

Economic, Social & Cultural Council of the African Union – Progress

1. Background:

The African Union (AU) made a historic decision in 2002 to bring the voices of the African people's into the decision making processes of the AU through the creation of the Economic, Social & Cultural Council of the African Union (ECOSOCC) as an advisory organ. ECOSOCC will bring together civil society groups to work with the AU.

The impulse is not for the African Union to organize civil society. Rather the organizing principle of the Economic, Social & Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) of the African Union is one in which civil society would organize themselves to work with the Organization. Established under the provisions of Articles 5 and 22 of the African Union's Constitutive Act, ECOSOCC is the vehicle for building a strong partnership between governments and all segments of African civil society.

The Statute of ECOSOCC, adopted by the Heads of State and Government at the Third Ordinary Session of the Assembly in July 2004 define it as an advisory organ of the African Union composed of different social and professional groups of the Member States of the African Union [Assembly/AU/Dec.42 (III)] . The composition of ECOSOCC shall include African social groups, professional groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and cultural organizations.

The distinctive character of the African Union's ECOSOCC is that it is an opportunity for African civil society to play an active role in charting the future of the Continent, organizing itself in partnership with African governments to contribute to the principles, policies and programmes of the Union.

1.1 ECOSOCC's Mandate / Objectives:

- Promote dialogue between all segments of African people on issues concerning the Continent and its future;
- Forge strong partnerships between governments and all segments of civil society, in particular, women, the youth, children the Diaspora, organized labour, the private sector, and professional groups;
- Promote the participation of African Civil Society in the implementation of the policies and programmes of the Union;
- Support policies and programmes that promote peace, security and stability and foster Continental development and integration;
- Promote and defend a culture of good governance, democratic principles and Institutions, popular participation, human rights and social justice;
- Promote, advocate and defend gender equality; and
- Promote and strengthen the institutional, human and operational capacities of the African civil society. 1 One hundred and fifty (150) CSOs, representing national, regional, and Diaspora societies will be elected to ECOSOCC's highest decision and policy-making body - its General Assembly. Membership will reflect the core principles of gender parity and youth representation, and will be attained through a consultative process and elections.

2. Progress:

2.1 The Launch of ECOSOCC:

Africa's Civil Society gathered at the headquarters of the African Union in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from 27 to 30 March 2005 for the launching of the Economic, Social and Cultural Council of the African Union (ECOSOCC). This historic occasion marked the beginning of a new phase in the Union's activities. Participants came together to determine the modalities for implementing the

functions of ECOSOCC; begin establishing a consultation process for election of members to the ECOSOCC General Assembly; and elect a two-year interim Standing Committee.

From this meeting the central objectives of the March launch of ECOSOCC were developed as follows:

a) to adopt the Statutes of the Economic, Social and Cultural Council of the African Union, which were approved by the Assembly of the African Union, 3rd Ordinary Session, 6 – 8 July 2004, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Assembly/AU/Dec.42 (III).

b) and further set 10 Sectoral Cluster Committees of ECOSOCC established to formulate opinions and provide inputs into the policies and programmes of the African Union:

Peace and Security

Conflict anticipation; prevention; management and resolution; post conflict reconstruction and peace building; prevention and combating of terrorism; use of child soldiers; drug trafficking; illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons and security reforms etc.

Political Affairs

Human rights; rule of law; democratic and constitutional rule; good governance; power sharing, electoral institutions; humanitarian affairs and assistance etc.

Infrastructure and Energy

Energy; transport; communications; infrastructure and tourism etc

Social Affairs and Health

Health; children; drug control; population; migration; labour and employment; family; aging; the physically challenged; sports; culture; youth and protection and

social integration etc.

Human Resources, Science and Technology

Education; illiteracy; information technology; communication; human resources; science and technology etc.

Trade and Industry

Trade; industry; handcrafts; customs and immigration matters etc.

Rural Economy and Agriculture

Rural economy; agriculture and food security; livestock; environment; water and natural resources and desertification etc.

Economic Affairs

Economic integration; monetary and financial affairs; private sector development including the informal sector and resource mobilization etc).

Women and Gender

Women; gender and development as a crosscutting issue etc) Cross-Cutting Programmes (all other cross-cutting issues that are not covered in above clusters including HIV/AIDS, international cooperation, coordination with institutions and organs of the Union.

At the conclusion of this meeting in March 26 – 30, 2005 an interim standing committee of ECOSOCC was elected by civil society organizations for a two year term. Additionally, Hon. Prof. Wangari Maathai was elected as the Interim presiding Officer for the Economic, Social & Cultural Council of the African Union (ECOSOCC).

2.2 The 1st Meeting of the Interim Standing Committee of ECOSOCC:

The Interim Standing Committee of ECOSOCC held its 1st meeting in Nairobi, Kenya from April 22 – 24, 2005. The three day meeting was presided over by H.E. Prof. Wangari Maathai, the Interim Presiding Officer of ECOSOCC. The meeting included civil society representatives from the five regions of the continent and the secretariat of the African Union Commission.

At this meeting the Committee developed and adopted a strategic plan of action to facilitate the smooth and effective functioning of the Interim ECOSOCC in the following two years. The plan included the following components:

- Modalities, procedures and timelines for the organization of regional, national and continental consultations to facilitate the elections of the representatives of Civil Society Organizations (CSO's) into the post interim ECOSOCC general assembly;
- Guidelines for the conduct of these elections and consultations;
- Participatory consultative process for civil society to engage with ECOSOCC on the issues and modalities for operationalization of the sectoral cluster committees;
- A communications and publicity plan to give the required visibility to ECOSOCC with emphasis on media interactions and social engagements to sensitize and mobilize the African people and provide information on critical issues related to peace, security and the fast tracking of Africa's economic integration and scientific research and technological development to generate discourse and ensure people centred policies and programs;
- Resource mobilization and fund raising strategy to support the work of ECOSOCC and the African Union, in particular and the integration of the process of African in general. The committee also developed a budget of USD \$ 3,784,800 for the ECOSOCC process.

