

"African Union - Civil Society" Dialogue

This brief note addresses the issue of developing dialogue and collaboration between the African Union (AU) and African Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). It asks the following questions:

- Dialogue for what purpose?
- Dialogue with whom?
- A possible mechanism for collaboration.

Purpose of the dialogue

The African Union has its mandate, objectives and programme, but it's not at all certain that African CSOs are *fully* acquainted with them. It would be important, therefore, that the AU clarify with CSOs its role and its intentions as it undertakes the process of deepening dialogue and collaboration with CSOs. The latter need to understand better the reasons and possibilities for dialogue with the AU. This will not only prepare them for the dialogue, it will also help some CSOs deselect themselves as not being equipped to enter into the dialogue with the AU:

The benefits of AU-CSO dialogue will be many. For example, the dialogue will:

- Help the AU inform CSOs about the AU's evolving programme, so as to obtain their feedback and also their support.
- Help the AU promote its programme and encourage government/CSO collaboration at a national level.
- Help the AU learn from CSOs about the concerns of civil society (i.e. the people) and changing conditions across Africa.
- Give the AU direct access to capable CSOs which can brief the AU on specific areas of interest.

CSO Partners in Dialogue

There are an increasing number of varied CSOs in Africa, as elsewhere in the world, and they play a very significant role in their various sectors. A simple and working definition of a CSO is that of an association of people that exists to promote economic and social development. Normally speaking, a CSO would be non-profit, non-governmental and non-partisan (i.e. non party political). Such a definition would include faith-based groups, trade unions, NGOs, village associations, producer groups, professional associations, universities and the like, big and small. Each of these organizations, in their own way, may be said to be representative of African civil society (i.e. African peoples) in their respective countries.

It considering which CSOs would be valid partners for dialogue with the AU, it would be a mistake to limit conferring legitimacy solely to those groups with memberships (i.e. based on the notion of being ‘representative’), for very capable organizations exist throughout Africa that work for the common good, without being constituted as membership organizations. It is clear, however, that organizations with large or broad constituencies may be considered more ‘representative’.

It could be argued that there would be limited value in establishing a permanent dialogue with small or individual CSOs working at a local level. They could be a source of valuable information about conditions in their respective countries, but many would be unlikely to be able to dialogue at a policy level. Coalitions of CSOs at a national or sub-regional level would be more relevant, for they are likely to have developed some capacity for policy dialogue. It would seem, though, that the most interesting organizations would be those working as networks, and especially networks established on sectoral lines.

The value of sectoral networks is that they are likely to be very focused in the issues they address and to be results-oriented in terms of policy dialogue. Such groups are unlikely to want to join a permanent process of dialogue with the AU for superficial reasons, for their very existence is founded on a desire to positively influence development policies.

Sectors where capable CSO networks will be found across Africa include the following:

- HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis (addressing “health and *poverty*” issues at the grassroots’ level)
- Debt (addressing “implications on *poverty*” and “painful but efficient” solutions)
- Food Security (addressing “interactions with *poverty*” and “African and AID” solutions)
- Desertification (addressing “interactions with *poverty*, Food Security and Migration” issues and realistic solutions)
- Gender
- Environment
- Extractive Industries (e.g. governance issues)

A possible mechanism for dialogue

Large, infrequent conferences are unlikely to be able to help create partnerships and provide the sort of dialogue that both the AU and CSOs would benefit from. A better model could be regular workshops on a particular theme involving the AU, sectoral networks (there could be several, for language and geographical reasons) and other capable groups and institutions working in the same sector.

The preparation of and follow-up to such workshops would be crucial, with mutual accountability concerning agreed courses of action. As a condition of their participation, CSOs should be required to produce reports on the issues under discussion. The regular workshops would review progress achieved since the last workshop.