policy development. Most of the recent policy frameworks developed by the AU have had support from CSOs, either during the consultative or drafting stages. Some examples are the key role of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) in the development of the AU’s Transitional Justice Policy⁴ and that of the ISS in the design of the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS). These contributions are seldom fully acknowledged.

Beyond policy development, CSOs often partner with or provide technical support for the achievement of selected elements of the union’s programme of work,
either at the level of the AU Commission or at member state level. In July 2015, for instance, AU heads of state declared 2017-2027 the African Human Rights Decade, with the AU Assembly pledging to develop a 10-year Human Rights Action and Plan for Human and People’s Rights. The Pan African Lawyers Union (PALU) has since worked alongside the AU, spearheading the drafting of the plan and consulting with stakeholders. CSOs can also be proactive, suggesting and co-implementing activities outside of the AU’s existing programme that are considered relevant to the fulfilment of certain objectives.

Another key area of technical support relates to early warning mechanisms. This assistance usually takes the form of data collection and analysis due to CSOs presence in hard-to-reach places. This approach has been successful with the much-heralded ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN), a partnership between ECOWAS and the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEPI), a CSO network.

CSOs also support peace operations. The transformation of United Nations peacekeeping from predominantly military to multidimensional missions has changed the face of peacekeeping missions, a change that is reflected in other spaces, including the AU. ACCORD, the ISS and the KAIPTC have developed constructive relationships with RECs/regional mechanisms (RMs) and the AU to improve the contribution of civil society to supporting peace. Their primary focus is training. The NRC contributes African civilian experts to support the AU Commission, which uses their expertise in civilian aspects of the union’s peace support operations.

Research and analysis

All these roles have the greatest impact when they are supported by compelling evidence. Research and analysis are therefore central to civil society efforts to inform AU policy and practice. In pursuit of this objective, CSOs produce periodic research reports, analyses and policy briefs. Research and analysis also inform civil society efforts to monitor the implementation by the AU and its member states of policies and commitments.

For example, a number of CSOs contributed to the consultations and analyses that led to the Continental Framework for Reporting and Monitoring on the Implementation of the Women Peace and Security Agenda in Africa, which is intended to track the progress made in implementing commitments to women, peace and security in the AU and its member states. Similarly, the IPSS Impact Report is an annual assessment of the impact of interventions by the AU and RECs in terms of the AU’s African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). The report is widely read and recognised as a reference tool that captures the efforts and challenges faced by the AU, RECs/RMs and member states in their regional and continental efforts to prevent, and manage conflict.
Facilitation

CSOs regularly facilitate consultations with stakeholders at country, regional and continental levels over the policy and programmatic initiatives of the AU. They also support meetings between structures of the AU and stakeholders, for the purpose of fostering a collaborative approach and improved coordination. On numerous occasions CSOs, especially think-tanks, have collaborated with the Peace and Security Department to host high-level retreats, either to deepen the appreciation of policy makers of certain issues or to engage with stakeholders in the interests of broadening dialogue or improving coordination.

In these roles CSOs have become key partners that inform all aspects of the AU’s peace and security agenda. However, the relationship between CSOs and the AU is often difficult. CSOs frequently have to take into account the politically sensitive nature of peace diplomacy, which leads to attempts to limit their involvement, and suspicion that results in resistance to their participation in peace processes and structures. In this regard, the institutional arrangements established by the AU to facilitate CSO engagement are key, either enabling or hindering that engagement.
Chapter 2

Provisions for CSO participation

Background

The Organisation of African Unity (OAU), which preceded the AU, provided for limited participation of CSOs in its processes. There were several reasons for this. Firstly, and fundamentally, the OAU Charter did not emphasise the contribution of civil society although the organisation did make several pronouncements that provided the basis for progressive recognition of that role.

For instance, the 1991 Abuja Treaty, which called for the establishment of an African Economic Community, also established the basis of and framework for the inclusion of civil society (non-governmental organisations – NGOs) in regional processes. Article 90 of the treaty recognised NGOs as legitimate avenues for channelling the views and aspirations of African citizens and, accordingly, called for a mechanism to be set up for consultation with NGOs. The treaty also recognised the potentially valuable contribution of NGOs, including their ability to mobilise human and material resources.\(^7\)

The onset of the democratic wave in Africa ushered in the recognition of civil society as an independent contributor to stability and development

The transition from the OAU to an ostensibly more people-centred AU coincided with the onset of the democratic wave and experiments in good governance across the continent as part of efforts to boost the development of post-colonial states. These developments collectively ushered in the recognition of civil society as an independent contributor to peace, stability and development through their efforts to promote the accountability of governments, deepen policy processes and offer alternative perspectives, leading to more robust policies and their implementation. Popular participation in development processes and in ensuring the accountability and transparency of government (facilitated by CSOs) began to gain ground as a key pillar of good governance.
CSO participation in regional processes featured prominently at the 1999 OAU Heads of State Summit. Among the issues on the agenda were revitalising the organisation to meet the popular expectations of African citizens and the need for the union to end conflicts on the continent. One of the outcomes of the summit was the recognition of the contribution of civil society efforts to deepen democracy. In essence, what this reflected was that in asking how they might address the unmet expectation of citizens and the growing conflicts, one of the solutions they identified was an increased role for CSOs. This watershed moment paved the way for a progressive people-centred union.

The language of AU frameworks indicates that it is cognisant that for the continent to become ‘an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the global arena,’ it must draw on the contribution of the various categories of civil society. This recognition also prevails among its leading member states.

According to South Africa’s Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), for example, moving ‘away from the overly state-centric character of the OAU and its concomitant lack of civil participation’ was ‘of crucial importance in the establishment of the organs of the Union.’ According to the state institution, ‘[T]he cooperation of African NGOs, civil societies, labour unions, business organisations are essential in the process of cooperation and implementation of the Abuja Treaty, as was expressed in the Ouagadougou Declaration and provided for in the Sirte Declaration.’ The AU has made several institutional and administrative provisions in this regard as outlined in the following sections.

**African Citizens and Diaspora Directorate**

The African Citizens and Diaspora Directorate (CIDO) is mandated to ensure the effective participation of CSOs in the activities of the AU. It recognises a wide range of CSO categories including social and professional groups, NGOs, community-based organisations and voluntary and cultural organisations, including those in the diaspora.

**ECOSOCC**

The AU has institutionalised the participation of these categories of CSOs through the creation of the ECOSOCC, which is intended to comprise a wide range of social and professional groups of AU member states. The intention behind its formation is to inform AU policy studies and translate policy into practice to realise the vision and objectives of the union. It is also intended to contribute to efforts to forge pan-African values and foster and consolidate partnerships between the AU and CSOs through information, mobilisation and feedback.
MoU and observer status

In recognition of the contribution of CSOs, the AU and its organs provide for memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with its stakeholders. These are envisaged to confer priority status on holders in relation to partnership opportunities and participation in events that can only be attended by a limited number of external actors. The same mechanism operates at the level of RECs. For instance, much of the traction that the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) has been able to achieve as a peacebuilding network has been enabled by its MoU with ECOWAS.

The AU and its organs may also grant observer status to external stakeholders, including civil society organisations. However, the criteria for granting observer status and guidelines for the accreditation of non-African stakeholders, which were adopted at the 7th Ordinary Session of the Executive Council in 2005, tend to be skeletal and subject to significant interpretation and variation. Some organs of the AU such as the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child\(^{11}\) and the ACHPR\(^{12}\) have adopted the criteria, customising them to make them more instructive and to allow for their consistent application.

Livingstone Formula and Maseru Conclusions

In line with Article 20 of the Protocol on the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council, the PSC has established frameworks to facilitate its engagement with CSOs.

