



The African Union's ECOSOCC: an overview

Francis Ikome

Dr Francis Ikome directs the IGD's Multilateral Analysis programme.

CIVIL SOCIETY in Africa has always occupied an ambiguous and contested place on the continent's integration agenda. Although African leaders, in both the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and its successor, the African Union (AU), repeatedly acknowledged the importance of African civil society, it was only from the 1990s onwards that the OAU began to effectively involve civil society in its activities. These initiatives were deepened and strengthened during the organisation's transformation to the AU – moving away from ad-hoc and instrumental modes of engagement to institutionalised participation.

In this regard, the Constitutive Act of the AU was shaped in a manner that emphasises the need to build partnerships among African governments and all segments of civil society. Indeed, the transformation of the OAU to the AU created a more conducive environment for more robust engagement with non-state actors in the activities and processes of the emergent pan-African organisation. The broader mandate assigned to the AU, which moves away from the narrow focus on political issues to embrace broader socio-economic and cultural challenges, provides more opportunities for engagement with civil society. In principle, civil society should serve as a strategic partner for the effective implementation of the AU's mandate, vision, and mission, particularly with regard to establishing 'a peaceful, integrated and prosperous Africa, driven by its people and that would be a dynamic force in the global community' (AU 2004c). The ultimate goal is the establishment of an African community predicated on popular participation and partnership with all segments of civil society, in order to strengthen solidarity and cohesion among African peoples – a union of African people, and not just a union of governments.

The establishment of the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) was in application of the prescriptions of the Constitutive Act and a translation into action of the union's vision of establishing a people-centred and people-oriented organisation. Indeed, its establishment represents a giant step forward in the involvement of civil society in the body politic of the pan-African organisation, and a move towards a participatory approach in the continent's integration and development strides.

This brief examines the objectives, mandate and institutional challenges of ECOSOCC. It begins with a brief background to its establishment and proceeds to locate it within the overall architecture of the AU. This is followed by an examination of its objectives and its potential for adding value to the AU, and a brief overview of its composition, as well as its institutional development, with a focus on the ongoing transition from an interim structure to a permanent one. It also explains the boundaries between ECOSOCC and other avenues of civil-society engagement with the AU, particularly the Citizens and Diaspora Directorate (CIDO) in the Chairperson's Office at the commission. It concludes with an examination of some of the challenges facing ECOSOCC.

Global Insight aims to provide members of the policy community with concise but trenchant analyses of topical issues. Comments and suggestions are invited.

Precursors to the establishment of ECOSOCC

The establishment of ECOSOCC is a culmination of efforts to involve civil society actively in the work of both the OAU and its successor, the AU, particularly with regard to the integration of the continent. The precursors to the ECOSOCC statutes included a number of declarations, charters and treaties under the auspices of both the OAU and the AU. The most prominent of these instruments include: the 'Declaration on the political and socio-economic situation in Africa and the fundamental changes taking place in the world' (OAU Assembly, 1990); the African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation (OAU Assembly, Arusha, 1991); the Abuja Treaty establishing the African Economic Community (AEC) (1991); the Conference on Security, Stability, Development and Co-operation in Africa (CSSDCA), whose operational principles were contained in the Kampala Document on the CSSDCA (1991); the 'Solemn declaration on the CSSDCA' adopted by the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government in 2000; and the establishment of a CSSDCA unit within the OAU Secretariat to provide, among other functions, the interface between civil society organisations (CSOs) and the OAU.

Although efforts to evolve structured engagement between the OAU and civil society¹ were constant and varied, they gathered momentum only in the context of the transformation of the OAU to the AU. Concrete action was in the form of a number of OAU/AU civil-society conferences in June 2001 and June 2002, culminating in the establishment of the AU-civil society working group (AUCSPWG) in 2002, with a mandate to develop accreditation criteria for CSOs, a code of conduct for CSOs, and modalities for the operationalisation of ECOSOCC. The AUCSPWG developed the ECOSOCC statutes that were later adopted by the AU assembly, setting in motion processes for the effective operationalisation of the interim ECOSOCC.

