State of Citizens' Engagement Report

2024

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Foreword

by the Presiding Officer of the African Union ECOSOCC

Greetings to readers and partners to the inaugural State of Citizen Engagement Report, being delivered by the Economic Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC).

Since its formation, the African Union has recognised that the continent's progress depends fundamentally on the meaningful participation of the African people. The establishment of the ECOSOCC, through article 5(h) and 22 of the 2000 Constitutive Act of the African Union as a vital organ to serve as the formal interface between the Union and African civil society stands as a milestone to this effect. Uniquely Positioned within the structures of the Union, ECOSOCC provides institutionalised space for civil society to directly engage with the African Union and contribute to the realisation of Agenda 2063 — Africa's strategic vision for inclusive and sustainable development.

This report arrives at a critical juncture, as the AU prepares for the 2026 Mid-Term Review of Agenda 2063. It reflects on the extent to which African civil society—supported and enabled by AU institutions—have participated in shaping continental governance. It also highlights the spaces created by the AU and its organs, RECs/RMs for civil society engagement, while identifying areas for further deepening participatory governance institutionally.

The AU has made commendable efforts to open channels for citizens' input, yet the mechanisms for engagement remain uneven and, at times, underutilised. To fully realise Aspiration 6— "an Africa whose development is people-driven"—citizen engagement must move from occasional consultation to structured, inclusive co-creation across all governance levels.

I am confident that this report will guide our institutions, Member States, RECs, and partners in renewing their commitment to a responsive, transparent, and inclusive African Union. The strength and legitimacy of our Union depend on its ability to engage, empower, and be accountable to its people.

It is my hope that this document inspires not only sound policy, but shared purpose. A stronger Africa will emerge not through institutions alone, but through partnership with the citizens it serves.

Mr. Louis Cheick Sissoko

Presiding Officer
African Union ECOSOCC

Foreword
by the Head of Secretariat of the African Union ECOSOCC

Greetings to all stakeholders and readers of the ECOSOCC's State of Citizen Engagement Report. This comprehensive report offers a vital overview of the progress, challenges, and opportunities in fostering a more people-centered African Union. As the Head of ECOSCC Secretariat, I am privileged to introduce this report, which underscores the indispensable role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in shaping our continent's future.

ECOSOCC was strategically established in 2004 to institutionalize citizen participation and engagement, serving as a critical platform for dialogue, engagement, and exchange among Africa's diverse civil society components and AU institutions. We are the primary civil society interface, channeling citizens' interests and concerns for continental policy consideration and enhancing the capacity of African civil society to engage with policymaking at the highest levels. Our role is pivotal in mainstreaming citizen participation and contributions to major programs, development aspirations, and policy frameworks of the AU.

The active engagement of CSOs in the work of the Union is not merely a procedural formality but a strategic imperative for the success and sustainability of the African Union and the attainment of Agenda 2063. The AU recognizes that its efficacy is intrinsically linked to citizen engagement, which engenders trust, confidence, legitimacy, ownership, effectiveness, and sustainability of its policies. CSOs contribute invaluable research and expert analysis, bringing data-driven insights and grassroots realities that make policy frameworks more robust and effective.

This engagement is central to the realization of the seven aspirations of Agenda 2063, which envisions transforming Africa into a global powerhouse by the year 2063. These aspirations include building a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development; an integrated and politically united continent; good governance and respect for human rights; a peaceful and secure Africa; a strong cultural identity; a people-driven development agenda; and Africa as a prominent global player. Achieving this vision requires the full participation of African citizens and the diaspora, as Agenda 2063 is fundamentally people-centered and rooted in collective ownership. It is on this basis that ECOSOCC leverages its mandate to serve as the voice of the African citizenry both within the continent and abroad by mobilizing grassroots civil society actors. In doing so, ECOSOCC functions as a vital bridge between the people and the African Union in the collective pursuit of Agenda 2063.

While significant progress has been made, as outlined in this report, persistent challenges remain; particularly, limited grassroots capacity and budgetary constraints. These obstacles often lead to an adversarial dynamic between governments and civil society, rather than fostering the collaborative partnership envisioned. To unlock the full potential of citizen engagement, it is essential to address these technical and operational barriers through sustained capacity building and structured, consistent dialogue between stakeholders.

This flagship and inaugural edition of the report serves as a technical blueprint to strengthen our collective efforts. I urge all stakeholders, Member States, Regional Economic Communities, and especially civil society organizations to utilize these findings to deepen collaboration and reinforce our shared goals. United in purpose and driven by the active participation of our people, we can realize The Africa We Want: an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful continent shaped by the aspirations of its citizens.

William Carew

Head of Secretariat
African Union ECOSOCC

Acknowledgements

The successful production of the *State of Citizens' Engagement Report* is a testament to the invaluable contributions of numerous institutions, partners, and individuals who supported its development from concept to publication. **ECOSOCC** extends its sincere appreciation to all its **staff at the Secretariat** and members of the **4th Permanent General Assembly of ECOSOCC** for committing their expertise, resources, time, and insight to this important initiative.

We extend our sincere appreciation to the Member States of the African Union, Policy Organs of the African Union, and the members of the **African Governance Platform** for adopting this report as a flagship initiative in February 2023 on the margins of the Summit of Heads of States and Governments, as a mechanism to help gauge state of citizen engagement and participation at the level of the AU and RECs/RMs.

We are particularly grateful to the **European Union (EU)**, **Expertise France**, the **European Partnership for Democracy (EPD)** and the **Reform Initiatives** for their unwavering support that reflects a shared commitment to strengthening the implementation of Agenda 2063.

Special recognition is further extended to **Dr. Andrew Atta Asamoah**, **Dr. George Mukundi, Ms. Priscilla Ankut** and **Dr. Remember Miamingi**, the independent technical experts who, through their exceptional leadership, supported the development of this comprehensive report.

Our profound gratitude also goes to **Dr. Primrose Z.J. Bimha**, Policy Research and Political Engagement Specialist, for her invaluable assistance in the editing and proofreading this report. Without her immense support, the completion of this project would not have seen the light of day.

We also extend appreciation to all other individuals, partners, academic institutions, traditional and religious authorities, media representatives, and think tanks who contributed their perspectives during consultations, surveys, and technical meetings. The engagement and insights from the African Diaspora are equally acknowledged with gratitude.

This report reflects the collective will and collaborative spirit of a wide range of actors working to advance inclusive governance and citizen participation in Africa. ECOSOCC remains deeply thankful for the contributions received and reaffirms its commitment to building a truly people-driven Union in line with **Aspiration 6 of Agenda 2063**.