Article 20 reads:

> The Peace and Security Council shall encourage non-governmental organisations, community based and other civil society organisations, particularly women’s organisations, to participate actively in efforts aimed at promoting peace, security and stability in Africa. When required such organisations may be invited to address the Peace and Security Council.

The Livingstone Formula\(^{13}\) for promoting interaction between the PSC and CSOs, and the subsequent Maseru Conclusions,\(^{14}\) both acknowledge the important contribution civil society can make to the peace and security agenda of the AU. Among the areas identified are:

- Expert briefings
- Perspectives on thematic issues addressed during open sessions of the PSC
- Provision of support for mediation and peace-making efforts
- Regular advice on early warning
• Expertise in peace-support operations
• Training in the activities and workings of the PSC
• Mobilisation of resources

At its 391st meeting, held in open session in August 2013, the PSC agreed to put the Livingstone Formula into operation to facilitate its interaction with CSOs in the promotion of peace, security and stability. Both frameworks provide for the participation of CSOs in PSC-approved peacekeeping missions. In implementing the provisions, the PSC elected to recognise ECOSOCC as the consultative organ responsible for coordinating the participation of civil society in the work of the AU, particularly the Peace and Security Cluster.
Chapter 3

Peace and security engagements

Experimenting with different formations

In the past 20 years African CSOs have adopted a range of formations in their engagement with the AU. Umbrella CSO formations have played and continue to play a key role as mechanisms for engaging the AU Commission, its organs and the RECs. One example is the East African Civil Society Organisations Forum (EACSOF), which has a history of pioneering cutting-edge work addressing causal factors such as exclusion, citizenship (statelessness) and shortfalls in electoral justice. In 2016 EACSOF, together with PALU, filed an application with the East African Court of Justice challenging the legality of the ruling by the Constitutional Court of Burundi allowing then President Pierre Nkurunziza to run for a third term – a decision that had resulted in widespread popular protests and civilian deaths.

EACSOF’s West African counterpart is the West African Civil Society Organisation Forum (WACSOF), which is officially recognised by ECOWAS and operates in all ECOWAS member states. The original purpose of the organisation was to support the ECOWAS conflict management mechanism and devise a framework for institutionalising an ECOWAS-civil society interface that addresses broad human security issues in the region.16

Regional CSO bodies, based in Addis Ababa and beyond, offer civil society ‘safety in numbers’, voice and agency in relation to continental processes

WACSOF brings together civil society organisations and other stakeholders to promote the pursuit of democracy, peace and security, the rule of law, human development and integration in the sub-region. Its activities range from generic CSO coordination and capacity building and engagement to improve dialogue between the state and CSOs about peacebuilding to higher-level activities such as election monitoring and observation.
Regional CSO formations may also be organised on particular issues or for particular constituencies. Examples include the PALU (on human rights), The African Women's Development and Communications Network (FEMNET) (on gender and women's empowerment) and WANEP, which has more than 500 member organisations. These organisations offer CSOs 'safety in numbers', voice and agency in relation to continental processes. CSOs in this domain are based both in and out of Addis Ababa.

There are also loose regional and continental networks that are organised thematically. Innovative approaches have emerged within this category over the years. For instance, Atrocities Watch Africa provides continental leadership in the prevention and tracking of mass atrocities to help inform the AU’s continental early warning system. The network primarily employs emerging technologies such as social media and crowdsourcing to document and monitor atrocities.

The quality of advisory and technical support to the AU has deepened but there has been an attrition in civil society engagement with the union.

An important group among the African CSOs working in the AU space is a small group of think-tanks that include the IPSS and ISS. The work and contribution of these bodies have become critical to the AU’s processes. Also in this category are the membership-based Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa and ACCORD.

A more visible formation of CSOs that engages the AU is the international CSOs/NGOs whose work focuses on peace-and-security-related themes, including human rights, governance and democracy, transitional justice, security-sector reform, humanitarian assistance, early warning and conflict prevention. Among these are Amnesty International, Crisis Action, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Human Rights Watch (HRW), the International Crisis Group (ICG), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Oxfam International and SaferWorld. This category also includes networking organisations such as the International Refugee Rights Initiative (IRRI). The contribution of these organisations is often characterised by their efforts to link advocacy in relation to the AU with international policy frameworks and advocacy aimed at global and multilateral entities.

A few organisations exist merely to highlight the work of the AU in human rights, peace and security. These include ISS through its PSC Report project, Amani Africa Media and Research Services and the African Union Watch. The latter is a loose ‘think and do’ designed to monitor the AU’s compliance with its Constitutive Act and the legal instruments of its various institutions. Amani Africa and ISS have
etched out a unique niche, providing information about and policy research into the AU with a focus on the PSC.

Sometimes national and sub-national level CSOs engage the AU. However, this is often in the context of and with the ‘accompaniment of regional or INGOs. Some organisations that were originally national have evolved into regional or continental bodies. Among these are the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR), which works to build fair, inclusive and democratic societies in Central, East and Southern Africa and to contribute to post-conflict stability, good governance and human security. The IJR was initially established in South Africa in the wake of the country’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission with the aim of contributing to the transition from apartheid to a democratic state.

These CSO formations occasionally come together in the form of loose coalitions in campaigns based on shared concerns. In global policy and advocacy practice the coalition approach is often adopted because of a desire to harness the power of collective action. In the same way, coalitions have been shown to be a powerful way of influencing the AU’s peace and security agenda.

For example, the hashtag #Blue4Sudan was used to launch a global campaign in 2019. A blue wave spread across all social media platforms as users around the globe came together in solidarity with protesters in Sudan following the brutal military crackdown on civilians. The global campaign, with its focus on influencing AU decisions, contributed in part to the military stepping down and handing power to a civilian-run administration.

Emerging patterns in CSO engagements

In the past decade the quality of advisory and technical support provided to the AU by some non-state partners has deepened. However, more broadly, there has been an attrition in civil society engagement in and contribution to the processes and activities of the union. This is partly as a result of the shrinking of space for civil society within AU member states, with a decline in the number of invitations to participate in the union’s programmes and summits. That can be attributed to an erroneous interpretation of the mantra ‘African solutions for African problems’, which equates ‘African’ with central governments. In so doing, it overlooks the fact that African citizens have the right to express their aspirations through AU processes and, equally, through civil society channels associated with the AU.

In a seminal analysis, Oxfam and the Open Society of Southern Africa (OSISA) offered a useful list of ways in which CSOs engage the AU. According to the two organisations, CSOs access the AU in four main spaces:

- Institutional spaces: Provided for in AU statutes and organs. ECOSOCC is one example, with its members playing an official role in AU structures.
• Invited spaces: These are more ad hoc. CSOs may be invited by any organ or structure to attend AU activities.

• Created spaces: Created by CSOs when they organise autonomous activities related to AU issues and processes.

• Joint spaces: Created when CSOs organise activities jointly with AU organs or structures.¹⁸

Institutional spaces

The discipline of peace and security is multifaceted, attracting the attention and contribution of CSOs with diverse interests. These CSOs engage the AU through a range of entry points, the majority of which are incorporated within the APSA and African Governance Architecture (AGA) frameworks. They include:

• Provisions in policy documents and decisions that provide the basis for CSO advocacy and programmatic interventions

• Institutions CSOs can engage, whose initiatives they can support and whose progress they can monitor

• Personalities with whom CSOs can collaborate and who they can track to monitor the fulfilment of assigned mandates.

Invited spaces

RECs, the implementing arms of the AU in their regions, are the building blocks of African integration and are key entry points for CSO engagement. Because they are closer to citizens they should, theoretically, narrow the gap between those citizens and the AU Commission. The AU’s commitment to improving coordination between the commission and RECs means the RECs are becoming increasingly influential in AU processes. This is evidenced by annual coordination meetings in line with a decision taken at the 2017 summit.¹⁹

While RECs generally mirror the institutional structure of the AU Commission they do so with varying degrees of success. Some are more advanced in engaging citizens than others. ECOWAS, the East African Community and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have regional parliaments, forums for NGOs or regional tribunals intended to enable citizens to participate or raise their grievances.²⁰ Theoretically, RECs are also accessible to civil society in countries where they have liaison offices hosted within ministries of Foreign Affairs.