The place of ECOSOCC in the AU architecture

ECOSOCC is a statutory organ of the AU established under articles 5(1)(i) and 22 of the Constitutive Act, composed of various social and professional groups of member states of the union, and social and professional groups representing the African diaspora. It is an advisory organ that is intended as the major, yet not exclusive, institutional framework for civil-society participation in AU processes, with the ultimate goal of contributing to the development and integration of

the continent. It is designed as a continental mechanism for an effective interface between African governments and their peoples. ECOSOCC is endowed with statutes that define its objectives, functions, composition, membership and institutional structures. Furthermore, it is embedded in the vision and mission of the union.

ECOSOCC, as an institution and a process, is structured and influenced by key actors, stakeholders and constituencies. The major direct actors are the elected CSO representatives who make up the ECOSOCC General Assembly. Its constituencies are the CSOs that elect the representatives and give them the mandate to sit in the ECOSOCC assembly. In this regard, it is important to note that membership of the ECOSOCC General Assembly lies with CSOs, and not with individuals. Individuals are only representatives of elected CSOs. The stakeholders in the ECOSOCC process are: the African people; the AU Commission, including in its role as secretariat of ECOSOCC; the policy and executive organs of the AU; regional economic communities (RECs), the building blocks of African integration; member states; and development partners.

Composition

With regard to its composition, the groups that constitute ECOSOCC include, but are not limited to, the following: (a) social groups such as those representing the interests of women, children, the youth, the elderly, and people with disability and special needs; (b) professional groups such as associations of artists, engineers, health practitioners, social scientists, academia, business organisations, national chambers of commerce, workers, employers, industry, and agriculture, as well as other private-sector interest groups; (c) non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), and voluntary organisations; (d) cultural organisations; and (e) social and professional groups in the African diaspora.

ECOSOCC and CIDO: interface and boundaries

ECOSOCC's interface and place in the overall AU architecture is closely linked to the issue of boundaries between ECOSOCC and other formal and informal channels of engagement of the AU with non-state actors, particularly CIDO.

In this regard, it is important to note that CIDO is a department of the AU Commission, designed to mainstream

The African Union's ECOSOCC

civil-society activities and inputs in its work. The commission, just like ECOSOCC, is an organ of the AU, with a core mandate to facilitate implementation of the union's decisions. It is both the secretariat of the union and its executive instrument. CIDO is its sectoral arm charged with the implementation of directives relating to partnership with African citizens in general, including African civil society and the African diaspora. This includes follow-up on the support and advice offered by ECOSOCC itself, to ensure that they are effectively taken into account in the spirit of partnership with civil society, and in line with the prescriptions of the Constitutive Act (Adisa 2007: 5–7).

