

# Conference on Democracy, Civil Society and Governance in Africa

**Opening Statement by Mr. K. Y. Amoako**  
**UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of ECA**

**Addis Ababa**  
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Your Excellency, Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim,  
Secretary-General of the OAU,  
Your Excellency, Mr. Petros Olango, Deputy Speaker of  
the Ethiopian House of Representatives,  
Distinguished Colleagues,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with open arms that I welcome you to Addis Ababa and to our very own United Nations Conference Centre, for this most timely Conference on Democracy, Civil Society and Governance in Africa. It is very gratifying to see that so soon after the First Annual African Forum on Governance which ECA and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) staged here in July this year, our finest academics, civil society group, and senior civil servants are gathering once again to take up the governance challenge that Africa faces.

There is no question that the world has a right to pass judgement on the generally poor state of Africa's governance. But it is us Africans alone who bear the primary responsibility for improving the situation, with solutions tailored to our peculiar national contexts, faced with the ultimate challenge of eradicating poverty and advancing the socio-economic well-being of the continent's peoples.

The role of civil society in bringing about good governance is an important, not to say critical, dimension to the ongoing debate. We at ECA have recognized that - warts and all - civil society is an actor without whose participation good governance cannot be achieved. This is why in May this year we convened a regional consultative conference of African NGOs and civil society organizations to lay the foundation for the Governance forum. Subsequently, at United Nations headquarters the same month, I participated in the International Conference on Governance and Sustainable Growth and Equity.

As I articulated at the New York Governance Conference, I see six fundamental challenges facing us as we begin to forge a path for Africa in the area of governance and popular participation of civil society.

The FIRST challenge is peacebuilding. Three decades of conflict -- latterly mainly internal in character but also at a certain point inter-state -- have devastated a number of African countries, leaving governments, civil society as well as institutions in ruin. We live today with the effects of these conflicts, among them severely damaged infrastructure, weak governmental structures, ethnic tension, landmines, and the proliferation of small arms. All these factors mitigate against lasting peace and stability.

If we accept poverty as the root cause of the social and political chaos we are witnessing in Africa, then we necessarily accept also that peace is a necessary condition for development.

The SECOND challenge is nurturing democracy. The consensus we reached at the governance forum in Addis Ababa was that although democracy is a difficult process requiring vigilance and reinforcement, it is absolutely essential to good governance. The good news is that a number of African leaders have in recent years recognised the importance of non-authoritarian, participatory democratic structures.

The issue now in Africa is not whether to democratise, but how, how soon, and in what form. An agenda to bolster democracy was developed in the First Annual African Governance Forum. It includes suggestions for African states to:

Meld successful traditional systems and mechanisms of citizen participation with modern ways

Strengthen the institutions of democracy  
Enhance public education on democracy; and

Establish indicators of progress toward improving the building blocks of democracy: for example, political liberalisation, transparent systems, the rule of law and human rights, and improved democratic structures.

The task remains for countries in Africa to further advance their agendas. For many countries, narrow political considerations, personalised power and corruption have undermined the process of democracy and responsive governance. But although I understand that achieving outstanding democracies will be a long-term proposition in some countries, my own view is that the movement should not take forever.

I believe that Africa's civil society should establish an expectation that democracy be universal in Africa. Aside from extreme situations such as the need for emergency action to counter threats to the survival of a state as such, should this goal take more than a decade? I think not.

The THIRD challenge, and something I mentioned at the beginning of my statement, involves the role of civil society. Arguably one of the most crucial issues we face is the question of whether civil society in Africa is equipped to play the key role in bringing about good governance that is expected.

How strong is civil society? Does the concept come out of the West, or does it have a uniquely African character? Can NGOs, run as they almost invariably are by middle-class elites, truly claim to represent the broad mass of people at various levels of society? Do NGOs represent civil society as a whole, including the marginalised social movements?