Another example of an invited space exploited by CSOs working on peace and security is AU high-level dialogues. The former Political Affairs Department traditionally hosted an annual High-Level Dialogue on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance in Africa (HLD) as a space for reflection and dialogue between stakeholders, including CSOs, within and beyond the AU. A similar space is the
Annual High-Level Retreat on the Promotion of Peace, Security and Stability, which has evolved into the central forum in which special envoys and mediators can share experiences and best practice in the areas of conflict prevention and peace making.

**Created spaces**

There are many examples of created spaces. One is the initiative taken by a group of CSOs to organise a pre-HLD meeting to facilitate networking and alignment among them. This meeting has since been recognised by the AU. The ISS has curated a role for itself as a trusted technical partner for the PAPS department and the PSC. It also engages diplomatic missions in Addis by providing briefings and other inputs through round tables, dialogues and retreats. As such, the ISS has been able to make different perspectives available to member states, which they can use to make decisions about various processes. These technical inputs by informed think-tanks should be mainstreamed across all the organs of the AU, including RECs.

**RECs, the implementing arms of the AU in their regions, are the building blocks of African integration and key entry points for CSO engagement**

Most recently, a group of CSOs, including WANEP and the West Africa Think Tank (WATHI), collaborated with the ECOWAS Commission within the framework of the West African Peace and Security Architecture, to establish the West Africa Peace and Security Innovation Forum, a platform to enhance community engagement, facilitate cutting-edge research and foster the dissemination of knowledge about best practice and innovative solutions to emerging challenges to human security in the ECOWAS region.21

**Joint spaces**

In many ways, joint spaces can be considered the ‘sweet spot’ of CSO-AU engagement. These are instances of shared interest in the collaborative implementation of agreed priorities. An example derives from Article 12(3) of the PSC Protocol, which provides for collaboration between the PSC and CSOs to facilitate an effective early warning system. In terms of this provision CSOs have successfully collaborated with their respective RECs to establish and sustain such systems. The most progressive have been in the IGAD and West Africa regions. Both the Conflict Early Warning Response Network (CEWARN) in the IGAD region and ECOWARN, have structures based on strong collaboration between governments and CSOs at all levels (sub-national, national and regional).
CEWARN integrates CSOs comprehensively, using CSO field monitors who source real-time early warning information from communities in which they are embedded. CSOs also participate in local peace committees alongside representatives of provincial administrations, government security structures and traditional, religious and women leaders. As members of these committees CSOs contribute to response initiatives at the sub-national level.

At the national level CEWARN works through National Conflict Early Warning and Response Units (CEWERUs) that operate in each member state. CSOs, research entities and think-tanks are incorporated in CEWERUs alongside representatives of government institutions. Perhaps the weakest integration of CSOs is at the continental level. Although regional early warning mechanisms are part of the APSA through their links with the AU’s Continental Early Warning System, the pathway for CSO engagement at that level is not clearly defined. Civil society must take this problem up.

**Role of development partners**

Donors have traditionally supported civil society engagement both within member states and in the AU as part of strengthening democratisation and good governance. A range of donors employs different approaches to support this engagement. Among these are Canada, the United Kingdom, Norway, Sweden, and other donor countries who fund CSOs directly. Others support CSOs in the context of their support for the AU. The initiative by the European Union (EU) in terms of the APSA support grant is an example of this approach. The fund, which is now in its fourth iteration, includes support for institutionalising the contribution of CSOs, including through ECOSOCC.

Donors also have preferences based on geography and themes. For instance, the Open Society Foundations focus on supporting the emergence of CSO coalitions and citizen engagement with the AU while donors based in France prefer to support CSOs in francophone African states.
Chapter 4
Lessons from CSO engagement

Quantifying CSO contributions
CSOs contribute tangibly to AU efforts to create peace, security and stability. They provide research and technical assessments for policy making and assess the progress of implementation. They also help when the AU has staffing problems. Staff shortages in the union mean that projects implemented together with CSOs often have to be supplemented by staff from the CSOs. The CSOs also frequently contribute funding secured from their donors to joint projects.

Other more intangible benefits to the AU from its association with CSOs stem from the different perspectives they might offer in a particular situation or the local knowledge they might provide about a member state. The union also gains popular support from citizens because of the awareness CSOs create about proposed new policies.

Impediments
According to much of the literature, 23 AU member states face increasingly visible CSO activism powered by greater access to information and by social media. The contribution of CSOs is contingent on adequate legal, political and social space in which to operate and influence policy development and implementation. To achieve this, all actors, particularly governments, must protect, nurture and celebrate the civic space. 24

However, in many cases governments regard such activism as a threat to their political legitimacy and survival and often believe it is encouraged and funded by meddling Western interests or opposition political parties. The response has been an onslaught against CSO activism by closing civic spaces using restrictive laws, policies, threats and intimidation, physical attacks and marginalisation.

Such restrictions can take the form of complicated and costly registration requirements, vague administrative procedures and intrusive reporting requirements, making it increasingly difficult to register an organisation. Many CSOs have underdeveloped governance and accountability structures and therefore fail to meet the requirements. In essence, the excessively bureaucratic
oversight has the effect of obstructing and constraining independent voices rather than enhancing accountability.\textsuperscript{25}

More insidious challenges to the operations of CSOs take the form of excessive and invasive oversight of operations, including restrictions on gatherings and protests and limitations on permitted levels of funding from foreign sources. Ironically, the lion’s share of the budgets of many of the governments that impose such limitations are funded by these very sources.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced an additional dynamic to CSO-state relations. The lockdowns and general uncertainty associated with the pandemic severely tested the resilience of government and CSO systems. The pandemic also put further pressure on and exposed faultiness in the inclusivity (or lack thereof) of political systems. In some countries it had tangible implications for the democratic process, with governments such as those in Ethiopia and Senegal accused of using lockdowns to silence popular expression and, even more seriously, to hold on to power by postponing elections.\textsuperscript{26}

**Challenge of access to AU summits**

CSOs have often treated the AU as an entity distinct from its constituting member states and characterised by different values. Perhaps the most symbolic reflection of the shrinking space for CSO engagement at continental level was the union’s decision to exclude them from AU summits:

The Assembly of the African Union decided in July 2015 that observers, including citizens and their delegations, can only be invited to one of the biannual AU summits. Civil society has therefore been denied access to a critical policy development space, in Kigali in July 2016 and now the January 2015\textsuperscript{27} AU summit is closed for CSOs. Closing the AU summit space to African citizens as observers is a challenge to a key mission of the AU which is to build ‘an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the global arena’. The AU summit is a unique and symbolic opportunity for informal yet important interaction between citizens and power holders. Oxfam positions this restriction within the broader context of closing civic space and calls on the AU to reverse its decision.\textsuperscript{28}

The responses to this decision extended beyond the continent and were felt at the 5th AU-EU summit held in 2017. After initially being included on the agenda to address participating heads of state, CSO representatives (European and African) were barred from speaking, ostensibly at the request of some African delegations, on the grounds of ‘rules of procedure’.\textsuperscript{29}

There are indications that the space for CSO engagement in AU summits is opening somewhat, albeit erratically and selectively. However, the mid-year coordination
meeting between the AU Commission and RECS remains largely inaccessible to CSOs. The meeting has been described as administrative, dealing with coordination issues of a non-policy nature and therefore irrelevant to CSOs. This could not be further from the truth. For a number of reasons so-called ‘coordination issues’ are absolutely relevant to CSO advocacy.