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List of Abbreviations

ACDEG - African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance
ACERW - African Committee on the Rights and the Welfare of the Child
ACHPR - African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights
AEC - African Economic Community
AfCFTA - African Continental Free Trade Area
AGA - Africa Governance Architecture
APSA - African Peace and Security Architecture
APRM - Africa Peer Review Mechanism
AU - African Union
AUC - African Union Commission
AUDA - African Union Development Agency
AU-YVC - African Union Youth Volunteers Corps
AYWL - African Young Women Leaders
CDF - Consultative Dialogue Framework
CEWARN - Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism
CIDO - Citizens and Diaspora Organisations Directorate
COMESA - Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
CRRs - Country Review Reports
CSOs - Civil Society Organisations
CSSDCA - Conference on Security, Stability, Development, and Cooperation in Africa
CSVMS - Country Strutural Vulnerability Mitigation Strategy
CSVRA - Country Structural Vulnerability and Resilience Assessment
EAC - East African Community
EACSOF - East African Civil Society Organizations' Forum
ECCAS - Economic Community of Central African States
ECOSOCC - Economic Social and Cultural Council
HLD - High-Level Dialogue
IGAD - Intergovernmental Authority on Development
NECs - National ECOSOCC Chapters
NEPAD - New Partnership for Africa's Development
NGS - National Governing Councils
NGOs - Non-Governmental Organisations
NHRIs - National Human Rights Institutions
NPOAs - National Programmes of Action
PAP - Pan-African Parliament
PAPS - Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security
PSC - Peace and Security Council
RECs - Regional Economic Communities
RDC - Regional Dialogue Committee
RMs - Regional Mechanisms
SADCC - Southern African Development Community
SAf-CNGO - Southern Africa Civil Society Organisations Forum
SATUCC - Southern African Trade Union Coordination Council
SCCs - Sectoral Cluster Committees
OAU - Organisation of the African Union
WACSOF - West African Civil Society Forum
YACW - Young Africans Writing Competition

Background
& Context

01

1.1 Background

Continental efforts to harness the contribution of citizens to achieving the vision of **"a united and strong Africa,"** which predates the formation of the African Union (AU), found major expression in the collective commitment of African Heads of State and Government during the process of transforming the Organisation of African Union (OAU) into the AU. Apart from acknowledging the need to "build a partnership between governments and all segments of African civil society"[1] in the preamble of the Constitutive Act, clear provisions were also made in Articles 4(c), 5(c)(h), 17 and 22 for the participation of citizens in the activities of the Union and the establishment of institutions mandated to facilitate citizen engagement. In addition to advancing the continental and regional commitments to citizens' engagements, the provisions provided preliminary indications of the AU's approach to achieving the desired goal. It also established the normative foundations for existing citizen mobilisations, and Africa's civil society in general, to pursue their integration into AU processes.[2]

In pursuit of this goal, the AU's approach has taken two major forms. The first is through the establishment of **institutions and organs that facilitate citizen engagement, participation, and contributions to continental processes**. This has seen the establishment of institutions such as the Economic Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC), the Citizens and Diaspora Directorate (CIDO), the Pan-African Parliament (PAP), the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), and other related institutions. Collectively, these institutions constitute established entry points for citizens' contribution to continental policy formulation. For example, ECOSOCC – established through the adoption of its statute at the Third Ordinary Session of the Assembly in July 2004 – has emerged not just as an advisory organ to the Union as per Article 5(c) and 22 of the Constitutive Act, but also as a critical platform for facilitating dialogue, engagement, and exchange among the different components of Africa's civil society and AU institutions. It has thus gained a reputation as an established AU organ for channelling citizens' interests and concerns for continental policy considerations, and enhancing the capacity of civil society for engagement at the highest level of continental policy.

The second approach has involved the **mainstreaming of citizen participation and contribution into major programmes, development aspirations, and policy frameworks.** The 2016 AU Master Road Map of Practical Steps to Silencing the Guns in Africa assigned specific functions to civil society organisations (CSOs) in the search for peace and security on the continent. Similarly, the AU's Agenda 2063 strategic framework, which guides the AU's efforts to achieve sustainable development provides in Aspiration 6, for "An Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children."[3] Such provisions have allowed for policy organs and institutions spearheading the implementation of such programmes to be guided in their efforts to harness citizen input. It has also provided CSOs and other civil society mobilisations the leeway to engage, support, and extend the reach of continental initiatives.

> **An Africa whose development is people-driven**

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1 See the preambular section of the Constitutive Act of the African Union, online here.
2 Amani Africa, 2023. The Role of Civil Society Organisations In African Union's Decision-Making Processes: Agenda Setters, Participants, Collaborators And Shapers?, Amani Report 18, online here.
3 African Union Commission, 2015. Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, April 2015, p.8, online here.

Over the past two decades of the AU's existence, the continental organisation has **progressively enhanced citizen involvement in its activities, and policy formulation** – primarily through the diverse roles played by CSOs at the national, regional, and continental. Efforts have also faced numerous challenges, as the different platforms for engagement across the continent have had to deal with varied forms of citizen mobilisation and engagement in the delivery of their respective roles. While overall progress cannot be discounted, the actual effectiveness of established institutions in facilitating citizen engagement and influencing continental policy remains largely unmeasured. This is mainly due to the disparate nature of existing platforms through which various citizens and civil society mobilisations interface with the AU. In addition, despite the resulting differences in experiences, there is **no unified means of reporting** or consolidating the AU's experiences towards measuring the true state of citizens' engagement with the organisation. There is also **no means of tracking CSOs' input into AU processes.** The need to "**connect with African Citizenry**"[4] was, thus, flagged as one of the five focal areas requiring urgent reform action towards transforming the Union.

1.2 Objective of this report

In efforts to fill this gap, the State of Citizens' Engagement Report was adopted by members of the African Governance Platform as one of its flagship reports at its February 2023 meeting, on the margins of the AU Summit of Heads of States and Governments in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It seeks to primarily provide an **overview of the extent to which the AU and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and Regional Mechanisms (RMs) engage citizens in theiractivities and policy formulation**. It also aims to **identify concrete actions and measures that can enhance citizens' engagement with the AU**. It also seeks to establish the extent to which CSOs are contributing to continental and regional policy-making, implementation, and accountability processes. Apart from documenting the individual experiences of the various AU organs and institutions working with African citizens through CSOs, it is also a tool for measuring the extent of citizen involvement in continental policy processes from the perspective of the AU. Given the report's two-year periodicity, this first edition focuses on establishing the baseline of AU-citizen relations by providing an overview of the AU's engagements with the continent's civil society as of 2024. It also covers the contribution of RECs/RMs in facilitating citizens'engagement, given their involvement in the implementation of continental programmes and frameworks. The role of RECs is discussed as an extension of the AU's engagements through existing regional arrangements.

1.3 Conceptual and methodological approach

The concept of **citizen engagement generally lacks a single definition and often varies slightly in application from one institution to another.** In the context of this report, it is defined as a two-way process of interaction between the AU and African citizens with the aim of fulfilling the AU's goal of building partnerships with all segments of African civil society, towards fulfilling the vision of a united and strong Africa. This contextual usage of the term emphasises four major variables - the role of authority, the place of citizens, the process of interaction between actors, and the ultimate goal of enhancing development. This translates into a wide range of interactions between the AU and African citizens, resulting from consultations, collaborations, participation, and empowerment initiatives, towards enhancing citizen input and

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4 African Union, Overview of Institutional Reforms, online here.

involvement in continental policy processes. Though in the context of the concept of citizen engagement, citizens may act as individuals, in the context of this study, organised civil mobilisations and civil society organisations (CSOs) are defined as representatives or proxies to citizens' engagements.