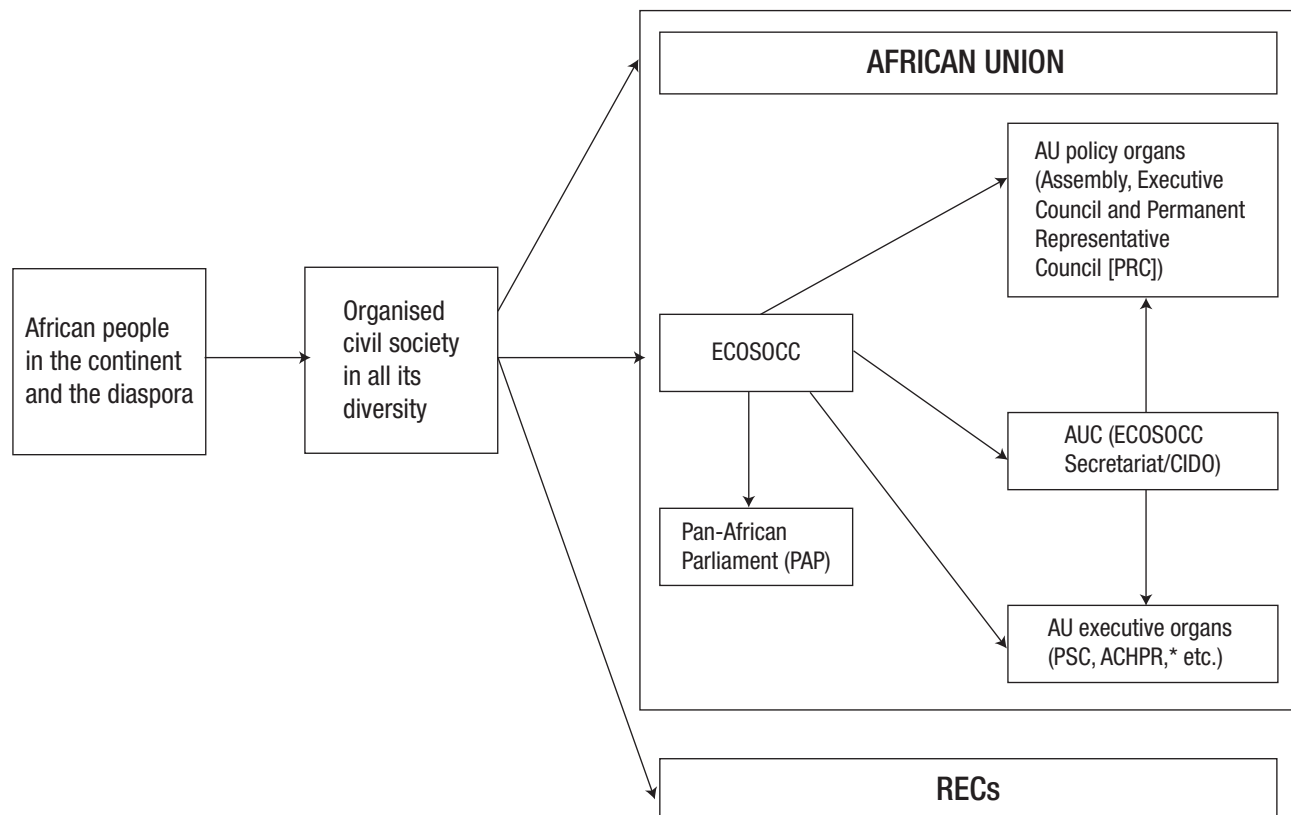
Unlike ECOSOCC, CIDO has a second-order objective, with a particular mandate to follow up on civil-society participatory activities, some of which necessarily take place outside ECOSOCC. Within this background, AU policy-makers have acknowledged that AU-CSO relations cannot be confined to ECOSOCC, as this will overburden that body, and also result in the marginalisation of some segments of civil society that are not represented in the ECOSOCC assembly. To allow for greater inclusivity, the AU has provided room for bilateral engagements with networks and other processes outside

ECOSOCC. CIDO has been identified as the appropriate body to follow up on these processes (ibid; AU 2005a).

Flowing from the foregoing, it is significant to note that certain CSOs, such as faith-based groups, were not allowed in ECOSOCC by the executive policy organs. CIDO will also seek to collate inputs from these groups, and feed them into the work of the commission as the implementing arm of the union. Other organs, such as the Peace and Security Council (PSC), have also created instruments for civil-society participation under their protocols, and CIDO will also follow up on this sectoral engagement (Adisa 2007). Other channels of engaging civil society outside the confines of the ECOSOCC framework include: the signing of memoranda of understanding among CSO groupings with departments of the commission or with the commission itself; granting of observer status to CSOs to observe AU processes and meetings; pre-summit CSO consultative forums; and consultative meetings with CSOs on specific issues, such as on Africa's partnerships with external powers.