Firstly, inclusion of CSOs in these meetings would contribute to the progressive realisation of a people-centred African Union, which is so desperately needed. Secondly, CSOs can, and should, contribute to the structure of and spending by AU and RECs, which is discussed at the mid-year meetings. In addition, technical briefings by CSOs remain relevant to the various interchanges that take place between the commission and RECs during the meetings.

The AU is acutely aware of the demands of CSOs in this regard. The need to involve them in AU-REC coordination was highlighted in the resolution of the 11th Extraordinary Session of the AU Assembly in November 2017, which stated that ‘the involvement of key non-state actors such as the private sector, civil society, academia and the public at large is limited’ in harmonising integration between the AU and RECs.³⁰

AU member states face increasingly visible activism by civil society organisations powered by greater access to information and by social media

The COVID-19 pandemic put the AU’s commitment to a people-centred approach to the test. In response to the pandemic the commission migrated its meetings to virtual platforms and a multitude of problems arose. This resulted in the participation of CSOs being deprioritised.

For instance, CSOs that would typically attend PSC open sessions in person were not granted access for at least a year. There was no justifiable reason for the failure to extend online participation to CSOs, there was only a lack of political will. Consequently, as the AU compound remained closed to non-AU staff for months on end, CSO actors lost the opportunity to interact personally with AU staff, which is a key strategy for accessing policymakers and AU-related information and, more specifically, making their contributions to PSC sessions.

Troublesome nomenclature and criteria

Nomenclature is another source of exclusion of certain CSOs. The tag ‘African’ is used as a mechanism for excluding certain groups. In reality there is a fine line separating ‘African’ and ‘African-led’ CSOs from those of foreign origins but have indigenised their systems, governance and staffing structures. An example of the
latter would be the membership-based International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH). While FIDH has its origins in Europe, the majority of its members are now in Africa, as are its board members and board chairperson.

The application of an external funding threshold as a criterion for delineating African CSO requires careful consideration. Development budgets of all African governments are largely externally funded, yet member states do not view this as having negative implications for their legitimacy. The AU itself benefits from external funding but insists that CSOs should be largely domestically funded. According to the AU, the budget for its peace operations is 61% externally funded and its programmes 59% externally funded. In effect, the reason for excluding some CSOs on the basis that they are not ‘African’ is political expedience. At times the technical contribution of the same CSOs is accepted without any qualms.

**Fault lines among CSOs**

**Stagnation of umbrella formations**

Resource challenges make it logical to engage the AU primarily through continental and regional CSO formations – not every CSO has the means to maintain an AU observation and response mechanism, nor would this be the best use of limited finances. Apex formations confer several advantages such as efficiency and economies of scale.

Unfortunately, while some continental and regional umbrella and membership organisations have lasted, the envisaged progressive establishment and deepening of influence has not been evident. An example is EACSOF, which once played a critical role in the region with its cutting-edge work on peace and security and addressing causal factors such as exclusion and citizenship (statelessness). However, the umbrella CSO has lost some of its visibility and gravitas.

There are several points of concern about the functioning of these umbrella organisations. Most of them (including PALU, FEMNET and IRRI) operate from outside Addis Ababa, largely because of the logistical and regulatory challenges associated with establishing a presence in Ethiopia. Given the largely non-communicative nature of the AU Commission, the lack of access to official information has significant implications for the work of these organisations. Previous efforts by Oxfam International and the Pan-African Citizens Network to establish a CSO hub in Addis to bridge the gap between the commission and CSOs were not sustained and the inability of many African CSOs to establish an institutional presence in Addis Ababa is a significant challenge.

**Crowding out national formations**

A quick scan of the CSOs that frequent AU programmes and activities reveals that there is a majority of umbrella formations and INGOs at the expense
of national-level organisations, whose participation they should facilitate. Such organisations, which have the benefit of proximity to relevant issues and their effect on communities struggle to establish and sustain their direct engagement with organs of the AU because of inadequate financial resources and access to information.

Because most donors prefer to fund specific activities, it is difficult to secure funding for more general ongoing engagement, however valuable it might be. On the other hand, umbrella CSOs and INGOs are better resourced, have more access to AU structures and processes and often have more technical capacity than national CSOs. The results of their engagement with the AU are therefore more visible or celebrated than those of national CSOs. Umbrella organisations and INGOs could possibly, therefore, try to ensure they do not crowd national CSOs out of the AU space.

A more collaborative way of working with national CSOs is also in the interests of umbrella organisations and INGOs. Despite their competitive advantage, INGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are less able than national CSOs to criticise the AU over sensitive issues such as governance and human rights. This necessitates a strategic collaborative relationship between these INGOs and national CSOs, which are perceived to have more legitimacy to comment on such issues because of their ‘African-ness’.

Another problem is that umbrella organisations and INGOs base their engagement with the AU on their particular interests. These priorities become prominent, propelled by the effective campaign delivery model of INGOs, inadvertently marginalising the concerns of citizens and the organic citizen-empowerment approach. This is evident in the frequent lack of resonance between key moments of popular mobilisation in member states and the focus of CSO engagement with the AU in Addis. It is important for CSOs with proximity and access to the AU to remain connected to and progressively reflect the concerns of national formations as part of their advocacy. There is little debate by groups in Addis about transforming international policy, practice and multilateralism.

**Constituencies left behind**

Certain stakeholder groups, particularly youth groups, are under represented in the engagement of CSOs with the AU. There is a clear need to provide support for such groups, especially those from marginalised backgrounds. Their formations tend to suffer from under-developed systems and resourcing. Young people, for example, are becoming more important in both social mobilisation and the promotion of peace and security. Therefore, as a crucial civil society group, their involvement in efforts to avert and resolve conflict should be increased.
Effectiveness

This monograph and other evaluative works reference the progress in CSO engagement with the AU in its decision-making and implementation processes. CSOs are established members of the diplomatic community in the AU space, particularly in Addis Ababa. As such, they regularly meet and exchange perspectives with high-ranking members of diplomatic missions and intergovernmental organisations, including the AU, as well as with international agencies. In the course of monitoring their impact they often receive and document evidence indicating that their contribution is valued by stakeholders. This monograph also makes it clear that CSOs have numerous opportunities to contribute their technical expertise to priority issues of relevance to the AU’s peace and security agenda.

Unpredictable engagement

Despite the comprehensive policy and institutional frameworks and structures put in place for CSO engagement, the African Union has not succeeded in setting up systems for including CSOs in its processes and programmes. Hence, in spite of the fact that the PSC recognises the potential contribution of CSOs to its objectives and has convened two retreats to discuss the matter, the PSC Secretariat, in its 2018 study of the implementation of the AU APSA, admitted that there had never been a meeting between the PSC and CSOs. This situation only changed in 2022 when, under the chairship of Ghana, the PSC convened its first meeting with African CSOs on 14 September 2022 to discuss how CSOs could promote peace, security and stability.

In essence, the participation of CSOs remains unpredictable and optional, often depending on the perceived benefits accruing from the inclusion of specific individual CSOs and on the preferences of and lessons learned by gatekeeping AU personnel. It is therefore not unusual that within the same division there are different attitudes to working with CSOs. These differences are often informed by the perception that CSOs are influenced politically by the agendas of their foreign funders. CSOs wanting to gain the trust of AU personnel are therefore consistently under pressure to demonstrate their independence from Western influences. CSOs still experience significant challenges and expend considerable resources in their efforts to meet key personnel, to access critical information timeously, to participate in activities and, consequently, to contribute meaningfully to the setting of agendas and implementation of programmes.