Consequently, the use of "citizen" reflects its generic and inclusive reference to all African people rather than in its legal sense. As per the provisions of Article 3 of the Protocol on Amendments of the AU Constitutive Act, citizens also include the African diaspora.[5]

Given the multiplicity of AU actors involved across different sectors, this report employed a mixed-methods approach to the collection of data. This involved detailed content analysis of existing official AU organ reports and frameworks. This enabled the collection of extensive data, covering the various organs and institutions of the AU towards mapping their experiences and establishing the context and state of their engagements with African citizen formations. This was complemented by primary data collected through interviews with key informants purposefully sampled on the basis of their direct involvement in facilitating citizen engagements or extensive understanding of AU-citizen engagements. The selected actors were drawn from organisations with an established history of working with and engaging AU policy processes over the last two decades.

To get a good sample and randomised input from the wide range of CSOs involved in the study, **a survey was administered to ECOSOCC platform members, resulting in feedback from 222 responses.** This overview informed the identification of **key trends, persistent challenges, and lessons learned from two decades of AU's engagement with CSO actors.**

For facilitate data collection and ensure representation of institutional experiences, contributors were targeted based on their institutional affiliations. Thus, data was based on institutional engagements reflecting the experiences of the various AU organs in their engagements with CSOs. However, given the thematic focus of the various AU organs, the eventual disaggregation of data in this report reflects the state of thematic engagements.

The combination of methods afforded the study the needed flexibility for gaining deeper insights into the issues, enabled effective triangulation of data collected, and strengthened the analytical rigour. For example, the use of key informant interviews made it easier to incorporate key experts into the deduction of trends, challenges, and lessons, as well as the incorporation of nuances through guided exchanges.

> **Citizen engagement is a two-way process of interaction between the AU and African citizens, aimed at building partnerships with all segments of civil society towards a united and strong Africa.**

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5 This amendment recognises the role of the African Diaspora in the development of the continent and expressly "invite and encourage the full participation of the African Diaspora as an important part of our Continent, in the building of the African Union." See Article 3 of the Protocol on Amendments of the AU Constitutive Act, online here.

1.4 Structure of this report

This report is organised into six main sections.

Section 01
focuses on tracing the origins and evolution of AU-citizen engagement by providing a succinct overview of how the AU evolved to allow for citizens' involvement in its activities and policies.

Section 02
focuses on tracing the origins and evolution of AU-citizen engagement by providing a succinct overview of how the AU evolved to allow for citizens' involvement in its activities and policies.

Section 03
provides a detailed background to the report, the problem statement, utility of the report, and the approach to data collection.

Section 04
presents findings from collected data in relation to observed trends, challenges encountered, progress made, and existing opportunities. It examines the current state of affairs through the lens of CSO and AU experiences and perspectives.

Section 05
provides a synthesis and consolidation of comparable lessons learned, and practices for enhancing the AU's engagement with civil society and citizens.

Section 06
concludes by identifying major policy issues requiring attention, and their associated solutions targeting Member States, the ECOSOCC, other AU organs, RECs/RMs, CSOs, Citizens' Formations, and Strategic Partners.

02

Evolution of AU-Citizens Engagement

2.1 From state-led continental action to people-centred AU

The transformation of the **OAU** to the AU marked a significant shift in the continental approach towards governance and citizen involvement. Prior to this, continental efforts, which were argely centred on the decolonisation agenda, were mainly led by states and **did not include citizen groups and citizen-centred mobilisations.** As the majority of African countries attained independence and the continent's political landscape began to stabilise, the OAU's shortcomings in tackling emerging issues such as economic stagnation, governance challenges, social inequalities, intra-state conflicts, and external influences became evident. This informed the search for a more comprehensive framework in efforts to address the continent's political, economic, security, and social concerns.

As part of the transformation of the OAU into the AU, **African leaders envisioned the AU as a more integrated and people-focused** organisation capable of spearheading the search for African solutions to African problems. The AU was designed to be more than just a political union. It endeavours to drive socio-economic integration and development across the continent. Unlike its predecessor, the AU adopted the principle of "non-indifference" rather than "non-interference", which granted the organisation the leeway to intervene in member states to prevent human rights abuses and conflicts. This paradigm shift made it imperative for the involvement of the African people in continental efforts. It also created opportunities and spaces for the actualisation of the AU's goals.

The African Union was designed to be more than a political union.

Even though prior to this transformation, the relationship between the OAU and CSOs was ad-hoc, the recognition of the importance of civil society in efforts to realise continental goals began to emerge in the decisions and charters of OAU meetings in the early 1990s. The most notable of these include the 1990 OAU Assembly's Declaration on the Political and Socio-economic Situation in Africa, which highlighted the fundamental changes taking place in the world; the 1991 African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation adopted by the OAU Assembly in Arusha; the 1991 Abuja treaty establishing the African Economic Community (AEC), which called for the setting up of "a mechanism for consultation with such non-governmental organisations."; the Conference on Security, Stability, Development, and Cooperation in Africa (CSSDCA), whose operational principles were contained in the Kampala Document on the CSSDCA (1991); and the 2000 solemn declaration on the CSSDCA, adopted by the OAU Assembly of Heads of States and Government in 2000. The CSSDCA encouraged the participation and contribution of civil society in democratisation efforts across the continent. It established a mechanism for CSO input into continental decision making in the form of a biennial conference during OAU Summits. Beyond the emphasis on the role of civil society in Africa's development and integration processes, the increasing expression of the need for action on CSO involvement in continental processes culminated in a plea by OAU Secretary-General Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim, to the Council of Ministers and the Assembly of Heads of State and Government in 1997, for a formal collaboration between the OAU and CSOs.

2.2 Key milestones in the AU's Citizen inclusion journey

The **evolution of citizens' engagement under the AU** has been characterised by several major milestones.

The **first** was the adoption of the AU Constitutive Act in 2000 which, among other things, emphasised the importance of the "participation of the African peoples in the activities of the Union."10 This was a major milestone as its provisions on citizen inclusion are one the defining departures of the AU from its predecessor, the OAU, and established the primary legal framework for the AU's engagement of citizens.

Second was the strategic move to establish ECOSOCC in 2004 as a means to institutionalise citizen participation and engagement to ensure that the voices of various civil society actors could be heard at the continental level. In this direction, ECOSOCC was established as an advisory organ composed of different social and professional groups from member states.

The **third** and most impactful milestone is the inclusion of Aspiration 6 of the AU Agenda 2063, which was adopted in 2015. This milestone clearly reflects efforts to mainstream citizen engagement as it aims to harness the potential of women, youth, and civil society,[6] while outlining a long-term vision for the continent's transformation over 50 years. It also emphasises an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa, driven by its citizens and representing a dynamic force in the international arena.

Also important are the several protocols, charters, including all the Shared Values Instruments that have been adopted to promote human rights, democracy, and good governance since the establishment of the AU. These include the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance (ACDEG), the ACHPR, the Youth Charter, the Anti-corruption Charter and the Charter on the Values and Principles of Decentralisation, which all encourage states to involve citizens in democratic processes and policymaking.[7] To enhance it, the Africa Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) was also established as a tool for sharing experiences, reinforcing best practices, identifying deficiencies, and assessing capacity-building needs to foster policies, as well as standards and practices that lead to political stability, high economic growth, sustainable development and accelerated sub-regional and continental economic integration. Furthermore, the establishment of AU's New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), launched in 2001 and subsequently restructured into the African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD), also marked a milestone as it seeks to foster economic development and alleviate poverty through increased cooperation between governments and CSOs.[8]

These milestones indicate the AU's commitment to transforming the continent into a unified, prosperous, and inclusive society. It also expresses the **AU's commitment to involve African citizens in the quest to address the continent's development challenges.** For details on major historical developments since 1990 (see timeline 1).

