



The OAU/AU at 50: Democratic Governance as a Precondition for a Sustainable African Future

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Prioritise the operationalisation of the African Governance Architecture, which aims to streamline and harmonise various existing continental developmental and governance institutions, frameworks and initiatives.
- Demonstrate the necessary political will and commit to improving democratic governance, individually and collectively, through already established tools such as the APRM by assisting member states in generating funding for priorities identified in their NPOAs, thus ensuring that governance and developmental challenges are addressed appropriately.
- Renew focus on RECs as building blocks for continent-wide integration by allowing for more subsidiarity and complementarity through effective strengthening of their institutional infrastructures.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 50th anniversary of the African Union (AU), previously the Organisation for African Unity (OAU), in May 2013 provided a fitting moment for the continental body to reflect on its achievements, challenges and the way forward. When compared with the OAU, the AU has been more successful in achieving greater security on the continent, thereby allowing development to take place. However, many challenges still beset Africa and the continental institution is currently unable to present a united stance on governance challenges through the consistent application of agreed-upon continental policies on democratic governance.

Under the leadership of the Chairperson of the AU Commission (AUC), Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, who assumed office in October 2012, hopes were raised about the body becoming a more effective agent of change. However, there has not been sufficient political will at the level of the Assembly to implement governance reforms that would create the basis for sustainable continental integration.² To support the changes that are articulated in a myriad of policy documents, African leaders should commit to regional integration by ceding more sovereignty to regional and continental institutions.

INTRODUCTION

The AU's history is fairly recent. It was formed in July 2002 after the OAU, founded in 1963, was deemed to have achieved its overarching goal of decolonising the African continent. However, the AU did not start with a clean slate and had to construct a new agenda while consolidating some of the gains of its predecessor. It was founded with the intention of dealing

with continental challenges in a new manner. This included developing and building on several norms, including the sovereign equality of member states; condemnation of unconstitutional changes in government; and the AU's right to intervene in member states in grave circumstances. However, progress has been slow in some instances, notably with regard to deepening democratic governance as a precondition for sustainable economic growth and poverty alleviation.

The OAU's record in matters of peace and security proved to be dismal. At the time of the transition from the OAU to the AU in 2002, over 70% of UN peacekeeping missions were in Africa. The continent remained the subject of negative descriptions, with former British Prime Minister Tony Blair referring to Africa at a Labour Party conference in 2001 as a 'scar on the conscience of humanity'.³ Prior to that, the *Economist* magazine's front cover called Africa 'The Hopeless Continent'.⁴ This doomsday picture was a result of OAU policy failure owing to a continued adherence to strong sovereignty norms and principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states. Moreover, the OAU had neither the policy tools nor the political will to deal with the root causes of poverty on the continent, which for the most part could be blamed on conflict and unaccountable governments. As a consequence, and in the absence of state actions and the incapacity of continental institutions to provide adequate responses, violent conflict, poverty and stagnation became the greatest tragedy in Africa's post-colonial history.

This policy brief argues reservedly that since its inception, the AU, like its predecessor, has struggled to become the pivot of the developmental agenda of the African continent. However, its record in peace and security has been positive as a result of the codification of supranational norms in its Constitutive Act (2002). Therefore, in order to impact meaningfully on the developmental agenda, the AU should focus in the short to medium term on peace and security through consolidating democratic governance.

MARRYING ECONOMIC GROWTH WITH DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

The golden jubilee of the AU was celebrated on

23 May 2013 with renewed hope, under the theme of 'pan-Africanism and African Renaissance'. This event occurred at a time when momentous shifts in the African political and economic ecosystem had taken place. To validate these shifts, the world has become more forward-looking about Africa, with the continent now described as 'the new frontier' or 'Africa rising'. The World Bank advised that economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa was likely to surge above 5% in 2013–2014,⁵ well above the global average of 2.4% in 2013 and 3% in 2014, with foreign direct investment in Africa expected to reach record levels of \$54 billion by 2015.⁶ Sound fiscal management has also translated into greater investment in social sectors, as borne out by the 2013 Human Development Report, *The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World*, which noted that no African country for which data was available had a lower Human Development Index value in 2012 than in 2000.⁷

More importantly, these positive developments have not been confined to commodity-rich countries, but have been more evenly spread, with resource-poor countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya and Rwanda registering impressive levels of economic growth and human development.⁸ Improved macroeconomic management and increased political stability played their role, underpinning strong public spending, especially on infrastructure and services.

Notwithstanding this economic growth, poverty remains a key challenge with natural resource-driven growth perpetuating inequality and socio-political tensions. The policy interface and co-ordination between national governments, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and the AU remain underdeveloped and pose a challenge for continental policy co-ordination and implementation. There is also an overall incapacity to implement decisions at the national, regional and continental level. Moreover, implementation is hampered by the inability of the AU to mobilise resources from member states, with 90% of the AU's programmes and peace operations being funded by international co-operation partners.

In the early 1990s, a democratic transformative shift also occurred, with the majority of African states moving away from one-party and military regimes and launching multi-party elections and liberalisation

reforms. It has taken Africa more than two decades to put in place new regimes incorporating constitutional rule, guaranteeing political liberties, providing for regular multi-party elections, establishing the separation of powers and placing checks and balances on government.⁹ While these are not always adhered to in practice, the institutional commitment to democratic governance is an important step towards economic growth and sustainable development.