Limited entry points for AU-CSO engagement

ECOSOCC is intended to be the entry point for civil society’s contribution to the AU. However, some CSOs have found it challenging to engage ECOSOCC, which, in some countries, has been accused of being captured by state interests. ECOSOCC
requires CSOs that wish to work with it to be endorsed by their governments, which is problematic on two counts. Firstly, it undermines the independence of civil society in shaping its contribution. Secondly, there is frequently an adversarial relationship between civil society and government.

A closely related challenge is the political standing of ECOSOCC. The body’s status as an invited space raises questions about its effectiveness as a platform for conveying CSO voices – especially when they are dissenting voices. This limitation is particularly pertinent to the CSOs working in the area of peace and security, whose work requires them to engage member states and the AU on governance, democracy, human rights and other issues that are unpopular in many member states.

Another challenge relates to the level of inclusivity of ECOSOCC, given its bureaucratic membership criteria. Should CSOs be African, be in Africa, or be African led? Also, the expectation that CSOs must be in good standing with their governments excludes those considered to be too activist. In the same way, criteria relating to registration within member states exclude participation by social movements that, although often informal, have become an increasingly significant voice in the governance discourse.

There is a striking disconnect between the CSOs most frequently engaged with the AU on peace and security and ECOSOCC.

Another problem is activist organisations that are denied membership, ostensibly because of non-compliance with the registration requirements – including with those requirements relating to types of funding – but are, in fact, excluded on the basis of dissenting positions. ECOSOCC has not shown the activism characteristic of non-state actors in regard to its membership criteria but has adopted, wholesale, those proposed by the AU.

For these reasons, CSOs that are actively engaged with the AU on peace and security issues are being excluded or are excluding themselves from ECOSOCC membership and processes. As a result, there have been calls for the AU to relax the criteria for membership. One such criterion is that CSOs must raise at least 50% of their resources from their members – a stipulation that is not practical for the majority of CSO working on peace and security in Africa.

There is a striking disconnect between the CSOs most frequently engaged with the AU on peace and security and ECOSOCC, a problem that is likely to be perpetuated. For instance, in 2016 ECOSOCC’s Peace and Security Cluster officially rolled out the Civil Society Forum for the Operationalization of the Livingstone
Formula. The event was not well publicised among ‘mainstream’ CSOs involved in peace and security. The challenges experienced by ECOSOCC in gaining traction have been highlighted by the PSC as one of the obstacles to a more vibrant interaction between the council and CSOs, as provided for in the protocol that established the PSC.  

Similarly, CIDO does not contribute significantly to CSO efforts to engage the AU on peace and security issues. Although the directorate hosted what was intended to be an annual conference on Security, Stability, Development and Cooperation in Africa, this initiative, together with other efforts by CIDO to promote collaboration between the AU and CSOs has waned. The most these CSOs can expect in the arduous process of securing accreditation to AU summit events is letters of support.

In 2007 a group of CSOs compiled a report on the obstacles to a people-centred AU, including the meaningful participation of CSOs in AU summits. Recommendations relating to AU summits included:

• Host countries must commit to facilitating civil society access to summits
• Mechanisms are required to improve access to and distribution of information about AU processes for both member states and CSOs
• The AU Commission’s interaction with CSOs should be transparent and open to a wider range of groups
• Autonomous, direct civil society interaction with the AU can be improved by wider dissemination of information, increased coordination and efforts to access and transmit recommendations to official summit participants.

It is significant that today, 15 years later, each of these points is still valid. CIDO has made no discernible contribution to resolving the issues. This raises questions about the effectiveness of CIDO as an entry point to the AU.

Closing spaces around AU summits

CSOs’ expectations and approaches to AU summits have evolved considerably in the past 20 years. Many previously considered the summits to be an opportunity to influence heads of state to take certain decisions. This left scores of CSO actors ‘milling around’ the venues, hoping to catch a glimpse of the executives (and perhaps be included in a photograph).

What has become clear is the complex interplay among AU entities, which requires deeper understanding and creative strategies on the part of civil society in order to maximise its engagement. In this respect, CSOs that succeed in their engagements with the AU now recognise that the Heads of State summit at
the beginning of February every year is the culmination of a year-long process requiring engagement through multiple structures and moments. Over the years, an increasing number of CSOs have changed their approach, engaging with the AU earlier in the process. In this way, their advocacy efforts have better prospects of success.

**The MoU and observer status**

While both the MoU and observer status are much sought after because they are believed to confer preferential status, information about ways of securing these is difficult to access, as is information about the benefit they confer. CSOs without MoU status have been known to have similar levels of access and engagement to those with it, especially within the AU Commission.

MoU status appears to be more of a prerequisite for joint activities at the level of RECs. The MoU mechanism is poorly understood, which inadvertently makes it more accessible to INGOS, which have greater access and more resources to sustain their engagement with the AU. Therefore, MoUs cannot be said to be successful in creating confidence in the status it confers.

**Resistance to CSOs**

AU organs are increasingly open to inviting CSOs to provide technical input. However, opportunities to be physically present and to engage in political or statutory spaces are still reserved for the privileged few. The APSA framework now includes standby mechanisms for mediation support for member states. While CSOs contributed technically to the design and operation of these mechanisms, the pool of African NGOs specialising in the political aspects of mediation support and included in these processes is said to be limited.

In addition, while policies associated with these frameworks give legitimacy to CSO involvement in structures and processes for peace making, they are generally characterised by significant grey areas. This is a source of concern for CSOs given the prevailing reticence among states towards CSO involvement.

The persistent tendency to exclude CSOs from political processes is evident in the area of mediation support. Because mediation is, in itself, seen as a very political process, creating space for CSO involvement alongside AU actors has lagged behind other aspects in the peace and security value chain. As a result, despite the contribution of CSOs to the development of mediation support structures, there is a question about the viability of involving them in the actual process. It has been suggested that if the activities are driven by CSOs the mediation support structures may lack the unequivocal buy-in of political decision makers, which they need to function properly.
Institutions

Analyses undertaken by CSOs often point to the PSC as a strategic advocacy target because its mandate is to take decisions and commission actions from other organs of the AU. It is the only organ that can deploy the African Standby Force. The PSC is also mandated to request member states to give it updates, thus providing for some accountability.

The PSC is regularly engaged by CSOs in a variety of ways. They communicate with its chairs and with its members, arrange visits/delegations of constituencies affected by conflicts and facilitate the crucial interface between its members and affected constituencies during PSC field missions. This type of engagement is not consistent across all the union’s organs and institutions and civil society must focus on some of the others in order to engage more fully.

Chairperson of the AU Commission

The chairperson of the AU Commission is often overlooked as a key player in the field of peace and security. The Office of the Chairperson often issues statements indicating the position of the Commission on particular conflicts and conflict-related situations. While its ability to mobilise specific actions to complement these statements (such as deploying missions or forces) is limited, statements by the chairperson are still important as diplomatic instruments of pressure and also as the basis for further interaction by CSOs. Other important roles played by the chairperson are the appointment of envoys and special representatives in instances where the AU is required to focus its attention on specific countries or themes.

The chairperson retains the prerogative to appoint officials such as the Youth Envoy and the Envoy on Women, Peace and Security and, more recently, the High Representative for the Horn of Africa, all of whom have recently proved to be accessible to CSOs. Thus, CSOs should endeavour to influence either the direction or pace of the chairperson’s actions.

In 2021, in the wake of a deepening crisis in the Sahel, CSOs advocating for greater political engagement by the AU successfully lobbied the chairperson for the urgent appointment of a new High Representative for the Sahel. In another recent case CSOs working to protect and ensure the rights of children in armed conflict adopted a multipronged approach to lobby the chairperson to appoint an Envoy/Special Representative for Children Affected by Armed Conflicts – including securing a decision by the Assembly of Heads of State during its 35th Ordinary Session in February 2022 ‘reiterating’ the urgency of this.