CIDO also has responsibility for mainstreaming the participation of the African diaspora in the work of the union. The

Figure 1: The place of ECOSOCC in the overall AU architecture



*African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights

Source: ECOSOCC Strategic Plan 2005–2007

ECOSOCC statute does provide for diaspora participation in the work of ECOSOCC, but the organisation of diaspora networks and the task of designing frameworks for harnessing their inputs is that of the commission and the member states of the union. CIDO is the executive instrument for the facilitation of this. Overall, the activities of CIDO and ECOSOCC should be seen as being mutually reinforcing and not competitive (Adisa 2007).

Importantly, also, although African peoples are expected to take full control and ownership of the ECOSOCC process, this important AU organ is not intended as an independent continental civil-society umbrella organisation for court-marshalling African governments. Rather, it is an integral part of the body politic of the AU, an essentially intergovernmental organisation. Therefore, like other AU organs and processes, ECOSOCC is governed by AU rules and regulations. Within this context, its activities and modes of operation should be geared towards achieving the overall goals and objectives of the AU.

Institutional structure

The institutional structure of ECOSOCC, as provided for in article 8 of the statutes, includes: a general assembly; a standing committee; sectoral cluster committees; a credentials committee; and a secretariat.

General Assembly

The ECOSOCC General Assembly is a 150-member body made up of various social and professional groupings in member states of the AU and the African diaspora, and distributed as follows: (a) two CSO representatives from each of the 53 member states of the union, adding up to 106 CSO representatives from national constituencies; (b) two CSOs from each of the five regions of the continent, making a total of 10 CSO representatives from the regional constituency; (c) eight CSO representatives from the regional constituency; (d) 20 CSOs from the African diaspora as defined by the executive council, covering the various regions of the world; and (e) six CSOs, serving in an ex-officio capacity, nominated by the commission based on special considerations, in consultation with member states.

It is noteworthy that the ECOSOCC statute requires that the selection of representatives to its assembly from all the constituencies of ECOSOCC (member states, regions, the continent, the diaspora and the nominated categories) should

be in line with the AU's principle of gender and youth parity (see AU 2004a: articles 3 & 4).

The General Assembly is the highest decision- and policy-making body of ECOSOCC, headed by a presiding officer and five deputy presiding officers, who make up the bureau of the assembly. The assembly discharges the following functions: electing members of the standing committee and overseeing its work; preparing and submitting advisory opinions and reports as appropriate; submitting proposals on the budget and activities of ECOSOCC; approving and amending the code of ethics and conduct for CSOs affiliated to, or working with, the AU; and reviewing the activities of ECOSOCC, and proposing appropriate actions and recommendations (AU 2004a: article 9).

Standing committee

The standing committee is the principal co-ordinating organ of ECOSOCC. It is charged with co-ordinating its work; preparing the meetings of the General Assembly; following up on the implementation of the code of ethics and conduct developed for CSOs affiliated to, or working with, the union; and preparing and submitting the annual reports of ECOSOCC to the AU assembly. It also, in consultation with the commission of the union, determines the criteria and modalities for granting observer status to ECOSOCC. Its members have a two-year term of office (AU 2004a: article 10).

Sectoral cluster committees

Eight sectoral cluster committees have been established as the key operational mechanisms of ECOSOCC, with the principal tasks of formulating opinions on, and providing inputs to, the policies and programmes of the AU. Because of the across-the-board relevance of civil society to the work of the AU, these sectoral cluster committees have been aligned to the departments that make up the AU Commission. They include: peace and security; political affairs; infrastructure and energy; social affairs and health; human resources, science, and technology; trade and industry; rural economy and agriculture; economic affairs; women and gender; and an additional one, the cross-cutting programmes cluster committee, created to cater for all other cross-cutting issues. These cluster committees, as currently constituted, may be amended by the ECOSOCC assembly as it may deem necessary (AU 2004a: article 11).

The African Union's ECOSOCC

Credentials committee

Like the standing committee and the sectoral cluster committees, the nine-member credentials committee is established by the General Assembly of ECOSOCC. Five of its members are drawn from the five regions of the continent (one CSO representative each); one CSO representative from the African diaspora; one nominated representative for special-interest groups; and two representatives of the commission. It is responsible for examining the credentials of CSO members of ECOSOCC and of their representatives. It is guided in its work by rules of procedure adopted by the General Assembly (AU 2004a: article 12).