The changing international development agenda aided these democratic transitions. There was an increasing realisation that 'one-size-fits-all', externally imposed structural adjustment programmes and poverty-reduction strategy papers had failed. Thus, a new approach to drive development in Africa was needed. In addition to a flurry of Western-led initiatives, including the United Kingdom-initiated Commission on Africa, various multifaceted, home-grown initiatives started to gain traction with the establishment of the AU. Initiatives such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) were based on the premise of 'African solutions to African problems' and have infused the AU and its member states with a sense of ownership and urgency in dealing with continental challenges, while grounding democratic norms in governance. Moreover, the continental body also created linkages with RECs as important building blocks in promoting an ambitious regional integration and security agenda, and deepened co-operation with the UN Security Council. These governance programmes and institutions within what is now termed the 'African Governance architecture' have been underpinned since 2002 by innovative security instruments and policies within the African Peace and Security Architecture, including the Peace and Security Council of 2004, the Continental Early Warning System and the Panel of the Wise. Through the Constitutive Act of 2002,¹⁰ the AU has also developed and built on several norms as safeguards in the promotion of a culture of peace and security. These include the sovereign equality of member states; condemnation of unconstitutional changes in government; and the AU's right to intervene in member states in grave circumstances.

Can Africa's current economic growth trajectory be sustained? The continent cannot truly prosper in the face of critical shortages in hard infrastructure.

Undoubtedly, the ambitious Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa is a step in the right direction. Crucially, it is driven by the African Development Bank, but under the leadership of the AUC and NEPAD. The programme has lofty objectives, including mobilising resources for continent-wide infrastructure investments in energy, trans-boundary water resources, transport, and information and communication technology. In her July 2012 acceptance speech, Dr Dlamini-Zuma highlighted infrastructure, peace and security, agriculture and youth unemployment as the anchor themes for her tenure as AUC Chair.¹¹ However, the AU is an overarching continental institution with multifaceted policy ambitions and institutions, covering a broad range of domains such as peace and security; trade and industry; infrastructure and energy; social affairs; rural economy and agriculture; human resources, science and technology; and economic affairs. While all of these are crucial to Africa's development, the AUC is chronically understaffed, with fewer than 1 000 active employees to support the work of 10 commissioners, including the chairperson and deputy chairperson. Moreover, the AU's supranationalism is not sufficiently strengthened for the body to play an effective role in shaping domestic priority-setting in member states, notably in trade and industry, agriculture and other 'soft' areas that are critical to national development. In light of its scarce resources, the AUC should deepen its expertise in those areas where it has been more effective and credible since its inception, namely the promotion of peace and security through a normative policy framework and entrepreneurship that deepens governance.

This is particularly crucial because governance initiatives have not achieved their full potential. After ten years of existence, the APRM boasts 33 member states, 17 of which have completed their first reviews. Significant challenges remain. The process, billed as an instrument to improve the lives of African citizens, remains largely unknown outside of government offices and selected civil society organisations (CSOs). While peer review reports have been comprehensive and frank for the most part, the follow-up has been virtually non-existent in most member states. Countries have thus identified governance challenges and gaps, as well

as committed to resolving them through a National Programme of Action (NPoA). But because in most countries the APRM has failed to carve out a space for itself among a myriad of other development and governance initiatives, the NPoAs are not being implemented. Moreover, democracy is not developing strong roots, with leaders amending constitutions in order to remain in power beyond constitutional limits. The corrosive effects of such practices on the AU's democratic agenda of the past decade could become more visible in years to come.

To build a stronger continental institution for the next 50 years the AU will have to develop better policy oversight and consistency at the political level, while embracing an ambitious bureaucratic reform agenda under Dr Dlamini-Zuma's leadership. More importantly, the neglect of certain RECs as building blocks for continent-wide integration should be addressed as a matter of urgency. The vision for the next half-century is a work in progress, likely to be undergirded by the AU's 50-year strategy dubbed 'Agenda 2063', which aims at an 'integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the global arena'.¹² However, without concrete commitments toward deepening democracy, this vision will not materialise.

The AU has developed commendable frameworks and plans. These need to be transformed from theory into practice, with emphasis on effective implementation. Initiatives such as the APRM, already in existence for a decade, need to start demonstrating visible impact to remain relevant.

ENDNOTES

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- 2 The Assembly is the highest political decision-making body of the AU, and is composed of heads of state and government. The Commission is an administrative body that implements Assembly decisions.
- 3 Speech delivered by Tony Blair, Annual Labour Party Conference, 2 October 2001, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/oct/02/labourconference.labour6>, accessed 17 October 2013.
- 4 See *The Economist*, 13 May 2000, <http://www.economist.com/printedition/2000-05-13>.
- 5 Deloitte, 'Deloitte East Africa Presents their 2013 Economic Outlook', <http://deloitteblog.co.za/2013/08/26/deloitte-east-africa-presents-their-2013-economic-outlook/>, accessed 1 November 2013.
- 6 World Bank, *Africa's Pulse 7*, April 2013, http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/Africa/Report/Africas-Pulse-brochure_Vol7.pdf, accessed 1 November 2012.
- 7 UNDP (UN Development Programme), *Human Development Report 2013, The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World*, http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2013_EN_complete.pdf, accessed 1 November 2013.
- 8 For more information, see Schafschmitt-Chaterjee C, *Sub-Saharan Africa: A Bright Spot in Spite of Key Challenges*. Deutsche Bank Research, 15 July 2013.
- 9 Bratton, M & N van de Walle, *Democracy Experiments in Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 3–8.
- 10 AU (African Union), Constitutive Act of the African Union (2002), Article 4.
- 11 For more information, see Africa: Acceptance Speech of Newly Elected African Union Commission Chairpersonship by South African Home Affairs Minister Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, *allAfrica*, 16 July 2012, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201207180980.html>, accessed 25 October 2013.
- 12 AU, *Agenda 2063 Vision and Priorities*, <http://agenda2063.au.int/en/vision>, accessed 4 December 2013.

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