Specialised Technical Committees

Specialised Technical Committees (STCs) are established under the Constitutive Act of the AU. Each STC is charged with ensuring that AU projects and programmes
under a specific theme are harmonised and that there is coordination between the AU Commission and the RECs. Among the members of STCs are ministers of member states and senior AU officials responsible for sectors falling within a particular thematic area.

STCs are answerable to the Executive Council of the AU and are therefore very influential. The situation in the case of peace and security is slightly different because the PSC is answerable to heads of state although there is an STC on Defence, Safety and Security, which is a point of engagement for CSOs in relation to the Africa Standby Force.

**African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights**

One of the most vibrant AU organs is the ACHPR, which has shown the extent to which CSOs can be included. CSOs with observer status can participate in meetings, have access to related documentation and may contribute to the commission’s meetings and processes. Many of these activities are facilitated by the commission’s NGO Forum, which provides the space for coordination, collaboration and cooperation among CSOs and with the commission.

Although the commission is often overlooked by CSOs who are not working predominantly in the field of human rights, it is an integral part of the AU’s peace and security mechanism. This became clear when CSOs that were concerned about the AU’s failure to act on the conflict in northern Ethiopia were able, in 2021, to lobby the AU to agree to deploy a fact-finding mission, effectively revealing, for the first time, the situation on the ground in Tigray.

**Gaps in CSO engagement: thematic areas**

**Preventive diplomacy**

Preventive diplomacy and mediation are central components of the AU’s strategies for promoting peace and security. In 2017 alone, the AU and RECs engaged in peace diplomacy in 27 instances and resorted to mediation 13 times. In order to capitalise on the research and policy expertise of CSOs and think-tanks, their contribution to sustainable political settlements and their peacebuilding role, the AU and RECs have established norms for including them in diplomatic and mediation processes.

A study undertaken by the IJR revealed that the AU, ECOWAS and SADC have elaborated policy guidelines for CSO participation in peace making and enshrined them in statutory instruments. In the case of the AU and ECOWAS these policies have been further elaborated, with guidelines for inclusive mediation and NGO participation in relevant structures and processes.

The study identified policies relating to both the involvement of expert CSOs in APSA institutions and the inclusion of civil society stakeholders in local peace
processes. Hence, ECOWAS guidelines position NGOs as intermediaries between ECOWAS and communities and as facilitators in multitrack dialogues. AU guidelines emphasise the role of CSOs in technical teams backing mediators and in training and sharing mediation knowledge, while SADC provides for an exchange of expertise with regional research institutions. Despite these provisions, commentators highlight the gap in CSO engagement. The IJR attributed this to the limited pool of African CSOs that specialise in mediation support. This emerges as an important area for capacity building among CSOs.

**Peacekeeping**

CSOs, it is believed, find it difficult to engage in peacekeeping. In fulfilling the requirement to be multidimensional, all AU missions have military, police and civilian components under civilian leadership. However, the military component currently outweighs the others, in numbers as well as in importance. This points to the need for the AU to continue to reinforce the civilian contribution to its peacekeeping operations. To do so it must make progress in articulating the framework and guidelines for civilian engagement and key concepts such as protection of civilians, gender, humanitarian support and combating sexual exploitation and abuse.

**Women, peace and security**

Despite the recognition in policy frameworks of the critical role played by women in peace building and preventing and resolving conflict, there has been little progress in providing opportunities for or monitoring that role. While women played a critical leadership role in the uprising in Sudan that led to the overthrow of Omar Al Bashir they were marginalised when governance structures were established.

Very few states submit annual reports on their progress in matters of gender mainstreaming and empowerment. Increased mutual accountability through regular monitoring and reporting is critical for the greater empowerment and protection of women. Collaboration between civil society and the AU Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security resulted in the establishment of gender pre-summits and therefore the visibility of gender issues during AU summits. However, the Women Peace and Security Agenda continues to struggle to gain visibility in the priorities of CSOs engaging the AU.

**Climate change**

The implications of climate change for resource governance (water, land forests) development are well known. In the Sahel the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s changed agropastoral dynamics in favour of settled farmers, who were less affected than herder communities. The marginalisation of many Fulani nomads has made them vulnerable to the lure of jihadist rhetoric.
While the contribution of climate change to resource-based conflicts is acknowledged in numerous AU documents, little effort is made during conflict resolution processes to address resource challenges. This has been demonstrated clearly in the response of the international community to the conflict in the Sahel which has prioritised military considerations above interventions to address the inter-communal tensions arising from the drought.

**Marginalisation, exclusion and identity**

Integration – the incorporation of groups that differ in language, ethnicity, religious convictions (and even political orientation) into a harmonious, united population in which all groups have equal opportunities – is a foundational aspiration of the AU. Although local-level CSOs are actively involved in responses such as service provision and facilitating inter-communal dialogue, there is inadequate support at continental level.

Conversely, marginalisation of populations, whether on grounds of geography or identity, is acknowledged as the basis of tensions and conflicts across the continent. It is therefore no surprise that, in the Sahel, where the conflict has been responsible for an increasing number of civilian deaths each year, demands for improved service delivery (education, health, water and sanitation) lie at the heart of the grievances of marginalised people living in neglected peripheral rural areas, where most of the violence is concentrated.

Although community CSOs are active in service provision and facilitating inter-communal dialogue, their support at continental level is inadequate.

This discontent has been taken up and sometimes exploited by various insurrection movements, whether populist, autonomist or jihadist. At the core of the marginalisation and exclusion is the issue of identity, a powerful and emotive force behind some of the brutal conflicts in the region, including the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the post-election violence in Kenya in 2008. At a less acute level, differences in identity are responsible for electoral, resource-related and other intrastate conflicts. Despite this, the issue of identity is not prioritised in CSO advocacy.

Much of the CSO engagement with the AU is informed by a thematic approach. Yet there are issues of a non-thematic nature that are of fundamental importance to the AU agenda and have a direct bearing on peace, security and stability. They include the broader poverty-reduction, economic-transformation and integration imperatives that have been progressively marginalised.
It appears that the day-to-day work of the AU reflects these issues less and less directly as root causes of the challenges that confront the region. In this regard, it is encouraging that the vision of the new Commissioner of Political Affairs and Peace and Security (CPAPS) highlights the need to integrate the causal factors of governance and human rights, which have largely been missing from the department’s approach.

Coordination of CSO efforts

A study of CSO-AU relations reveals coordination challenges at several levels. As is evident from the preceding sections of this monograph, one of these is poor coordination between CSOs and the organs/structure of the AU responsible for facilitating the contribution of CSOs. However, in the past two years there have been indications that the ECOSOCC secretariat is increasingly reaching out to CSOs working on peace and security.

In 2021, for instance, the secretariat organised several important initiatives to increase CSO participation. In June ECOSOCC collaborated with the AU Commission and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa to host a workshop on enhancing CSO engagement in APSA. ECOSOCC subsequently collaborated with PAPS, RECs and the EU to convene a workshop to develop the 2022 CSO engagement work plan in terms of the EU APSA IV Framework. Sustaining these efforts will go a long way towards addressing the coordination challenges and structural formation issues that have hampered CSO engagement.

There are also coordination gaps between the advocacy efforts of CSOs and related AU organs – those in Addis Ababa, its human rights institutions in Banjul and the APRM in Midrand. It is important for them to recognise these.

The PSC Secretariat in the (then) Peace and Security Department identified a lack of coordination between the PSC and sister organs such as the PAP and the ACHPR, as well as the RECs. The AU continues to grapple with numerous challenges in its coordination with RECs. While there is less scrutiny of and commentary about the poor horizontal coordination across RECs, this is no less important. Whatever the exact nature, poor coordination within the AU has important implications for the work of CSOs.

