



Drums of Change

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Contents

The launch of ECOSOCC: participation of the people, by the people and for the people?...1

Editorial - Ensuring a healthy ECOSOCC...3

Continental PAD workshops
- Burundi...4
- Kenya...4
- Somaliland...5
- Cameroon...5

Peace, security, democracy and governance...6

On the NEPAD scene...7

Contacts...8

Acronyms

- APRM** African Peer Review Mechanism
- AU** African Union
- CSO** Civil Society Organisation
- ECOSOCC** Economic, Social and Cultural Council
- NEPAD** New Partnership for Africa's Development
- NGO** Non-Governmental Organisation
- OAU** Organisation of African Unity
- PAD** Peace and Development Platform
- PAP** Pan-African Parliament
- PSC** Peace and Security Council
- VCT** Virtual Coordinating Team

The launch of ECOSOCC: participation of the people, by the people and for the people?

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At the end of March 2005, representatives from Africa's major civil society groups gathered in Addis Ababa to mark the inauguration of the African Union's (AU's) Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC). Mandated under articles 5 and 22 of the new-look AU Constitutive Act, ECOSOCC marks a departure from previous continental policies under the old Organisation of African Unity (OAU), in which civil society had no structured or formal role in continental development.

With the evolution of development and governance theory to incorporate principles of ownership and active citizen participation, Africa's political leaders have acknowledged that they alone cannot determine the continent's future. The success of AU initiatives such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) is predicated on commitments to involve citizens, such as the African Charter for Popular Participation and the Conference on Security, Stability, Development and Cooperation in Africa.

The OAU paid lip service in the 1990s to the idea of participatory continental governance, but there was little attempt to move beyond rhetoric. However, when the AU Heads of State adopted the ECOSOCC statute in July 2004, they approved the creation of an "advisory organ of the AU composed of

different social and professional groups of the AU's member states and the African Diaspora." The ECOSOCC launch thus marks a new epoch – it transforms the nature of participation by civil society from being mere observers at OAU proceedings to being an integral part of the AU's activities.

According to the AU, "ECOSOCC is a vehicle for building a strong partnership between governments and all sections of African civil society and for achieving the goal of a people-centred African community." ECOSOCC can potentially contribute to enhanced oversight and accountability in continental governance, and has the power to lobby and advocate on behalf of civil society in continental bodies such as the Pan-African Parliament (PAP), the Peace and Security Council (PSC) and the African Courts of Justice and Human and People's Rights. As a formal structure of the AU, ECOSOCC has a right to have its submissions officially heard and considered.



Kenya's Nobel Laureate, Professor Wangari Maathai, President of ECOSOCC's interim General Assembly. Photo: Martin Rowe



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ECOSOCC’s General Assembly is comprised of 18 regional and continental Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), 20 CSOs elected from the African Diaspora and two CSOs appointed by each AU member country (selected after a process of national consultation). The AU Commission can also nominate six special *ex-officio* members, after consultation with member states. To be eligible for ECOSOCC membership, a CSO must be membership-based, with at least half its ownership and management being African or coming from the African Diaspora, and at least half its funds being derived through member contributions. ECOSOCC’s General Assembly must meet at least once in two years, its members may be re-elected only once and the duration of each term of office is four years. The General Assembly must ensure that at least 50% of representatives are women and 50% are youths aged 18-35. The definition of CSOs is broad, encompassing trade unions, professional bodies and special-interest Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).


At the March 2005 inauguration, Kenya’s Nobel Laureate, Professor Wangari Maathai, was elected President of ECOSOCC’s interim General Assembly. Deputy presidents from the other four regions of the continent were also elected. They are: Mrs Fatima Karadja (north Africa); Mr Charles Mutasa (south Africa); Mr Ayodele Aderinwale (west Africa) and Professor Maurice Tadadjeu (central Africa). Below this top management level, the ECOSOCC General Assembly also elected a Standing Committee of 18 members to


coordinate its work in the five regions. Finally, the ECOSOCC Statute provides for 10 Sectoral Cluster Committees and a Credentials Committee to be created. In order to accomplish the functions of the General Assembly and the Sectoral Committees, ECOSOCC is allocated a regular budget from within the AU budget.


Among ECOSOCC’s key objectives is the support of policies and programmes that will promote peace and foster development and integration in Africa, in which it is guided by the principles of human rights, gender equality, social justice and democracy. As a result, ECOSOCC has the mandate to go beyond the consultative nature of the United Nations’ Economic and Social Council. If it is courageous enough, ECOSOCC can provide the type of advisory input that the European Union’s Economic and Social Committee (ESC) provides to the European Union (EU) Commission and the European Parliament. The ESC not only advises on matters requested by the EU Commission and Parliament, but also takes the initiative to advise on other matters where it deems appropriate.

In conclusion, there are several specific areas where ECOSOCC has the opportunity to make a meaningful input into continental policy. **Some of these are:**

-  Continental peace and security initiatives – by advising the AU’s PSC on conflict prevention and peace-building efforts, ECOSOCC can make a valuable contribution.
-  The African Commission on Human and People’s Rights – by monitoring the reports of the commission and recommending follow-up actions, ECOSOCC can ensure that the commission’s work is not subsumed within the AU Commission. Evaluation of the commission’s work by ECOSOCC would introduce greater transparency and accountability into the politically sensitive arena of human rights’ violations.

 The APRM – by coordinating CSO submissions to the country processes of the APRM, ECOSOCC can play an oversight role on behalf of civil society by tasking appropriate sectoral cluster committees with monitoring the implementation of national action plans in the period between one review and the next.

 Corporate Governance within the CSO Sector – by formulating and implementing a code of ethics and management for the sector, ECOSOCC can enhance corporate governance and provide an illustrative example of improved governance in both the public and private sectors. Such a move will help prevent the exploitation of citizens by unscrupulous self-styled ‘community leaders’ and by the self-interest of some donor organisations.

 Involvement in the PAP – by preparing submissions and lobbying the continental parliament on a range of issues, from peace and security to human rights and peer review, ECOSOCC’s sectoral committees have the opportunity to move beyond talking and to demand action from African leaders on behalf of African citizens.



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