

Challenges to Governance and Participatory Development in Africa

Address to the International Conference on Governance for Sustainable Growth and Equity

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Mr. Chairman,

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished Colleagues and

Friends,

I am very pleased to be with you today to speak on the challenges to governance and participatory development in Africa. It is a good time to be here. With civil society going to scale in Africa, the Cold War behind us, and the example of the velvet revolutions in Eastern Europe before us, the demand for better governance and democracy has grown tremendously among my people.

Now, our development partners are adding to this demand, as is evident in recent OECD Development Assistance Committee reports on governance and participatory development, the World Bank's latest World Development Report, and the actions of UNDP. So it is an especially good time to be here.

In discussing with you the latest thinking about governance among Africans today, I have the benefit of drawing upon two recent meetings held in Addis Ababa. In May, we convened a regional consultative conference of African nongovernmental and civil society organizations to lay the base for the First Annual Africa Governance Forum. This forum, convened just a few weeks ago, was attended by leaders from a wide range of sectors.

I will also be referring to other regional and international efforts to help Africa achieve popular participation in both governance and development. They include the United Nations System-wide Special Initiative on Africa, a decade long programme launched in 1996 to mobilize the concerted support of all UN agencies on behalf of African development. ECA and UNDP co-chair this initiative and, indeed, as part of our shared assignments, we co-sponsored both of the very productive meetings I just referred to.

Mr. Chairman,

There is no question that the world has a right to pass judgment on the state

of Africa's governance. But it is Africans ourselves who bear the responsibility for action, including the tailoring of our own approaches to our problems. For example, some experts on these matters suggest we adopt the discipline and firm stance of certain countries in East Asia. Some advise us to emulate the openness and liberalness of the Western democracies. Some, as we are hearing this morning, cite valuable examples from Latin America. Indeed, because in certain respects we are last in the line of development, we can gain a lot from experiences elsewhere.

All of these suggestions are helpful. But we also want the world to understand that Africa has its own experience, its own best cases, and its own storehouse of culture and governance to draw on. In addition, we face unique country-by-country challenges, each reflecting a history of complex intercultural relationships.

Thus, in seeking answers to problems in African governance today, there are no cookie-cutter solutions. And because political science is not really a "science" but an "art," technical solutions--no matter how cutting-edge they are--will fail if unaccompanied by a new and higher practice of the art of politics.

I see six fundamental challenges facing us as Africa proceeds to address problems of governance and citizen participation in development.

The FIRST challenge is peacebuilding. Three decades of conflict have left a number of African countries with governments, civil societies, and institutions in ruin. Thus, although poverty may well be the root cause of the social and political chaos we are witnessing in Africa, peace is the sine qua non for development.

Strife is now recognized by most African leaders as being intolerable, a subject of regional concern, and often a matter for regional attempts at conciliation and peacekeeping. The international community cannot come through the Somalia, Rwanda, and Liberia ordeals without acknowledging the wisdom of paying far more serious attention to preventing future crises.

In setting out its ten-year agenda, the Special Initiative addresses peace first. Furthermore, it does so in a way totally consistent with Africa and donor views. The initiative calls for the creation of a trust fund to assure finance for peacebuilding actions by the Organization of African Unity. This approach is endorsed in the DAC's recent Guidelines on Conflict, Peace and Development Cooperation that urges donors to:

- encourage regional organizations to develop comprehensive frameworks for the promotion of conflict prevention and peacebuilding and orient their support for capacity-building to help regional organizations act as a bridge between the international community and the states of the region.

I am pleased to report that, in a splendid act of leadership, the UNDP has committed \$3 million to jump-start the Trust Fund. Looking ahead, I want to say how grand it would be if, by the time of Africa's second annual meeting

on governance, the trust fund is firmly established.

The SECOND challenge to Africa's well-being is nurturing democracy. The consensus 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. Recognizing that non-participatory systems of governance are no longer viable, Africa's heads of state have made democracy a key part of their collective agendas over the past seven years.

Already, the great majority of Africans are voting for their representatives. They vote enthusiastically and at participation rates that a number of developed countries can only envy.

The issue now in Africa is not whether to democratize, but how and how soon.

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 liberalization, transparent systems, the rule of law and human rights, and improved democratic structures.