If the efforts of AU entities are poorly coordinated CSOs must make a particular effort to ensure that their advocacy and contribution to the work is coordinated. In this respect, they should see the recent merger between the Peace and Security Department and the Political Affairs Department to form PAPS as an opportunity to address previous gaps in interdepartmental coordination. There efforts must include:

- Embracing the opportunity to recognise and address issues of human rights and democracy (previously the domain of Political Affairs) specifically and directly as root causes of conflicts
• Integrating issues of identity, displacement, migration and refugee rights more seamlessly into the causes and consequences of conflict

• Seizing the opportunity to harmonise their advocacy activities targeting the AU with advocacy targeting other institutions whose peace and political portfolios are also merged (certain RECs and the United Nations).

A further challenge is that even when the AU Commission does collaborate with its RECs, CSOs often battle for space in the collaborative effort. The inclusion of CSOs at the level of RECs is relatively consistent across the continent.

In ECOWAS, however, the CSO footprint is evident across the peace and security processes. Its regional Counter-Terrorism Strategy Implementation Plan\(^{51}\) gives CSOs the opportunity to contribute to all the pillars of the strategy (prevention; implementation of commitments; restoring and reconstructing at the level of relations; and rights). So where does the challenge lie? In the case of the AU and IGAD, which have tried to improve their collaboration over peace mediation and conflict resolution efforts in Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan, this collaboration has, by and large, been devoid of any citizen participation.\(^{52}\)

The prevailing attitude towards CSOs is suspicion and intolerance emanating from the belief that policy formulation is the prerogative of states

Both entities have legal provisions and structures for including civil society, such as the IGAD NGO/CSO forum, but these structures are generally not functional. Member states have insisted that only CSOs that are government affiliated should be included in the CSO forum. This is largely because of a bias against civil society participation in decision making.

The prevailing attitude towards CSOs is suspicion and a degree of intolerance emanating from the belief that policy formulation and decision making are the prerogative of states. It is important for member states to recognise that the contribution of CSOs does not diminish the relevance or the authority of states in policymaking. Rather, it adds robustness to the policymaking process by introducing alternative perspectives and enhancing the accountability of member states.

The effectiveness of CSO coordination goes beyond ensuring the coherence of the advocacy in Addis, Banjul, Arusha, Lusaka and Midrand and in the locations of RECs and so on. It is a long-established fact that while peace and security in Africa is about decisions taken at country level, at the level of RECs and at the level of the AU, peace and security for African people is equally contingent upon
decisions taken in New York (UN), Brussels (EU) and, increasingly, Beijing. There is an opportunity for CSO members in different global capitals to collaborate more effectively in their efforts to influence decisions made on multilateral platforms.

Recent efforts by the AU PSC to improve collaboration with the three elected African states on the UN Security Council (the A3) has improved prospects for the continuity of policy interventions from Addis to New York. Similarly, the vision of the incoming PAPS Commissioner of an AU that is more visible and more engaged in the global multilateral system necessitates and provides a platform for CSO advocacy in global capitals.53

**Sustaining CSO efforts**

**Funding challenges**

Most donors to the AU have traditionally had their origins in ‘Western’ capitals, while African philanthropic and grant-making organisations have been conspicuous by their absence. AU-CSO relations differ markedly from relations between CSOs and governments that participate in other multilateral forums, such as the UN or EU.

Western-based donors who fund CSO advocacy with the AU and partner CSOs do not always recognise the uniqueness of the situation. As a result, CSOs that interact with the AU are often under pressure to adopt advocacy approaches styled along ‘Western’ lines, resulting in disagreements with AU officials. Donors should focus less on visible engagement than on relationship building as a foundation for successful advocacy.

Donors seldom provide predictable support for long-term engagement with the AU or the institutional support necessary for sustainability or networking and coalition building for more effective advocacy. Funding comes primarily in the form of support for particular projects. However, the EU APSA Fund supports the participation of CSOs in APSA. There is a need for more funding of this nature to help with institution building and sustaining the engagement of CSOs with the AU.

Closely related to this is the concern that there is inadequate focus on crosscutting themes, such as the interface of peace and security with economy/poverty, with technology. As a result, CSOs are shaping their work in response to funded areas rather than in ways that might result in sustainable transformation.

There is cause for optimism. Recently, a few grant-making organisations have emerged that are positioning themselves as African or ‘southern’ in their political ideology. Key among these are the Open Society Foundations. In addition, non-traditional foundations whose work is more enabling and cognisant of the cultural-political dynamics are also emerging.
Policy advocacy

The solid and sustainable contribution of CSOs to the peace and security agenda of the African Union is predicated on a strong evidence base. According to the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA):

There is no fatality about the African condition. Research, properly undertaken and deployed, can and should play a key role in the social transformation and development of the African continent – as, indeed, any other region of the world. African scholars, through their research output, can and are expected not only to contribute to the expansion of the frontiers of scientific knowledge but also the strengthening of the capacity within the continent to respond to the multifaceted challenges of development that confront society.54

Some gaps emerge in this regard. While AU organs are increasingly using CSO research there has been a decline in substantive research that addresses the underlying causes of conflicts and associated under-development on the continent. In recent years policy briefs linked to specific thematic issues and driven by specific policy-change interests have become more predominant.

While this type of research is useful it should ideally be undergirded by an African-led, pan-African research agenda that provides guidance and an ideological anchor for CSO advocacy on human rights, peace and security.55 The promotion of such agenda-setting research is closely linked to the need to deepen African thought leadership in relation to the peace and security discourse, an area that is woefully lacking. Filling it requires a determined effort by CSOs with a commitment to a pan-Africanist mindset. It also requires the support of progressive donors willing to provide multi-year grants for research into agenda-setting themes and more general issues of concern.

Continuity of thematic focus

The competing priorities confronting the AU pose a challenge for both the AU and CSOs working with it. One of the manifestations is the unpredictability of the AU’s agenda. While in relation to peace and security the Silencing the Guns (STG) focus provides some continuity, it does not go far enough. In 2021, for instance, the STG agenda was significantly less visible than it was in 2020, when it was the body’s theme of the year.
Chapter 5

Recommendations

A diverse range of CSOs contributes to the peace and security agenda of the African Union. These contributions are made in the form of research and policy advisory activities, multi-stakeholder consultation, community dialogue, awareness raising and capacity building. CSOs also contribute to activities such as peacekeeping and mediation that were previously viewed as the domain of states. Successes are matched by challenges and failures.

For AU-related entities

Re-commit to enabling CSO participation

CSOs can only engage with the AU and its member states if it is allowed access. As elementary as this may appear, there is a need to revisit assumptions about the AU’s openness to CSO participation by interrogating the obstacles to accessing the most critical AU spaces, particularly those of political significance. CSOs should be concentrating on honing their input rather than on a struggle to gain access.

The AU Commission and other entities must live up to their intention to create a people-centred union by ensuring that CSOs have access to priority organs of the union. In this respect, an important step would be to develop a specific and time-bound plan for putting into practice existing provisions relating to civil society’s contribution to the peace and security agenda. This move could start with the PSC.

Enable CSO access to the PSC

Commemorating the 10th anniversary of the PSC in April 2014 the AUC designated ACCORD, ISS, OXFAM and WANEP to organise regional consultations over ways to enhance the relationship between stakeholders and the AU in the promotion of peace and security on the continent in the following decade. Among the problems noted were:

- Weak coordination between the PSC and other stakeholders working in peace and security
- Insufficient communication of and accessibility to the work of the PSC
• The fact that the criteria for membership of ECOSOCC marginalised a number of CSOs working on peace and security.

Addressing these three challenges would significantly enhance the prospects of improved CSO access to and engagement with the PSC, which is, arguably, the centrepiece of the APSA. A starting point could be attempts to harmonise the efforts of CSOs that have predominantly accompanied the PAPS and PSC with those of ECOSOCC, which appears to have undergone a revival.