Secretariat

The ECOSOCC also has a secretariat that is hosted by CIDO in the Chairperson's Office. The secretariat is charged with managing the day-to-day activities of ECOSOCC, ensuring, as it were, that CSO inputs that come through ECOSOCC are fed into the broader AU processes, and that feedback is appropri-

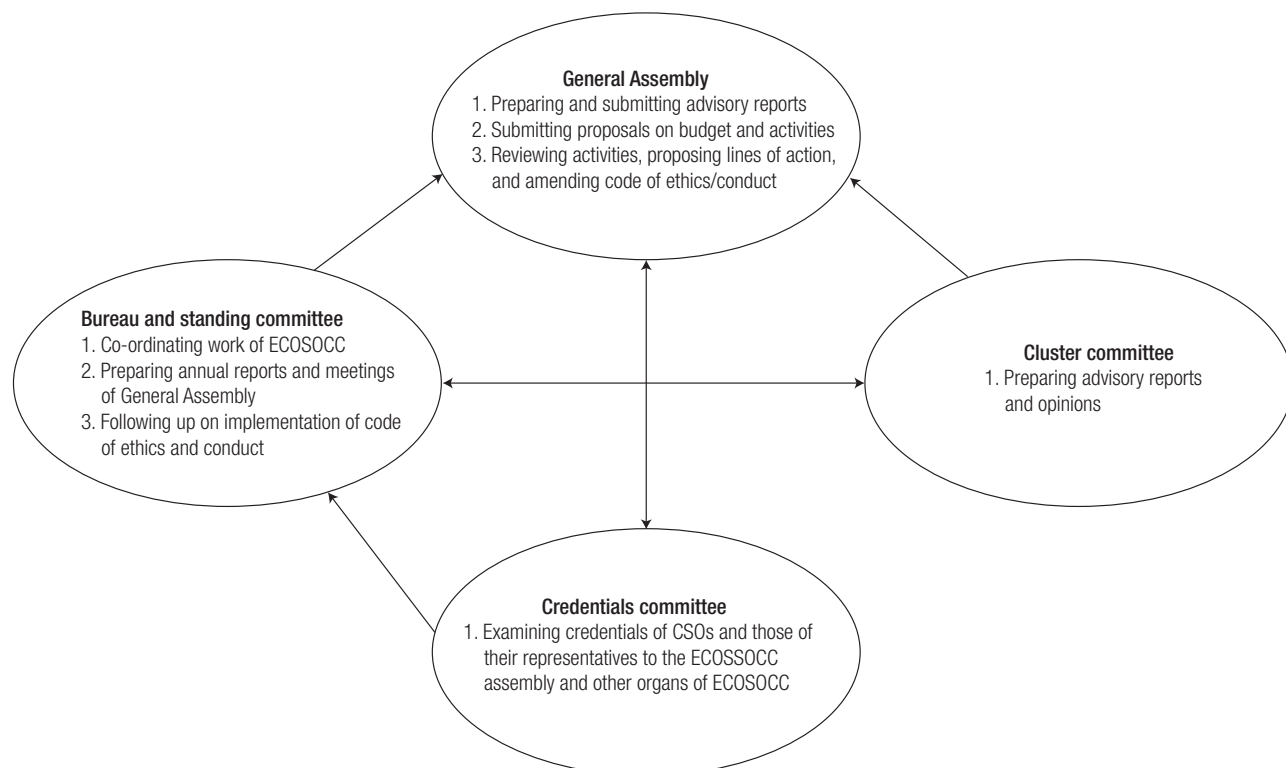
ately channelled to the relevant ECOSOCC organs and role players (AU 2004a: article 14).