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6 African Union Commission "Agenda 2063: The Africa we want." Popular version (2015). p.8-9, online here.

7 Ndou, Siphiwe D. "State and civil society relations perspectives for good governance: propositions for the Africa agenda 2063 aspirations." Journal of Public Administration and Development Alternatives (JPADA) 1.1 (2016), p.28-44.

8 Glen, Patrick J. "Institutionalizing democracy in Africa: a comment on the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance." African Journal of Legal Studies 5.2 (2012), p.119-146.

AU Frameworks, Mechanisms and Processes for Citizens' Engagement

03

In recognition of the importance of African citizens in the socio-economic and political development of the continent, **the AU has adopted multiple legal and institutional frameworks, mechanisms, and processes, within which its citizen engagement efforts are situated**. These include principal documents such as the Constitutive Act, the PSC Protocol, the ACDEG, the ECOSOCC Statutes, the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, the Children's Charter, the Youth Charter, and frameworks related to accreditation and the Diaspora engagement. For purposes of detailing the main anchors of the AU's engagement, this section discusses the AU Charters and the Peace and Security Council (PSC) Protocol. The other frameworks are discussed in sections where the primary organs and units leading their implementation are detailed in this report.

3.1 Legal frameworks guiding AU's citizens' engagement

AU Constitutive Act

The African Union's engagement with citizens is provided for in three major legal frameworks. Foremost among them is the AU Constitutive Act which places a premium on citizen engagement as a basis for a common vision of a united and strong Africa, and to address the myriad challenges that the Continent faces.[9] Article 4(c) of the Constitutive Act provides that "The Union shall function in accordance with the following principles… (c) participation of the African peoples in the activities of the Union." It also establishes several institutions in Articles 17, 18, 20 and 21, including the Pan-African Parliament (PAP), the Court of Justice, the AU Commission and the Economic Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC), respectively, to enhance citizen engagement in the activities of the AU and political and socio-economic development in Africa.[10]

The PSC Protocol and Rules of Procedure

Engagement with citizens in the management of peace and security challenges is also provided for in the 2002 Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the PSC of the African Union, and Rules 21 and 22 of the Rules of Procedure of the PSC. In Article 20 of the Protocol, Member States agreed that the PSC shall,

> *encourage non-governmental organisations, community-based and other civil society organisations, particularly women's organisations, to participate actively in the efforts aimed at promoting peace, security, and stability in Africa. When required, such organisations may be invited to address the Peace and Security Council.*

It provides in Articles 8(10c) and 11 regarding open meetings that,

> *civil society organisations involved and/or interested in a conflict or a situation under consideration by the Peace and Security Council may be invited to participate, without the right to vote, in the discussion relating to that conflict or situation.[11]*

The Peace and Security Council may also,

> *hold informal consultations with parties concerned by or interested in a conflict or a situation under its consideration, as well as with… civil society organisations as may be needed for the discharge of its responsibilities.[12]*

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9 Preamble AU Constitutive Act.
10 Article 5(c), (h), 17 and 22 of the AU Constitutive Act.
11 Article 8(10c) of the PSC Protocol.
12 Article 8(10) of the PSC Protocol.

The Livingstone Formula and Maseru Conclusions

The Livingstone Formula, adopted at the AU- PSC Retreat in December 2008, further shapes the working mechanism and interactions between the PSC and CSOs in the promotion of peace, security, and stability on the continent. The formula acknowledges ECOSOCC's role in coordinating CSO participation and sets clear criteria and procedural guidelines for CSOs wishing to engage with the PSC. The requirements align with Article 6 of the Statutes of ECOSOCC which provides, among others, for CSOs to be registered, uphold AU objectives and principles, be accredited to the AU and demonstrate a record of activities at national, regional, or continental level.[13]

Since its adoption and implementation, the Livingstone Formula has contributed to structured engagements such as annual meetings between the PSC and ECOSOCC. It has enhanced the possibility for CSOs to participate in PSC meetings, contribute to AU missions, and submit reports influencing the Council's decisions.[14] This structured approach ensures that CSOs can contribute effectively to discussions on peace and security, enhancing the council's responsiveness to ground realities.

Building on the foundation laid by the Livingstone Formula, the Maseru Conclusions emerged from the 6th Retreat of the AU Peace and Security Council in February 2014. The Conclusions focus on enhancing the implementation of the Livingstone Formula and reaffirming ECOSOCC's coordinating role and the need for a flexible and dynamic application of engagement principles in the PSC's interactions with CSOs.

The conclusions also advocate for a **more regular and structured involvement of CSOs in the PSC's work**, suggesting quarterly briefings focusing on early warning and conflict prevention. They call for a more systematic inclusion of CSO inputs in PSC deliberations, ensuring their contributions are relevant and timely.

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13 Refer to Paragraph 4 of the Conclusions on a Mechanism for Interaction Between the Peace and Security Council and Civil Society Organisations in the Promotion of Peace, Security, and Stability in Africa, Retreat of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union, held on 4th-5th December 2008 in Livingstone, Zambia (PSC/PR/(CLX)).

14 Aeby, Michael. "Navigating Channels for Civil Society Participation in Conflict Prevention and Peace-Making in the African Peace and Security Architecture." Civil Society and Peacebuilding in Sub-Saharan Africa in the Anthropocene: An Overview. Cham: Springer International Publishing (2022), p.465-498.

Declaration
Declaration on the political and socio-economic situation in Africa by the OAU Assembly.

1990

1991

Adoption
- African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation.
- Abuja treaty establishing the African Economic Community.

Adoption
AU Constitutive Act in Lomé (Togo) which includes provisions for the establishment of ECOSOCC and other structures.

1996

2001

Convening
- First African Union Civil Society Conference in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia).
- Establishment of the Civil Society Desk at the AU.

Institution
Establishment of the AU–Civil Society Provisional Working Group to develop the ECOSOCC statutes.

2002

2004

Institution
Formal establishment of ECOSOCC during the third Ordinary Session of the AU Assembly in Addis Ababa.

ECOSOCC
Launch of the interim ECOSOCC in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) with key figures like Prof. Wangari Maathai.

2005

2008

Institution
- Launch of the First Permanent General Assembly of ECOSOCC
- in Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania).
- AU-CSO Consultation on operationalizing Article 20 of the Peace and Security Council Protocol.
- Adoption of ECOSOCC's first Rules of Procedure.

Advocacy
OAU Secretary-General calls for formal collaboration between the OAU and CSOs.

2016

2016

Delegation
ECOSOCC tasked with popularizing Agenda 2063.