Clearly these are loaded questions, and I am sure you will find some of the answers during this conference. What is clear, however, is that civil society is booming in Africa, and is already having an impact on democracy and governance. This positive role needs to be strengthened. We at ECA believe we have a strategic role to play, which is why in July we opened a Resource Centre for Civil Society.

The Centre will strengthen the capacities of African civil society organisations, promote dialogue between them and governments, and facilitate the involvement of civil society organisations in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and democratisation.

Helping civil society contribute to the maturation of Africa's polity and economy is the continuing aim of the African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation. The Charter was sponsored by ECA in 1990 and adopted by people's organisations and international agencies as well as by Africa's Heads of State. It views popular participation as both a means and an end, "a fundamental right of the people to fully and effectively participate in the determination of the decisions which affect their lives at all levels and at all times."

In much of Africa, however, a fundamental transformation of the relationship between the state and civil society is needed if democracies are to endure and if good governance is to prevail.

Unfortunately, some leaders see civil society organisations as political competitors that need to be controlled rather than fostered. What civil organisations want, however, is legitimisation, recognition, policy dialogues, collaboration in implementing development in appropriate sectors, and political room in which to develop.

The FOURTH challenge is to mainstream women in politics and public administration. In almost all of our countries, the near-exclusion of women from centres of power, whether at the national, community or household level, has entrenched the wide disparities between men and women in economic, social, and political spheres. Currently women make up less than 10% of our parliamentarians, and hold an even smaller share of top appointments.

As we come to understand the links between responsive and effective governance and development more fully, we learn that governance that does not represent both sexes is neither participatory nor inclusive and thus cannot move a society forward. At the First African Forum on Governance, participants agreed that the absence of women's voices and perspectives has contributed to an impoverished debate, and, often, distorted policies.

The FIFTH challenge is to improve the capacity of Africa's institutions and people for better governance and participation. The many country reports presented at the First African Governance Forum indicate that to sustain good governance, the whole gamut of institutions of governance must be improved, including the legislature, the judiciary, the political parties, and the human rights commissions and other monitoring organs within civil society.

But I believe we must also strengthen the capacities of people. As the state of Kerala, India, has shown us, strong social services and fully functioning democracy can go hand in hand even among the impoverished. Universal education must prepare people to be voters, to participate in public discussions, and to work together across traditional boundaries.

The importance of affordable, effective, and sustainable education and training services, is something that cannot be understated. I also think of education at another level: education for leadership. We must help develop and sharpen technical skills. But we must also foster the political skills to operate with a wider vision. The politically skilled see people not as threats but as assets; strive not to divide but to incorporate; and seek not division but solidarity.

The SIXTH and final challenge involves the ownership of governance reforms. Basic norms of good governance apply universally, but as I said earlier, specific institutions and systems cannot be imported wholesale. They must be home grown. To be effective, they must become a "lived" experience rather than a "received" experience. Only in this way will the reform process earn sustained commitment and effective political leadership. Moreover, key actors in society have to embrace the reforms, buy into them.

At the First Annual Governance Forum, more than a dozen African countries reported on the various ways they are designing, implementing, and monitoring governance reforms. For example, the Government of Ethiopia has established a task force on good governance. Ghana recently organised a National Workshop on Governance drawing over 200 leaders from all major sectors. And Uganda has a very active media and civil society group that monitors and reports on good governance initiatives.

Leaders in a number of other countries are less sure of how much the public should take part in their governance reforms. Again, the questions are less technical and more about the political art of bringing about, with tolerable risks, systems that encourage new partnerships. A useful approach to such issues is the kind of peer-learning among top political leaders utilised by the Global Coalition for Africa, which is tackling issues like corruption in politically practical ways.

We at ECA are encouraged by the experience of the First Governance Forum. It is anticipated that before each forum, African NGOs will meet to articulate and input their concerns into the main event, in which they will also actively participate. It has been agreed that the event will take place on an annual basis. We hope to see some of you at the second annual African Governance Forum next year in Accra, Ghana.

Thank you for your kind attention and I wish you every success in your deliberations.

Thank you.