

AU's Network of think tanks for peace: an avenue for bringing the AU closer to the wider African public?

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On 8 February 2023, the African Union (AU) launched the African Network of Think Tanks for Peace (NeTT4Peace) to enhance the strategic partnership between African epistemic community and AU's Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS) on areas of governance, peace and security. This came as a breakthrough after years of efforts to institutionalize the engagement of African CSOs in peace, security and governance work of the AU, one key avenue for bringing the AU closer to the wider African public.

Navigating the AU policy space has been challenging for CSOs for the large part of the existence of the Union. This challenge and the frustration it caused is perhaps best captured by a participant at a High-Level training seminar hosted by Amani Africa in July 2022 when she told AU Commissioner for PAPS, Bankole Adeoye, that after 20 years of knocking on the door of the AU, to engage and work together, she had become jaded and she felt that she was no longer 'in love' with the AU. In his characteristically diplomatic style, Bankole replied that 'we are all Africans' and that AU-CSOs relationship is like a 'marriage'; despite the challenge, the relationship is the one that we are committed to 'for better or for worse' 'till death do us part'.

Providing the space for the engagement of CSOs in the works of the AU should not be seen as a favour or a burden. It is rather about honouring the normative commitment to engage CSOs in the implementation of its objectives. Comprising wide segment of groups including think-tanks, academic and research institutions, advocacy and Pan-African organizations, African CSOs play critical role in bringing the AU and its decision-making process closer to the people.

Article 20 of the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council (PSC) encourages CSOs to actively participate in the efforts aimed at promoting peace, security, and stability in Africa. The Protocol further envisages that the PSC may hold informal consultations with various actors including CSOs for the discharge of its responsibilities. There have been different initiatives to operationalize this article to ensure meaningful participation of CSOs in the works of the PSC.

The Livingstone Formula and the Maseru Retreat Conclusions are outcomes of such efforts by the PSC to put in place the appropriate modalities for effective interaction with CSOs in the promotion of peace, security, and stability in the continent. In September of last year, PSC also held its [inaugural](#) annual consultative meeting with CSOs with the view to enhancing synergy on timely governance, peace, and security issues in the continent. These are nothing short of a lip service and the commitments under the initiatives have not translated into the meaningful engagement of CSOs in the areas they were supposed to contribute, including early warning, peace-making and mediation, and peacebuilding.

African CSOs did not sit idle until the creation of an enabling environment for their engagement, but they have been organizing themselves to carve out space for themselves. The first decade of the establishment of the AU from about 2002 to 2010 witnessed a dynamic and robust era of CSOs' engagement where they were organized to the point of convening pre-AU

Summit meetings and issuing their view in good time to the Union before the Summit. They were organized enough to also participate in the margins and corridors of the Summit as Observers during the opening sessions of the Executive Council and even during the Assembly of Heads of State and Government. That space has been restricted since recently as the Summit was no place for CSOs but for them to stay in their 'lane', at technical expert level.

Over the last five years, there is renewed effort by CSOs to reclaim the AU policy space, particularly through the engagement with PAPS. It was in that context that a coalition of CSOs convened the first strategic retreat with the PAPS in Nairobi in February 2022 with the aim to enhance the collaboration and synergy between the two sides toward advancing the peace, security and governance agenda in the continent. The creation of this important platform – the NeTT4Peace – is the culmination of such strategic engagement while other outcomes, including the appointment of a focal point within the PAPS department still require follow-up. The second strategic retreat was convened this year in April in Addis Ababa.

The idea of creating such a structure to facilitate solid AU-CSOs partnership is not new. It dates back to the time of the Organization of the African Unity (OAU), a predecessor to the AU. In June 2001, 22 years ago, OAU convened the first ever OAU-Civil Society Conference in Addis Ababa, under the leadership of Amara Essy, the then Secretary-General of the Organization. Among one of its objectives was to build an OAU-Civil Society Partnership for Promoting Peace and Development in Africa. The building of a network between the OAU and CSOs to address the political, peace and security, socio-economic and environmental issues was one of the recommendations that emerged from that conference. 21 years down the road, not a single OAU-Civil Society convening as it was envisaged has taken place despite that there have been other similar

platforms. Nor was the intended network established.

It is therefore for the first time in the history of the AU that such a structure has been established within the AU. And for this, Commissioner Bankole deserves appreciation for his leadership in bringing the number of African CSOs working in the areas of peace and security under the umbrella of NeTT4Peace. Given the diversity of organizations involved in this initiative, the NeTT4Peace will not be a replication or duplication but an important stand-alone necessary platform, which will be driven and utilized by the AU and its Member States, as well as the wider Pan-African society, to advance the African political, peace and security agenda.

NeTT4Peace is hoped to bridge the gap between research and policymaking. As [noted](#) by the AU, the initiative is expected to enhance the relevance and value of the contribution of African knowledge communities while allowing the PAPS to better utilize evidence-based research to inform policy formulation and strategic decision-making. For the researchers and academics, it presents the opportunity for them to have a full picture of a part situation from an insider perspective, which has been the missing link in their work. This also increases research uptake by policymakers. Sometimes the nature of advancing political, peace and security agendas, is not so much about what you know, but who you know, and how you can get the desired outcomes.

The importance of the NeTT4Peace cannot be over-stated, and it is an idea whose time has come. This is particularly true in the current global context where Africa is facing the risk of the Second Scramble for Africa. This time the Scramble is not defined exclusively by military forces colonizing and occupying the continent, but it is playing itself out at the level of ideas, ideology, dogma, and deliberate agenda to extract resources and to control and manipulate African governments and societies. This is something that the AU PAPS and NeTT4Peace can collectively apply their minds to

understand and put in place mitigation strategies.

NeTT4Peace offers the much-needed expert resources for producing timely data and analysis that can be strategically deployed by AU decision-makers to bring about the change that we would like to see in our societies. Turning this potential into a reality however requires an earnest commitment on both sides to operationalize the initiative.

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