

OAU-Civil Society Conference

Opening Statement

by **K. Y. Amoako,**
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His Excellency, Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim, Secretary-General of the OAU,
H.E. Ato Dawit Yohannes, Speaker of the House of Representatives of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia,
Honourable Ministers,
Distinguished members of African and international civil society,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the United Nations Conference Centre in Addis Ababa. I am delighted to have been asked to address you on the occasion of this first formal consultation to set up a structured framework for co-operation between the OAU and African civil society. This meeting is the result of a collaborative effort between the OAU, the United Nations Development Programme, the Economic Commission for Africa, and the Inter Africa Group. Let me salute the leadership of Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim and all those involved in making this meeting a reality.

In my remarks today, I would like to share some lessons we have learned from working with civil society in Africa over a long period of time, and I would like to pose some challenges that I hope will stimulate your discussion over the next few days.

But before I briefly recap our antecedents on these issues, let me pay special tribute to Dr. Adebayo Adedeji, a great son of Africa whose vision and leadership during his time at the helm of ECA was instrumental in the early recognition of the role of civil society in development. We are honoured and delighted that Dr. Adedeji will be with us later today, and look forward to his insightful perspectives.

ECA's work with African civil society in the 1980s, so ably spearheaded by Adebayo Adedeji, led to our holding a conference in Arusha that resulted in the African Charter for Popular Participation. This charter was picked up by the OAU, was endorsed by our heads of state and was further endorsed by the UN General Assembly. So what we do here this week is both stimulated by and sheltered by official endorsements which reach back over a decade. Since promulgating the Charter, we have held national consultations with civil society in nearly 20 countries, and we have held sub-regional and regional consultations, working with such organizations as the African Forum for Voluntary Organizations, the Africa Leadership Forum and the Inter Africa Group. We established an African Centre for Civil Society at ECA in 1998. The Centre's role is to strengthen civil society organizations (CSOs), to promote their linkages with governments, and to continue to promote their access to and engagement in major development policy forums. The Centre has helped organize today's meeting. ECA has also published and disseminated research studies, technical manuals, newsletters and other publications on the role of CSOs in development and governance.

Given this experience, what have we learned?

First, we have learned that in regional settings, the participation of civil society is positive as well as additive. ECA's own forums, such as the African Development Forum, prove the point. The latest African Development Forum, held here last December, was structured so that civil society could dialogue directly with heads of state and senior African policymakers, as well as with our development partners, the academic and research community, and the private sector. All of us at ADF 2000 came away with new insights, particularly from the young civil society leaders who played such an active role. So the regional process of sharing perspectives and practices, challenging viewpoints and building consensus across sectors has proven very useful and must grow.

Second, at the national level the experience of CSOs is mixed – ranging from full partnership to situations where

the very legitimacy of civil society is called into question. In my view, the most fundamental of all lessons of working on CSO-governmental relationships is that those countries where CSOs are most accepted are the countries making the most progress. Pluralistic systems foster competition among ideas. And if there is one single observation you can make about CSOs, it is that they have plenty of ideas. The force of all these ideas is a commitment to make things work better, and that is valuable. That is why countries with productive partnerships with their CSOs do better.

The third lesson involves sharing responsibility for development with CSOs. In the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s and in the 1980s through the mid-1990s when Africa was in the throes of structural adjustment and consequent retrenchment of development, CSOs and international NGOs filled in critical gaps. In some provinces, local governors made it clear that until government could get back on its feet, CSOs would have to provide core services. That division of labour still exists, sometimes explicitly and formally, but more often informally. The lesson here is that CSOs are a vital part of our economic progress in terms of service delivery.

Fourth, CSOs are a vital part of assuring that democracy in Africa truly becomes deep rooted. Democracy is not just a matter of voting. It is a matter of open debate on policies, vigilance on actions, public accountability, widespread human rights and insistence on the rule of law. Achieving these attributes of democracy almost always requires a lot of internal and external pressure, and it is in this context that civil society is particularly needed now. As we say in one of our proverbs, "if you refuse to be made straight when you are green, you will not be made straight when you are dry". The real lesson is that assuring that democracy works is a never-ending task. Civil society must always be the guardian of democracy.

Fifth, whether you look at economic progress, social progress or progress in building peace, you have to observe that the CSO sector has integrated women of all ages into the process of nation building better than any other segment of society. Above and beyond being integrated, women have made outstanding contributions across the board. The CSO sector gives us a glimpse of what gender partnerships can look like. As such, we have a glimpse of what our future can become.

Sixth, communication and knowledge sharing is essential for a vibrant civil society. Good information technology systems and a strong participatory media enable CSOs to share experiences, to harmonize positions, to leverage systems and to advocate for policy change, up to and including the global system. For example, no continent has a greater interest in land mine clearance than Africa. The global consensus on the need to ban landmines and to de-mine those areas endangering human life came in a few short years. The consensus and actions came about not just from civil society, but from Internet-connected civil society. Our stake in democracy, good governance and peace in part depends upon widespread access to information and communications technologies, and to national, regional and global electronic and media networks.