Timeline 1: Major developments in AU-CSOs relations

3.2 Institutional frameworks and Agenda 2063

The Constitutive Act of the AU outlines a range of institutions in Articles 17 – 22, with the mandate to spearhead various aspects of the AU's work. Apart from those that have direct citizen engagement mandates, such as ECOSOCC and Pan-African Parliament, the majority of AU's core institutions and mechanisms established later, have citizen engagement components. The range of their roles with respect to citizen engagement is more illustrated within the broader rubric of the contribution to the realisation of Agenda 2063. This section, therefore provides an overview of the range of institutional frameworks fronting AU citizens' engagement, from the perspective of their assigned and/or ongoing roles in relation to Agenda 2063.

Citizen engagement, as articulated under Agenda 2063, points to the AU's ethos of people-centred development as a prerequisite for Africa's sustainable development. Significantly, the **AU recognises that its capacity and efficacy as a continental entity are intrinsically connected to citizen engagement** in its processes. Citizen engagement by the AU and its organs engenders trust and confidence, legitimacy, ownership, effectiveness, efficacy, and sustainability of its policies, processes, and actions. Ultimately, **citizen engagement by the AU organs and institutions is not just a moral obligation or procedural requirement, but also a strategic imperative for the success of the AU and the attainment of Agenda 2063**. It spells out a vision of "an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens, representing a dynamic force in the international arena." Aspiration 6 of the AU Agenda 2063 underscores the necessity and vision of "an Africa whose development is people driven, and relying on the potential offered by African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children."

The rest of this section discusses the seven (7) aspirations of Agenda 2063 (see Figure 1) and identifies the range of institutions with specific citizen-engagement roles.

Figure 1: Aspirations of Agenda 2063

Citizen Engagement Under Aspiration 1

Aspiration 1 of Agenda 2063 envisions a prosperous Africa founded on inclusive growth and sustainable development. This vision is characterised by a high standard of living, well-educated citizens, a skills revolution, healthy and well-nourished citizens, transformed economies, modern agriculture, a thriving blue economy, and environmentally sustainable, climate-resilient economies. As noted in the AU's Second Continental Report on the Implementation of Agenda 2063, this is to be achieved in part through boosting entrepreneurship, the creation of decent jobs, promoting affordable and quality health, ensuring productivity and value addition, and achieving economic diversification.[15]

Institutions that are playing notable roles in the realisation of these goals include the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), the Pan-African University (PAU) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

Citizen Engagement Under Aspiration 2

Under this Aspiration, the AU aspires to create a united Africa, establish continental financial and monetary institutions, and world class infrastructure which criss-crosses the continent. The political and economic integration as contemplated under this Aspiration entail a range of processes including free movement of persons and free trade within the Continent.[16]

At the centre of these processes are the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the AU Free Movement of Persons Protocol.[17] The AfCFTA was established in 2018 as one of the flagships of Agenda 2063, with the aim to establish a single continental market of 55 Member States of the AU. The AU Free Movement Protocol provides for free

movement of persons, their rights of residence, and establishment across Africa. Currently, the AfCFTA Secretariat, the African Union Commission (AUC) and ECOSOCC have been engaging African citizens on processes that relate to the AfCFTA and its associated free movement of persons as envisioned under Aspiration 2.

Citizen Engagement Under Aspiration 3

This aspiration under which the African continent seeks to entrench a culture of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice, and the rule of law is fundamental to the achievement of good governance and democracy in Africa, which guarantees respect for the rule of law and enjoyment of human rights by African citizens. In efforts to fulfil it, the AU has adopted a range of governance and human rights instruments, the most important of which include the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and its associated Protocols, as well as the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG). In addition, major institutional arrangements such as the Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department of the AU Commission, the African Governance Architecture Platform, the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (AfCHPR), the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), and the African Committee on the Rights and the Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) are key players in efforts to enhance democracy, good governance, and the rule of law across the continent.

Citizen Engagement Under Aspiration 4

The AU aspires to a peaceful Africa characterised by peace, security, and stability. In this direction, the continent has keenly established and operationalised institutions and mechanisms for the prevention and management of security

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15 AU, Second Continental Report on the Implementation of Agenda 2063 (2022), p.15.

16 Ibid., p.30.

17 Ibid.

challenges, including conflicts. The commitment is based on principles that entrench a culture of dialogue-oriented conflict prevention and resolution. These principles are espoused in AU instruments such as the AU Constitutive Act and the Protocol to the Constitutive Act that established the PSC.

Citizen Engagement Under Aspiration 5

Aspiration 5 encapsulates Africa's vision for a strong cultural identity, common heritage, values, and ethics. As noted in the AU's Second Continental Report on the Implementation of Agenda 2063, the AU places great importance on the values and ideals that buttress Pan-Africanism.[18] The AU appreciates African Cultural Renaissance as "a critical catalyst for harnessing Africa's diversity optimally and for peaceful harmonious co-existence."[19] The Aspiration for cultural renaissance is outlined by AU instruments such as the Charter for the African Cultural Renaissance which recognises that "the unity of Africa has its foundation first and foremost in its history". The attainment of this goal is pursued by organs and institutions such as the African Union Commission and The African Academy of Languages.

Citizen Engagement Under Aspiration 6

The African Union places great value on the inclusive and active participation of citizens in decision-making, for continued stability, growth, and socio-economic development.[20] As such, Aspiration 6 of Agenda 2063 underscores the need to harness the potential of African citizens, especially women, youth, and children, such that they are able to take part in the development of the Continent. The AU recognises that its development objectives cannot be attained without the participation of its youth and women. The African continent is

the youngest continent in relation to population with about 60% of its citizens being below the age of 25, and 40% of that being 15 years and below.[21] It is estimated that by 2030, 42% of the young people in the world will be from Africa.[22]

Consequently, the AU has adopted various normative frameworks that promote the participation of African citizens in the political, social, and economic development of the continent. These frameworks include the AU Constitutive Act, the ACDEG, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, and the African Youth Charter. In line with these instruments and Aspiration 6 of Agenda 2063, the attainment of citizen engagement is spearheaded by institutional platforms such as ECOSOCC, the African Union Commission, and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM).

Citizen Engagement Under Aspiration 7

Under Aspiration 7, Africa aims to become "a strong, united and influential global player and partner." Continental commitment to this aspiration is demonstrated through different measures such as the adoption of the AfCFTA agreement, which seeks to enhance intra-African trade, the undertaking to finance the AU budget, and the adoption of African positions on global issues such as climate change. The key institutional frameworks leading efforts to involve citizens in the pursuit of this aspiration are the AfCFTA Secretariat and the African Union Commission.

The next section outlines the approach and state of engagement of these institutions, and their attempt to engage citizens as part of the continental drive towards the attainment of the various aspirations of Agenda 2063.

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18 AU, Second Continental Report on the Implementation of Agenda 2063 (2022) p.41.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., p43.
21 Africa CDC, 2nd Africa Centres For Disease Control And Prevention (Africa CDC) Youth Pre-Conference 25-26 November 2023. Online here.
22 Ibid.