Objectives and potential value-add of ECOSOCC

Through the workings of its various organs presented above, ECOSOCC is intended to fulfill the following functions and objectives:

- promote continuous dialogue among all segments of the African people on issues concerning Africa and its future;
- forge strong partnerships among governments and all segments of the civil society, in particular women, the youth, children, the diaspora, organised labour, the private sector and professional groups;
- promote the participation of African civil society in the formulation and implementation of the policies and programmes of the AU;
- support policies and programmes that will promote peace, security, and stability in Africa, and foster the development and integration of the continent;
- promote and defend a culture of good governance, demo-

Figure 2: ECOSOCC: internal organs and their major roles



Source: ECOSOCC Strategic Plan 2005–2007

- cratic principles and institutions, popular participation, and human rights and freedoms, as well as social justice;
- promote, advocate, and defend a culture of gender equality; and
- promote and strengthen the institutional, human, and operational capacities of the African civil society (see, generally, AU 2004a: article 2).

It is expected that ECOSOCC will connect African people in all their diversity to the AU, and, by so doing, enhance the democratic foundations and legitimacy of the AU and its member states. This will also lead to a broadening of the space for peoples' participation at all levels of governance in Africa. Another potential value-add of ECOSOCC is that it will serve as a network of expertise and as a catalyst to inject the values, knowledge, and ideas of African civil society into AU policy processes. It will also monitor and evaluate the feedback on results achieved by the AU.

ECOSOCC has huge potential to deepen accountability in the continent. Concretely, through its function of mainstreaming African peoples in the activities and processes of the AU, it will contribute to ongoing efforts to build a democratic AU and continent. The value this adds is to enhance the democratic foundations and legitimacy of the AU and its member states. It is also aimed at playing an interface role by acting as a bridge between African peoples and their governments. Importantly, in addition, it is intended to provide policy advice and play an advocacy role.

ECOSOCC: institutional development challenges

Institutional development

Efforts to facilitate the establishment of a formal framework for civil society's engagement with the AU took a decisive turn during the Third Ordinary Session of the Assembly in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 4–5 July 2004, with the adoption of the 'Assembly decision on the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC)' (Assembly/AU/Dec.48 [III]) (see AU 2004d). The assembly adopted the ECOSOCC draft statutes and requested the chairperson of the commission to take urgent measures to launch and operationalise ECOSOCC. The authors of the ECOSOCC statutes were conscious of the elaborate processes and procedures that needed to be followed for the effective launch of a substantive ECOSOCC assembly.

Accordingly, and in order to ensure the speedy launch of ECOSOCC, transitional arrangements were annexed to

the statutes to facilitate the putting in place of an interim ECOSOCC assembly (see AU 2004d, article 1; AU 2004a). Pursuant to the provisions of these transitional arrangements, the commission convened a General Civil Society Conference in Addis Ababa on 24 March 2005, which was constituted and launched as an interim General Assembly of ECOSOCC. This assembly elected an AU-civil society provisional working group, which was to serve as the interim standing committee (ISC) of ECOSOCC. The mandate of the ISC was to facilitate the organisation of elections of CSO representatives from national, regional continental, and diaspora constituencies, in preparation for the launch of a permanent ECOSOCC assembly. The interim assembly was placed under the leadership of Nobel Laureate Professor Wangari Maathia as interim presiding officer, and was given a two-year mandate to put into place a permanent assembly.

The ISC produced a strategic plan for ECOSOCC (see AU 2005a), and its members carried out consultations, mobilisation, and sensitisation of African civil societies at various levels. Unfortunately, however, due to a number of unforeseen constraints, the ISC was unable to deliver on its core mandate of organising elections to usher in a permanent ECOSOCC within the two-year period allotted to it by the AU assembly. As a result, its mandate was extended to December 2007 by the AU's council of ministers, with further directives to take the necessary measures to ensure that the process of elections into the post-interim assembly is completed within this period (see AU, EX.CL/Dec.388(X)).