The task now is for countries in Africa to move forward from where they are. For many countries, narrow political considerations, personalized 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 and its international friends should establish an expectation that democracy be universal in Africa. Absent any gross threats to the survival of a state as such, should this goal take more than a decade? I think not.

The THIRD challenge involves the role of civil society. 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 good governance prevail.

Fortunately, as I mentioned before, civil society is booming in Africa. Unfortunately, some leaders see civil society organizations as political competitors that need to be controlled rather than fostered. What civil organizations want, however, is legitimization, recognition, policy dialogues, collaboration in implementing development in appropriate sectors, and political room in which to develop.

The African civil society agenda is far reaching. The call is for:

Helping policy makers see the merit of a flourishing civil society and promoting best practices on the enabling environment for civil society; and

Expanding the ability of civil organizations to be constructive participants in policy formation and implementation.

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 organizations 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."

The UN's Special Initiative also contains two pertinent civil-society components: strengthening subregional civil society organizations that foster peace in Africa and strengthening civil society organizations working on development.

To further these aims, in September of this year, ECA will establish, in cooperation with leading African civil society organizations, the African Civil Society Resource Centre. The centre will strengthen the capacities of African civil society organizations, promote dialogue between them and governments, and facilitate the involvement of civil society organizations in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and democratization.

Helping civil society flower in Africa is a major way to promote the agenda of today's meeting.

The FOURTH challenge is to mainstream women in politics and public administration. In almost all African countries, the near-exclusion of women from centres of power, whether at the national, community or household level, has ensured 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.

If women are mainstreamed there will be real gender partnerships. Mainstreaming can come about only when the unempowered become empowered, for empowerment releases incalculable human resources for development and good governance. Empowerment will enable women to be major and perhaps uniquely effective actors for peacemaking and peacebuilding in Africa.

At ECA, the promotion of gender equality is a full cross-cutting programme. We also want to use the celebration of our 40th anniversary in April 1998 as a time to reflect on the enormous contributions of African women to the development of their countries. We will focus on the ways in which women and men, and individual governments and the UN, can accelerate the

advancement of women toward gender equality in the 21st century.

Now is the time to get the politics right for advancing women in Africa. Bluntly, men in leadership must join empowered women to speak out for genuine gender partnerships. Nothing will be a more powerful hallmark of the transformation of our continent than enduring gender partnerships achieved across African society.

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.

I agree with the DAC working group's recent statement on "Participatory Development and Good Governance" that emphasizes the importance of affordable, effective, and sustainable education and training services, particularly for women.

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.

How to go about developing such political skills is less clear than the need for them. I hope this meeting will help develop approaches to this important human-capacity challenge.

The SIXTH challenge involves the ownership of governance reforms. Basic norms of good governance apply universally, but 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, it must also be embraced by the key actors in society.

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 organized 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 utilized by the Global Coalition for Africa, which is tackling issues like corruption in politically practical ways.

To summarize, I believe we in Africa face six major challenges as we proceed with improving governance and participation for development on our continent. They are:

1. Institutionalizing mechanisms for conflict prevention and peacebuilding, particularly by establishing a trust fund for OAU;
2. Promoting well-functioning democracies characterized by full citizen participation in government, fair ground rules for competition, and the establishment of the rule of law within the next decade;
3. Fostering complementary relationships between the state and civil society in Africa, including the proposals of the Special Initiative to bolster civil society;
4. Enabling enduring gender partnership in Africa, in part by encouraging men in leadership positions to be real allies in the empowerment of women;
5. Enhancing institutional and personal capacities through expanded education that includes teaching political skills on how to shape and enable partnerships across ethnic groups, sectors, and genders; and
6. Engaging in a continuous dialogue with African leaders on the political rationale for wider civil participation in governance.

Mr. Chairman,

In an earlier era in the West, Hobbs, Montesquieu, Rousseau and Locke provided an intellectual base for establishing what are still considered enlightened guidelines for progress and the legitimized state. We, in Africa, are now grappling with similar issues. We need states validated by their good service to citizens, their inclusiveness of all peoples, and their professional capacities to meet today's needs while preparing for tomorrow.

In Africa, we are more clear than ever about the challenges to sound governance that we face. With the help of meetings such as the one we are attending today, and with the bold mobilization of internal human resources augmented by international cooperation, Africa shall meet those challenges.

Thank you.

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