State of AU-Citizen Engagement: Trends; Challenges, Progress & Opportunities

04

4.1 The nature of existing platforms and institutional frameworks

The AU currently has multiple approaches or mechanisms for engaging or involving citizens in the pursuit of continental goals. These observer or affiliation status organisations serve as channels for receiving communications or complaints from citizens, on topical issues, avenues for making inputs to state reports, and the participation of citizens and citizen group representatives in AU activities. They also serve as avenues for experts' during into AU discussions and convenings, as they are given the opportunity to participate in such continental activities. These approaches constitute the main means by which the various institutional platforms and organs with the mandate to engage citizens or facilitate citizens' involvement in the continental process operate. This section assesses the state of each institutional platform in their efforts to fulfil their respective contributions to the attainment of assigned goals in the context of the functioning of the AU and the pursuit of Agenda 2063.

Citizens and Diaspora Organisations Directorate (CIDO)

The Pan-African Parliament (PAP)

The AU Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC)

Africa Peer Review Mechanism (APRM)

The African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (AfCHPR)

The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR)

The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child's (ACERWC)

The Peace and Security Council (PSC)

The African Union Commission (AUC)

Africa Governance Architecture (AGA)

The African Academy of Languages

The The African Continental Free Trade Area Secretariat

Citizens and Diaspora Organisations Directorate (CIDO)

Africa's Civil Society Engagements

The responsibility to implement the continental vision of achieving "**a people-oriented and people-driven organisation based on a partnership between governments, civil society and diasporas**,"[23] is the main responsibility of CIDO. In the pursuit of this role, the Civil Society Division of the Directorate extensively engages all categories of social, professional and cultural groups as well as non-governmental organisations operating on the continent, including faith-based actors, trade unions, and professional associations, among others. This is done to enable the mainstreaming of civil society into the work of the Commission. The Division serves as the eyes and ears of the Cabinet of the Chairperson and Deputy Chairpersons. This is unlike ECOSOCC which operates with a broader mandate to mainstream CSO and citizens engagement within the whole union and its organs.

Mandate
Engage civil society, faith-based actors, trade unions, youth, and the diaspora in AU processes.

Engagement channels
IFDF, iDOVE, OATUU Forum, Diaspora Networks.

Participation figures
3 diaspora networks, 3 IFDF forums, biannual diaspora workshops.

Challenges
Weak institutional ties to peace and security structures and limited member state buy-in.

Impact
AU's core link to citizens and diaspora.

Two of the Civil Society Division's engagements have defined its important contribution to the realisation of the continental goal of enhancing the involvement of African citizens:

- The first is the Directorate's achievements in fostering the AU's engagements with the faith community over the last decade, through the rolling out of an interfaith dialogue forum (IFDF), an interfaith dialogue on violent extremism (iDove)

- An international partnership on religion and sustainable development (PaRD).

Established in 2010, in appreciation of the importance of faith in the attainment of peace, justice, and development, the **IFDF has emerged as an AU platform for "cooperative interaction between people of different religious and/or spiritual faiths or beliefs**." Since the first Interfaith Dialogue Forum held in Abuja, Nigeria, in 2010, follow up meetings were held in 2016 (Abuja), and 2018 (Ndjamena) on matters related to justice, peace, security, and development on the African continent.[24] Through its partnership with the King Abdullah International Centre for Interfaith and Interreligious Dialogue (KAICIID), and the IFDF's 12-member elected Steering Committee from the 5 regions of the continent, the platform has emerged as the major point through which the AU engages and harnesses the continent's religious communities at the level of individuals and institutions. One of the platform's most recent continental engagements of Africa's religious leaders was through the "Continental Day of Prayer and Action to Counter the COVID-19 Pandemic" on 22 May 2020.[25]

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23 CIDO, 'Diaspora and Civil Society Engagement', online here.
24 African Union, "Interfaith Dialogue Forum", online here.
25 "Africa Continental Day of Prayer and Action to counter the COVID-19 pandemic", online here.

CIDO's Civil Society Division also **engages youth from diverse backgrounds and religious persuasions through its iDOVE platforms**, which combine dialogues and religion in addressing violent extremism on the continent. Since the establishment of the platform in 2017, CIDO organises an annual forum for dialogue among Africa's young people. It is aimed primarily, at discussing violent extremism and ways of addressing it. It has also championed the implementation of several youth-led projects and trainings around communication, arts, sports, and culture.

In addition to its efforts in engaging Africa's religious community, CIDO also runs the **African Union-Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU) Partnership Forum aimed at harnessing the input and support of Africa's organised labour for AU programmes and goals.** Through this platform, established in 2009, the AU engages labour organisations from the five regions of the continent through deliberations on topical discussions – issues bordering on continental policy design and implementation questions.[26]

Through these engagements, the CSO Division remains an important entry point for efforts to engage African people in achieving peace and stability. The major challenge associated with the AU's engagement of citizens through these platforms is around weaknesses in institutionalising platforms and establishing their clear connection to the various elements of the continent's preventive diplomacy tools, such as FEMWISE, the Panel of the Wise, and WiseYouth, within the framework of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). This is particularly important in the case of iDOVE and the IFDF which are crucial conflict prevention and management tools.

CIDO's Diaspora Engagement

Article 3 of the Protocol on Amendments of the AU Constitutive Act recognises **the African diaspora as an integral part of the continent** and invites them to participate in continental efforts and goals. CIDO's diaspora division is responsible for mainstreaming diaspora engagement in the work of the African Union Commission.

CIDO has spearheaded the establishment of various regional diaspora networks that serve to promote the linkages between the diaspora and the AU. As part of this effort, three major diaspora networks have been established. These include the Pan African-Australasia Diaspora Network (PAADN), which serves the diaspora in Australia, Asia, and Oceania; the African Diaspora Network-Europe, established in 2015 to facilitate engagement with the European diaspora; and the Western Hemisphere Diaspora Network (WHADN), established in 2022, comprising the diaspora in North America, South America, and the Caribbean, to facilitate ongoing linkages with the AU.

CIDO utilises a number of avenues for engaging with these networks. The first is through regional consultative platforms which bring together diaspora networks and groups at topical regional consultative conferences. In implementing this, the African Diaspora Consultative Forum (ADCF) has been the primary platform which brings together representatives from diaspora organisations and relevant AU organs on a regular basis, to discuss key issues. It provides a platform for diaspora stakeholders to share their views on AU policies, plans, and programs, with the goal of influencing decision-making. It is a means by which the AU directly engages diaspora networks. The conferences also provide a forum for CIDO, diaspora groups, and other stakeholders to explore partnership opportunities and to ensure that diaspora activities are aligned with, and feed into AU priorities. They also facilitate information sharing and brain

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26 The African Union, "Trade Unions", online here.

circulation of expertise between regions. CIDO also organises **Diaspora Focal Point Workshops on a biannual basis to bring together diaspora representatives and member state focal points.** In 2016 and 2018, two Continental Workshops for Diaspora Focal Points for AU Member States were held, through which Member States were equipped with the technical resources to engage the diaspora effectively. These workshops serve as an important platform for coordination and capacity building. At the workshops, diaspora networks from different regions elect representatives to serve on the diaspora steering committee for fixed terms. This helps strengthen diaspora representation within AU structures over time. CIDO also invites diaspora focal points nominated by member states to participate. This provides an opportunity for focal points and their regional diaspora counterparts to network, discuss challenges, and identify joint priorities. The workshops offer the opportunity to share strategic updates, program concepts, and good practices, with participants. This helps build understanding between diaspora groups, structuring their engagements with the AU for greater impact. The workshops also allow diaspora stakeholders to provide feedback to CIDO on ongoing initiatives and programming. Their inputs help shape more inclusive and responsive diaspora engagement by the AU.