As a follow-up to council's decision, and in order to lay the groundwork for the establishment of a substantive ECOSOCC assembly, the interim standing committee, alongside the commission and other stakeholders, took a number of measures. These included, among others: producing a roadmap with a work programme and a template for elections; producing a draft application form and its variables (eligibility requirements, support documents, deadlines for submission of applications, and publication of shortlisted candidates) for distribution to prospective candidates; and defining the procedures and channels to be followed in submitting completed application forms to the credentials committee. These instruments were prepared during a meeting of the standing committee of ECOSOCC that was held in Cairo, Egypt, in February 2007 (see AU 2007a).

The draft application forms, the election template, and other relevant documents and information regarding the electoral processes were posted on both the AU and the ECOSOCC websites in all AU official languages. The secretariat also liaised with African permanent missions and other



The African Union's ECOSOCC

related stakeholders in Addis Ababa and beyond, to help give the process adequate media coverage. Members of the interim standing committee were also called upon to support the publicity campaign in their respective regional and national constituencies (AU 2007a).

The election template was also published in a number of national dailies and continental magazines. In addition, the secretariat also sent relevant election materials and information to NGOs on the AU's database. It also took advantage of a number of CSO meetings to advertise the process (ibid).

Overall, the secretariat received more than 280 applications from diverse civil-society groupings from across the continent. As a result, the credentials committee convened in Accra, Yaoundé, and Addis Ababa in June, September and October 2007, respectively, to assess and shortlist candidates for election to the ECOSOCC General Assembly. The accreditation process was anchored on the prescriptions of relevant articles and clauses of the ECOSOCC statutes, particularly: article 3, relating to the composition of ECOSOCC; article 4, dealing with membership; article 6, defining eligibility requirements; and article 12, defining the mandate, composition, and rules of procedure of the credentials committee. Serious attention was also paid to the advice provided by the AU's legal counsel with regard to application of the eligibility requirements stipulated in article 6 of the ECOSOCC statutes (ibid; AU 2007e).

The election of CSO representatives into the permanent ECOSOCC General Assembly began on 31 October 2007 at the headquarters of the AU in Addis Ababa, with the election of eight continental CSOs to the assembly. This was followed by election of national CSO representatives for 25 countries (Algeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Niger, Nigeria, Republic of Congo, Sudan, Tunisia, Madagascar, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia), as well as representatives for the East, West and Southern African regions. It is expected that a partially constituted permanent assembly of ECOSOCC will be launched between July and October 2008, which will then continue and complete the election of the remaining members, including representatives from the diaspora.

Challenges

Despite the progress made thus far, the ECOSOCC transitional process is still faced with a number of challenges, particularly with regard to securing relevant CSO candidatures from the

remaining member states and regions, and accelerating ongoing processes that will facilitate the effective representation of the diaspora in the ECOSOCC assembly. The technical and logistical requirements of organising elections across the continent to select CSO representatives have been onerous and time-consuming. In the face of these difficulties, the interim standing committee requested a further extension to enable it to fulfil its mandate. This request was granted by the executive council of the AU, which further extended the mandate of the ISC to 30 April 2008, and also directed the commission to take appropriate measures to ensure that the permanent ECOSOCC is launched by May 2008.

Aside from the challenges of managing the transition from an interim structure to a permanent representative one, ECOSOCC will, when it is launched later in 2008, have to contend with a number of other challenges. These include, among others: building a fully functional institution; developing the capacity to ensure its sustainability; ensuring its smooth and effective integration into the overall governance structure of the AU; and securing the support and buy-in of various stakeholders, including Africa's external partners, such as the EU and the UN, that have had a head start on the AU in efforts to involve non-state actors in interstate organisations. Securing the effective representation of the diaspora in the ECOSOCC assembly is another outstanding challenge. Africa's diaspora is as diverse as it is dispersed. There is, therefore, a need to evolve a framework of engagement with the African diaspora that will allow for fair and balanced representation in the ECOSOCC assembly. The commission, through CIDO, is working towards this, and, in the coming months, will be convening a seminar to examine this question.