There are many more lessons on civil society. Indeed ECA has published a small literature of such lessons. But to me these are the main ones.

Along with the lessons I have just outlined comes recognition of some serious questions and challenges that lie ahead for Africa's civil society. For our own civil society sector to move ahead, we must face four fundamental challenges.

The first challenge is that the very legitimacy of CSO organizations and councils is not uniformly accepted in countries around this continent. Many governments can and do prevent CSOs from being legally recognized. They set up high, non-refundable fees for registration and very lengthy registration processes; they question the very notion of sharing information on core government processes like budgets, expenditures and performance; and they question the validity of core functions like lobbying, and publishing alternative viewpoints. All this makes for adversarial, rather than complementary, relationships. Addressing the tensions between CSOs and governments requires sustained interaction through national consultations, open dialogue, and a long-term process of confidence building. But none of the good things for government and civil society can occur unless the process of legitimacy forges ahead. We must work together to make it a norm across the continent that states legitimize civil society organizations.

The second challenge looks at the flip-side of the coin, the legitimacy of CSOs themselves. Performance, accountability and independence are three important pillars of legitimacy. This being the case, we need to take a long hard look at whether, by and large, CSOs in Africa maintain high standards of performance and accountability. Recent studies show that CSOs and grassroots organizations do not always perform as effectively as has been assumed in terms of poverty reach, cost-effectiveness, sustainability, popular participation, flexibility and

innovation. If we look at the issue of funding, we find the reality to be that, in particular, NGOs in Africa are almost entirely dependent on international donor support. This is dangerous, because in an environment of diminishing aid, dependence on donor funding is anything but sustainable. This dependence can also undermine the independence of thought and action of CSOs, who are therefore susceptible to being driven by donor agendas. There is also the phenomenon of northern NGO partners imposing perspectives on their Southern partners, which also militates against independence. So this second challenge I throw out to all of you here is for self-regulatory mechanisms to benchmark and improve performance, strengthen accountability, and diversify funding as a means of securing independence and ensuring sustainability.

Linked to the above is the third challenge, for CSOs to build their capacity. In a wonderfully diverse and pluralistic world, too many of our CSOs face the same problems as too many of our governments: their human capacity is often thin on the ground, their positions need to be more thoughtful, they need stronger and more representative structures, they need more frequent turnover in their leadership, their management information systems require major work, and their ability to deliver programs is too often way short of what they promise to do. These problems are why we set up the African Centre for Civil Society. In a sense, this challenge is also a challenge of legitimacy. Governments can be excused if they have less time to spend on CSOs that do not perform well. Unfortunately, it is easy to generalize, so the good CSOs can find themselves tarnished by the work of poorly performing CSOs. So, it is in all our interests to build civil society organizations' capacity.

Finally, the fourth challenge is one facing us all: HIV/AIDS. Everything good thing we want to see happen in our countries is not going to happen unless HIV/AIDS is beaten. None of us can forecast whether or when a feasible and effective vaccine will be developed. Until that time, all of us need to pull together. As Dr. Salim has said already, CSOs have unique abilities to offer care, to teach prevention, and to reach well beyond government services. At our ADF 2000 we said that unless we banded together to fight and defeat HIV/AIDS, our future would be eternally blighted. This is a challenge for all of us, not least for African civil society.

These challenges have a number of major implications for the critically important work of OAU -- both the work it is doing under its current mandate and the work it must now do to create an African Union.

In its current mandate, the roles of CSOs are already clearly spelled out. The OAU has worked with civil society actors, including very effective women-led CSOs, in some its most successful peace building operations. This forum is a chance to explore further opportunities for multi-track diplomacy in which civil society has a prominent role.

In its vital work to promote governance and democracy, the OAU and CSOs have common cause. The OAU is vital to seeing that there is understanding and fostering of a much-enhanced relationship between civil society and the state. Confident relationships between the state and CSOs are a prerequisite to a stable and flourishing democracy and to countries that produce solid development. We all need to model pluralistic relationships, and I welcome this meeting as a means for the OAU to cement its own acceptance of and collaboration with CSOs.

Now the OAU Secretariat has the huge responsibility of transforming itself into the Commission that will bring about and manage the African Union. If this new concept is to be well built, understood and supported across Africa, it will need all the ideas and the creative tension of working with CSOs.

My colleagues and I at ECA are pleased by the initiative of this meeting. We hope to work with all of you to make this meeting and its follow up a major success. Our work on establishing norms for good governance, including the roles of civil society in countries and of monitoring good governance, will support you. Our civil society centre will support you. And our direct collaboration with our brothers and sisters in OAU will add support.

Indeed, we are always happy to work with our neighbouring regional institution, for as they say in the home country of my Brother Salim Ahmed Salim, "in this world, all things are two and two".

Thank you and I wish you a productive conference.