Through these efforts, CIDO has been able to cultivate a willing and vibrant core group of diaspora stakeholders who are actively engaged with CIDO on various topics and initiatives aimed at enhancing their engagement with the AU. This has been instrumental in raising awareness about the diaspora and animating spaces for their participation in AU processes. Despite progress made, key challenges remain ¬– among them the tendency of diaspora groups to work in silos, and difficulties faced in securing buy-in from some member states, to establish enabling policies and allocate dedicated resources for diaspora engagement at the national level. Through these efforts, CIDO has become an important channel for harnessing the input of Africa's diaspora in pursuit of "The Africa we want" agenda.
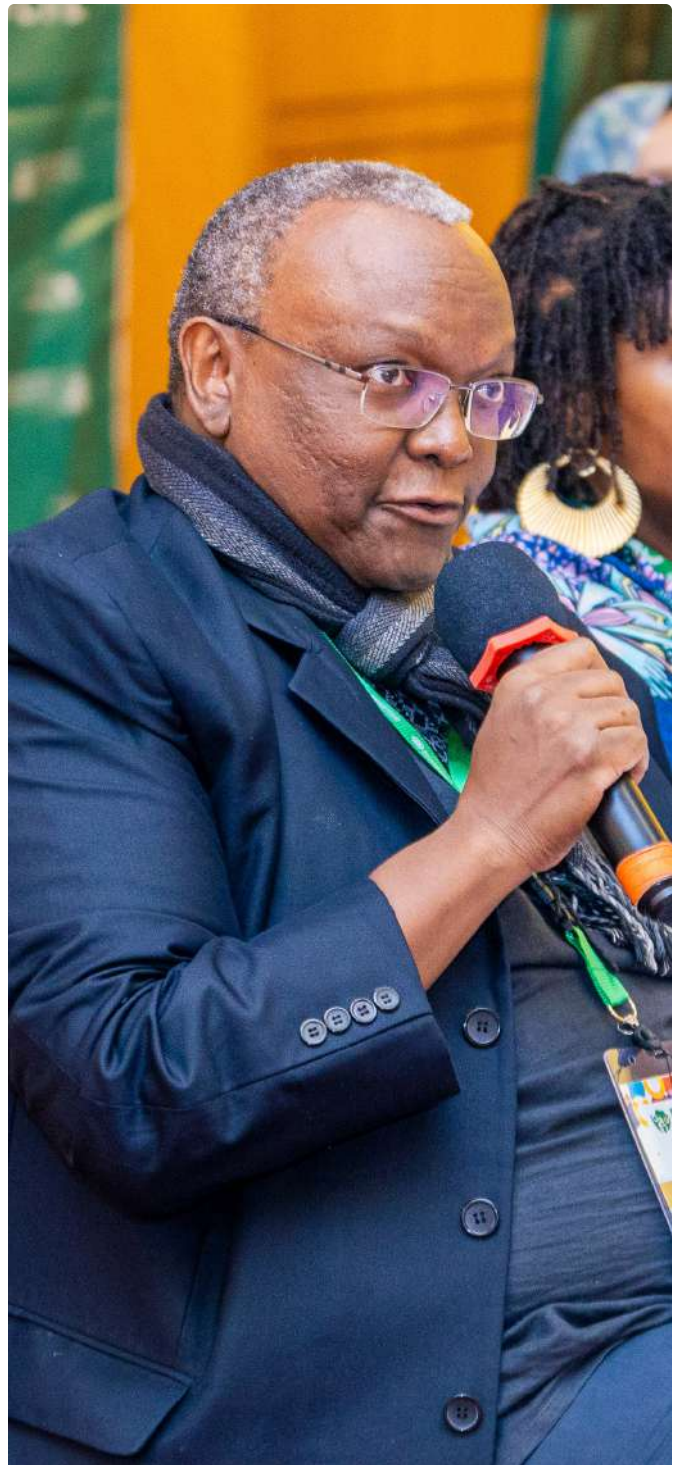
The AU Constitutive Act recognises the African diaspora as an integral part of the continent.

Pan-African Parliament (PAP)

The Pan-African Parliament (PAP) is a critical institution when it comes to the promotion of popular **participation and representation of African citizens in deliberations and decisions on governance, democracy, and human rights in Africa.** Headquartered in Midrand, South Africa, PAP was established in 2004 as an advisory and consultative institution in accordance with Article 5 of the AU Constitutive Act. As provided in its Protocol, PAP is based on "a vision to provide a common platform for African peoples and their grassroots organisations to be more involved in discussions and decision-making on the problems and challenges facing the Continent." [27]

Of all the AU platforms for citizens' engagement, the PAP is the one crafted as the legislative arm of the AU. It "**provides a platform for African peoples and their grass-roots organisations to be involved in discussions and decision-making on the and challenges facing the continent**." [28] With a representation of 5 per country, from all 55 member states of the AU, reflecting the diversity of political opinions in national parliaments, and a total of 275 PAP parliamentarians, it fulfils its citizen's engagement mandate in two ways. The first is by serving as a structured avenue for channelling diverse citizen inputs from the grassroots, into regional and continental processes. The second is through the facilitation of the interpretation of those views and inputs so as to translate them into harmonised forms that can be considered for adoption by AU decision-making actors.

As of 2023, apart from the statutory meetings of PAP's various structures, PAP is involved in various ways, in working closely with REC and national parliaments, or other deliberative bodies within member states. They are also involved in organising Annual Speakers and Clerks Conferences, meetings of vulnerable groups, as well as Women and Youth Conferences aimed at harnessing the voices of the African people to inform AU policy processes. The Women and Youth conferences are organised by the Women's Caucus and the Caucus on Youth, respectively, within the framework of PAP's Rules of Procedure. Inputs emanating from such platforms have often informed AU Policy and decision-making processes.

PAP also engages the African people through deliberate actions including co-organising workshops, hosting Civil Society Forums, and inviting technical presentations from CSOs to its Permanent Committees. One of the biggest platforms for PAP's meaningful engagement of the African people is through its established partnerships with the University of Pretoria's Centre for Human Rights. Through a 2017 Memorandum of Understanding between the two organisations, a CSO Forum was established in May 2019. Though still work in progress, it

Mandate
Promote citizen participation and oversight across AU policy processes.

Engagement channels
Women & Youth conferences, CSO Forums, Speakers & Clerks conferences.

Statistics
275 MPs (5 per country) engaging with CSOs and academia.

Challenges
Limited legislative powers and low public awareness.

Impact
Voice of African citizens in the AU's legislative process.

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27 Preamble of the Protocol to the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community Relating to the PAP.
28 PAP Strategic vision document, p.11.

remains an important platform for interaction between PAP and CSOs in Africa.[29] Under the framework of this agreement, two CSO forums are organised annually on the side-lines of the PAP's Ordinary Sessions. They are a major avenue for PAP's direct interactions with CSOs in Africa on matters concerning the continent. The CSO Forum serves as a platform for fostering collaboration among CSOs on matters related to the PAP. It facilitates dialogue not only among CSOs but also between CSOs and the PAP. Through various initiatives, the CSO Forum aims to raise awareness among CSOs about the operations of the PAP and it actively supports PAP committees in crafting model laws and other impactful initiatives.