Conclusion

Despite African leaders' recognition of the need to involve African peoples in the continent's integration process, moves to translate this to action were painfully slow. However, beginning in the 1990s, and as African leaders began contemplating transforming the OAU into the AU, the need to involve civil society in the affairs of the continental organisation gained greater significance. In the 1990s, a number of charters, treaties, and conferences were organised, under the aegis of the OAU, that pushed for the involvement of civil society in its activities. African leaders consequently committed themselves to the transformation of the continental institution, by formalising processes that had been developing under the OAU. They introduced an organ of the union, ECOSOCC, to

serve as a formal channel to facilitate the expression of the views of non-state actors within the union, partly to actualise the principle of a people-centred and people-oriented union.

The efforts of the AU are geared towards ensuring an inclusive and holistic articulation and aggregation of civil-society perspectives on issues. Indeed, the establishment of ECOSOCC represents a giant step towards a participatory approach to the continent's integration. However, it remains to be seen how judiciously civil society will utilise this window of engagement, and, more importantly, how seriously civil-society inputs will be taken by various AU policy organs and member states (see AfriMAP et al 2007; African Leadership Forum & UNDP 2006). It is only then that the notion of partnership between the AU and African peoples will move from the realm of rhetoric to that of reality. ■

Endnotes

- 1 The notion of civil society suffers from definitional confusion. However, in the context of the AU, it is defined in a manner that encompasses not only conventional NGOs, but also all social, professional, and cultural organisations as detailed in the groups that constitute the ECOSOCC.

References

- Adisa Jinmi. 2006. Draft proposal on deepening the participation of non-state actors within the African Union system. June.
- 2007. ECOSOCC agenda: reflections on the past and future challenges. Briefing of the Second meeting of the interim standing committee of ECOSOCC. Cairo. 24–26 February.
- African Leadership Forum and UN Development Programme (UNDP). 2006. Report of the regional consultative meeting on ECOSOCC, APRM and the MDGs. Addis Ababa. 8–10 December.

- AfriMap, AFRODAD, and OXFAM. 2007. Towards a people-driven African Union: current obstacles and new opportunities. January.
- Agrebi Saida. 2007. Briefing of the interim assembly of the ECOSOCC by the chairperson of the credentials committee on the occasion of the election of continental CSOs to the ECOSOCC permanent assembly. Addis Ababa. 31 October.
- AU. 2004a. Statutes of the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC). Assembly of Heads of State and Government. July.
- 2004b. Provisional internal rules and modalities for the establishment and institutionalisation of the ECOSOCC. August.
- 2004c. Vision document.
- 2004d. Provisional internal rules and modalities for operationalisation of ECOSOCC.
- 2005a. ECOSOCC Strategic Plan 2005–2007.
- 2005b. Report of the first meeting of the interim ECOSOCC standing committee. Nairobi. 22–24 April.
- 2007a. Report of the second meeting of the interim standing committee of ECOSOCC. Egypt. 24–26 February.
- 2007b. Report of the credentials committee meeting of the interim ECOSOCC. Accra. June.
- 2007c. Report of the third meeting of the interim standing committee of ECOSOCC. Yaoundé. 3–4 September.
- 2007d. Report of the credentials committee meeting of the interim ECOSOCC. Yaoundé. September.
- 2007e. Briefings by chairperson of credentials committee. Yaoundé and Addis Ababa.

Institute for



Global Dialogue

Block 12, Thornhill Office Park, Bekker Street,
Vorna Valley, Midrand, South Africa
PO Box 32571, Braamfontein 2017, South Africa
Tel +2711 315 1299
Fax +2711 315 2149
Email info@igd.org.za · Web www.igd.org.za

All rights reserved. The material in this publication may not be reproduced, stored or transmitted without the prior permission of the copyright holder. Short extracts may be quoted, provided the source is acknowledged.
ISSN 1607 2375
Produced by Acumen Publishing Solutions, Johannesburg.