**Improve CSO contribution to early response**

The goal of peace and security work is to identify situations that might erupt into conflict and neutralise them. Where this is not possible, the next best thing is to act early to prevent nascent conflicts from escalating, thus minimising their impact. The complexity of the evolution of conflict means it is not always possible to eliminate it entirely, making early identification and response all the more important. As far back as 2007 an assessment of the CSO-ECOWAS relationship led to the conclusion that "[t]he main weakness of ECOWARN has been its inability to generate early response. The concern that the early warning system is incapable of picking up conflict issues on its own needs to be addressed."\(^{56}\)

There is a need to revisit assumptions about the AU’s openness to CSO participation by interrogating obstacles to accessing critical AU spaces

Now, 15 years later, this monograph draws the same conclusion and similarly posits that there might be a greater role for civil society in closing the response gap, particularly at regional and continental levels. In this respect the recommendation is that RECs and the AUC facilitate stronger engagement by civil society in early warning processes by clarifying entry points and processes.

**Evaluate provisions for CSO engagement**

The peace and security landscape is constantly evolving, with existing threats reinforcing each other and becoming more complex and new threats emerging, as seen recently in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic. This, together with the ineffectiveness of mechanisms facilitating civil society engagement with AU entities and processes, points to the need for corrective action on the part of the AU. The AU must evaluate its provisions for facilitating civil society engagement and act on the results. There is a particular need for the PSC to undertake a review jointly with CSOs and think-tanks to identify corrective actions and improve civil society access to information about the work of the PSC.
For civil society

Increase political awareness

CSOs have progressively increased their aspirations to act not merely as observers but to play a role behind the scenes and become more engaged contributors and visible implementing partners. The results they achieve do not always reflect the level of effort they invest. Nor is the contribution of civil society to AU processes and initiatives always acknowledged. In this regard, it is important for civil society to document its contribution and, where it is strategic to do so, to increase its visibility.

The level of expertise, the quality of evidence and the persistence of engagement with AU officials do not guarantee the success of advocacy efforts. What many CSOs have learnt is that in addition to being a social, cultural and economic entity, the AU is, above all, a political body in which political imperatives will often prevail. This requires CSOs to be politically savvy and develop the ability to find successful expression for their work – even when this requires it to criticise the AU. It also means CSOs must continually sharpen the acuity of their political and power analyses. Among the improvements required is the ability to ask and answer the questions:

• Who are the most influential actors who can contribute to the desired change?
• What are their interests in the situation?
• What incentives will result in them making the decisions necessary for the required change?
• What barriers stand in the way of key actors making the decisions necessary for change?
• How can these barriers be addressed?

Working with member states as champions has proved to be a winning strategy to secure political will by the AU. The case of Save the Children International demonstrates this approach in its role as the coordinator of a loose network of CSOs working to protect children affected by conflict. Save the Children nurtured a relationship with several diplomats in Addis and ultimately established the (informal) Addis chapter of The Group of Friends of Children in Armed Conflict.

With the political support of this group, Save the Children went on to launch (in partnership with PAPS) the African Platform on Children Affected by Armed Conflicts, a platform of AU ambassadors in Addis who serve as an advisory, advocacy and supportive mechanism to the AU agenda on child protection in situations of conflict. By working with member states Save the Children has successfully made its work visible to heads of state.
Improve consistency of delivery
The AU is characterised by many challenges, periodic disappointment and setbacks. Perseverance is a key determinant of success as is consistent delivery of high-level technical outputs. This implies that if civil society actors are to be relevant they must be knowledgeable and up to date in their subject matter.

Improve coordination of CSO advocacy
CSOs have shown they are able to establish and sustain coordination structured along thematic lines. They should build on this success by:

- Improving networking between apex and umbrella organisations focusing on different thematic areas/constituencies
- Improving networking between CSOs/INGOs and national level CSOs, which is critical to engaging and influencing political actors at country levels
- Harmonising CSO engagement with the AU (in Addis Ababa and other African capitals) with engagement efforts in global capitals.

CSOs can mitigate against the fact that many spaces are severely restricted by adopting a more strategic approach to using the few invitations they receive. This could possibly be achieved through planning and debriefing sessions ahead of and subsequent to such high-level events.

Increase mobilisation of citizen voices
The assumption that CSOs reflect the voices of citizens is frequently challenged, requiring them to demonstrate and reaffirm the legitimacy of their claims. Mobilisation of citizens is a critical enabler that requires facilitation by and funding support from established CSOs. In their efforts CSOs should endeavour to collaborate with the growing number of grant-making organisations such as the Open Society Foundations, which focus on fostering citizen participation.

Adopt a nuanced learning approach
While there are numerous success stories on the continent CSOs must adopt a learning approach that goes beyond identifying practices to be emulated. What is required is an approach focused on identifying and promoting conditions that might replicate successes observed elsewhere in the region. For instance, just as ECOWAS has successfully fostered a culture of prevention, human security and participation through ECOWARN, CSOs in other regions must shore up their early warning capacity. Without such actions, continued reference to the ECOWARN experience will amount to little more than a window-shopping exercise.
Devise innovative responses to evolving situations

The mechanisms developed by the AU and its RECs to prevent or respond rapidly to conflicts or other threats to security are severely challenged. The peace and security landscape evolves constantly, with existing threats reinforcing each other and becoming more complex and new threats emerging. Successful civil society entities constantly modify their processes and approaches to remain relevant in their contribution to the AU’s peace and security agenda. An example of this approach is the recently established West Africa Peace and Security Innovation Forum.

For development partners

Most civil society organisations depend entirely on donor funding, which makes them susceptible to donor agendas, a fact that is repeatedly used by member states and AU officials to call into question the authenticity of their intentions. It is important that donors recognise and are sensitive to changes in the political environment in the region. In this respect, recommended approaches for development partners include:

- Recognising and supporting the pre-eminence of African agency, for instance, by supporting African-led agenda-setting research
- Providing civil society with support for ongoing engagement and relationship building with AU entities
- Supporting the strengthening and, where relevant, the re-establishment of umbrella and apex civil society organisations with important capacity-building and coordination roles.

For ECOSOCC

ECOSOCC is a key statutory entry point for civil society, yet in the past 20 years there had been little or no evidence of any coordination between CSO engagement with the AU’s governance, peace and security architecture and that of ECOSOCC with the same architecture. The entity must evaluate its performance with a view to improving its accessibility for African citizens and the extent to which it facilitates their engagement with the AU. This includes improving ECOSOCC’s accessibility to and coordination with the activities of civil society in the governance, peace and security space.
Notes

1 “Addis-facing,” Banjul-facing and “AU-UN-EU-Beijing-facing CSOs,” refer to CSOs working primarily with and in support of the AU units based in the named capital.


18 Ibid.


21 West Africa Peace and Innovation, About Us, 2022, https://wapsi-forum.org/about/.


24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.


33 Ibid.


35 Oxfam, Putting Citizens’ Voice at the Centre.


38 Aeby, Civil Society Participation.

39 Ibid.


43 Aeby, Civil Society Participation.

44 Ibid.


51 See, eg, the ECOWAS C.

52 Institute for Security Studies, Special focus on regional economic communities.


55 Ibid.

56 Opoku, West African Conflict Early Warning and Early Response System.

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About this monograph

Civil society organisations (CSOs) play an important role in reducing the likelihood of conflict, preventing its eruption and containing outbreaks. They also help avert escalation and prevent the recurrence of conflicts. The African Union (AU) recognises the importance of incorporating them in peace processes and programmes, and has built a relationship with many CSOs in that domain. This monograph analyses the relationship between the AU and CSOs over the last two decades. It sets out lessons and prospects for improving the effectiveness of CSO’s contribution to AU efforts.

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