This road map and budget proposal were shared with all the members of the Interim General Assembly.

Unfortunately, the process of completing the final strategic plan of action document and the budget took a long time and it is only toward the end of 2005 (November) that it was finally completed by the AU Secretariat and its consultants. This final document was also shared with the Interim General Assembly Members.

2.3. Challenges:

It was the hope of the Civil Society Organizations in Africa to see a faster movement of the electoral process in order to complete the ECOSOCC agenda in a timely manner. It was hoped that the consultation and the election process would have commenced by this time (and indeed it has in a few countries). Unfortunately, at this time little can be initiated and facilitated until financial resources have been secured for the process.

It is hoped that the necessary organs will prioritize ECOSOCC and provide the required funds to meet its objectives.

It is however important for this process not to be paralysed by a lack of financial resources, as such Civil Society Organizations in Africa have been encouraged to use their ingenuity and spirit of volunteerism to initiate electoral activities at national level.

2.4. Opportunities:

In the spirit of self reliance and self drive, a number of countries have taken the first few steps in the establishment of the National Coordination mechanisms for purposes of popularizing ECOSOCC in activities geared toward the election of two (2) CSO representatives to the ECOSOCC general assembly in 2007.

In Kenya for example, an Ad Hoc Committee for the Kenya Chapter of ECOSOCC was established by ten volunteers, comprising of members in organizations representing the 10 sectoral clusters (indicated in the ECOSOCC statutes). This Committee also developed and adopted a framework for communication and consultation in order to provide a benchmark for the Kenya National Process.

Thereafter a data base of profiles of registered Civil Society Organizations / Groups in Kenya was collected and compiled. On January 31st, 2006 ECOSOCC was formally launched in Kenya in a general meeting attended by over 300 CSO's based in Nairobi. Similar meetings will be repeated in several other cities and urban center's in order to give information about ECOSOCC to as many people as possible. By the time financial resources are available and the electoral process is in place, it is hoped that there will be much awareness and enthusiastic participation. The interim general assembly members in the other members States of the African Union have been urged to take this first step as we wait for resources.

We have received information from the Interim Members of the General Assembly in Ghana, Mauritania, Uganda, Mozambique and the Central African Republic, that they are carrying out their mandates vigorously and have started their own sensitization workshops with key national civil society organizations, forums, networks, coalitions, federations and national authorities. It is hoped that their various action plans and progress reports will be sent to the Office of the Presiding Officer and the ECOSOCC Secretariat in Addis Ababa as soon as possible. After which they will be shared with all other members of the Interim General Assembly. It is important to note that all National & Regional processes must be inclusive, transparent and democratic.

During the Heads of State Summit held in Khartoum, Sudan in January 20– 24, 2006, the Presiding Officer of ECOSOCC, Hon. Prof. Wangari Maathai addressed the Heads of State on behalf of ECOSOCC. In her speech Hon. Maathai congratulated the Heads of State's for the decision taken by the new

African Union to embrace the ordinary African people as partners in the future development and destiny of the continent. Hon. Prof. Maathai also made a direct appeal for resource allocation for the work of ECOSOCC. She noted that although Civil Society would continue to mobilize resources for the process, it was difficult to depend on what has yet to come from sources that have yet to commit. She hoped that the necessary organs would prioritize resources for ECOSOCC, to reflect the importance the Heads of State had given to ECOSOCC during the Abuja seminar on Union Government held in November 2005.

On her part Hon. Prof. Wangari Maathai during her frequent international trips, has brought ECOSOCC to the lime light, by sensitizing key decision-makers on the objectives of ECOSOCC and with a view to establish working partnerships with government, private sector and the civil society.

In recent meetings with the Deputy Prime Minister of Spain, Her Excellency, Ma. Teresa Fernandez de la Vega Sanz, & Amb. Andrew Young, the Chairman of Good Works International in Atlanta, USA, (amongst other potential partners) Prof. Maathai introduced the ECOSOCC initiative. These meetings have yielded a lot of interest in this initiative and as such the ECOSOCC action plan has been forwarded to the government of Spain for consideration. An important aspect of the ECOSOCC process is the inclusion of the Diaspora Civil Society Organizations as members of ECOSOCC. African Diaspora organizations will be encouraged to establish an appropriate process for determining modalities for elections of the 20 CSO's to the ECOSOCC assembly. The potential for partnership and resource mobilization in the Diaspora was recognized and discussed with Amb. Young. As a result consultations are now being carried out to maximize the potential gains for ECOSOCC within the Diaspora. Hon. Prof. Maathai will continue to bring to the world attention this extremely important and visionary initiative whose fruits will be enjoyed by generations to come.

3.0 The Way Forward:

The Interim General Assembly Members together with other competent, Civil Society Organizations in their respective countries, should strive to establish consensual and functional national coordinating mechanism for the ECOSOCC process as soon as possible. It must be noted that the mandate of the Interim General Assembly for ECOSOCC will expire in 2007. All stake holders must therefore make commitments to this process and follow through with them.

The African Civil Society must recognize that they must be change they want to see in Africa. It is the African people who must live the dream of a United Africa in their every day lives. And with increasing international attention being directed to Africa, this may be an ideal time to draw on an African example as a motivational force; ECOSOCC provides this opportunity.