Overall, however, PAP's Ordinary Sessions of Parliament provide **a major platform for citizens' engagement.** Unlike other structures, these sessions bring together 275 MPs from across Africa, each representing different policy interests and grassroots constituencies. By offering them the opportunity to deliberate on continental issues, they are not only channelling grassroots challenges for continental awareness. They are directly influencing continental policy as proxies for the citizens they represent. The outcomes of their deliberations represent important recommendations for AU policy actors. In May 2023, for instance, during the Second Ordinary Session of the 6th Parliament, a recommendation was made to formalise and enhance engagement between PAP and CSOs.[30]

While these functions represent positive steps in involving African citizens in discussions and decision-making, disconnects exist regarding the full appreciation of this platform. Currently, **only 49 Member States have ratified** the Protocol establishing the PAP. Among other challenges, the idea of evolving into an institution with full legislative powers, whose members are elected by universal adult suffrage, remains a vision that has yet to see substantial progress or acceptance among member states. Consequently, while PAP is an important platform for indirect citizen engagement, it **neither produces "decisions" nor proposes legislation**. It produces the occasional model law, which is different from proposing hard legislation.

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29 The Centre for Human Rights, About the Pan African Parliament Civil Society Forum. Online here.
30 Ibid.

AU-ECOSSOC

The AU-ECOSOCC spearheads AU efforts to promote **continuous dialogue between all segments of African societies and governments, on issues concerning the continent.** Its conceptualisation was informed by the notion that Africa's development and integration should be driven by a partnership between the African people and its governments. As the primary organ charged with forging "strong partnerships between governments and all segments of the civil society," by Article 5 of the AU Constitutive Act, ECOSOCC is structured differently from other AU organs. Its composition comprises varied social and professional groups, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations, voluntary organisations, cultural organisations, and trade unions, among others.[31]

Mandate
Institutionalise CSO participation in AU processes.

Engagement channels
General Assembly, 10 Sectoral Cluster Committees, Citizens Forum on Democracy, ECOSOCC Pre-Summit Forum, Global Africa People-to-People Forum and Young Africans Writing Competition.

Statistics
347 CSOs, 26 national chapters.

Challenges
Low influence, underfunded national chapters.

Impact
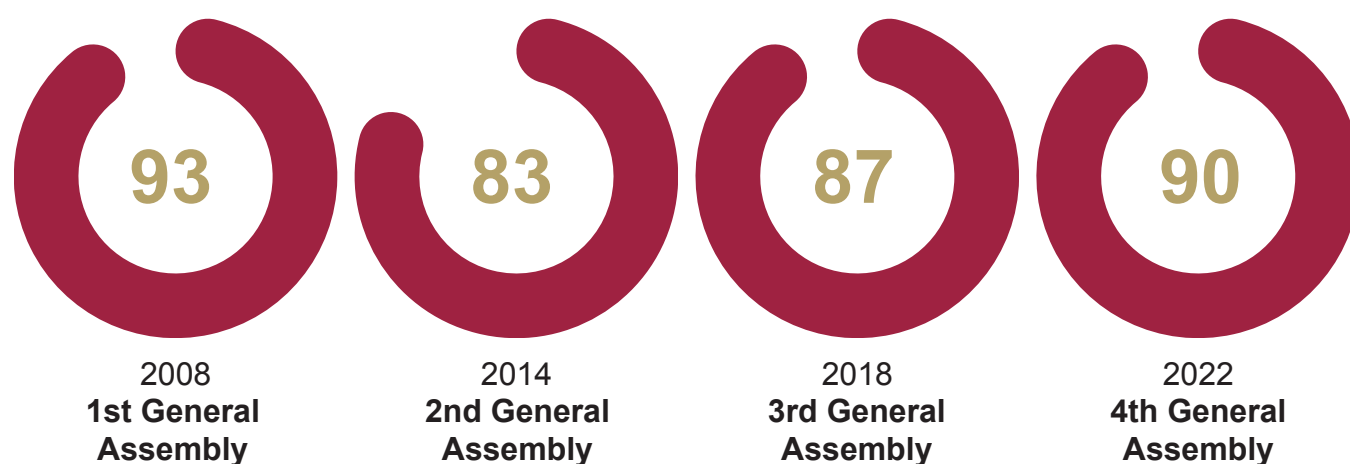Main AU entry point for civil society.

ECOSOCC's contribution to the AU's citizen engagement efforts currently centres around **three major approaches: established institutions, platforms, and knowledge management** through the ECOSOCC Resource Centre. The use of established structures for engaging citizens currently includes the work of the General Assembly, the Sectoral Cluster Committees (SCCs), and the National ECOSOCC Chapters (NECs).

The **most established of these structures is the ECOSOCC General Assembly** – the organ's highest decision-making body, whose primary duty is to drive the policy agenda of the organ. Consisting of 154 African CSOs, members of the GA contribute to the continental goal of improving engagement with citizens through its biennial meetings. From ECOSOCC's first GA in 2008 to its fourth in 2022, a total of 347 CSOs have had the opportunity to participate in continental processes through their membership of the General Assembly. Though the provision for the involvement of diaspora organisations in the General Assembly initially faced challenges with selection, the adoption of the Diaspora Framework by Member States provides the modalities for selecting representation for the 20 diaspora seats, thereby eliminating the challenge.

ECOSOCC's engagement functions through the use of structures also takes the form of SCCs engagements. **The SCCs function as key operational mechanisms mandated to "formulate opinions and provide inputs into the policies and programmes of the African Union."** Through SCCs, ECOSOCC is able to mobilise CSO inputs into continental efforts in the current 10 cluster areas, covering more than 42 separate specific topical areas (see Figure 3).

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31 Ibid.

93

2008
1st General Assembly

83

2014
2nd General Assembly

87

2018
3rd General Assembly

90

2022
4th General Assembly

Figure 2: ECOSOCC General Assembly Membership. Source: AU-ECOSOCC.

1

Peace and Security
- Conflict Management
- Peace Building
- Prevention and Combating Terrorism
- Drug & arms trafficking
- Security reforms

2

Political affairs
- Human Rights & Rule of Law
- Democratic and Constitutional Rule
- Good Governance
- Electoral Institutions
- Humanitarian Affairs

3

Infrastructure and Energy
- Energy
- Transport
- Communications
- Infrastructure
- Tourism

4

Social affairs and Health
- Health
- Children
- Drug Control
- Population & Migration
- Labour and Employment
- Family & Elderly
- The Physically Challenged
- Sports & Culture
- Social Integration

5

Human resources,
- Education & ICT
- Youth
- Human Resources
- Science and Technology

6

Trade and Industry
- Trade
- Industry
- Handicrafts
- Customs and
- Immigration Matters

7

Rural economy and agriculture
- Rural Economy
- Agriculture and Food Security
- Environment
- Water and Natural Resources
- Desertification

8

Economic affairs
- Economic Integration
- Monetary and Financial Affairs
- Private Sector Development

9

Women and Gender
- Women; Gender and Development

10

Cross-cutting programmes
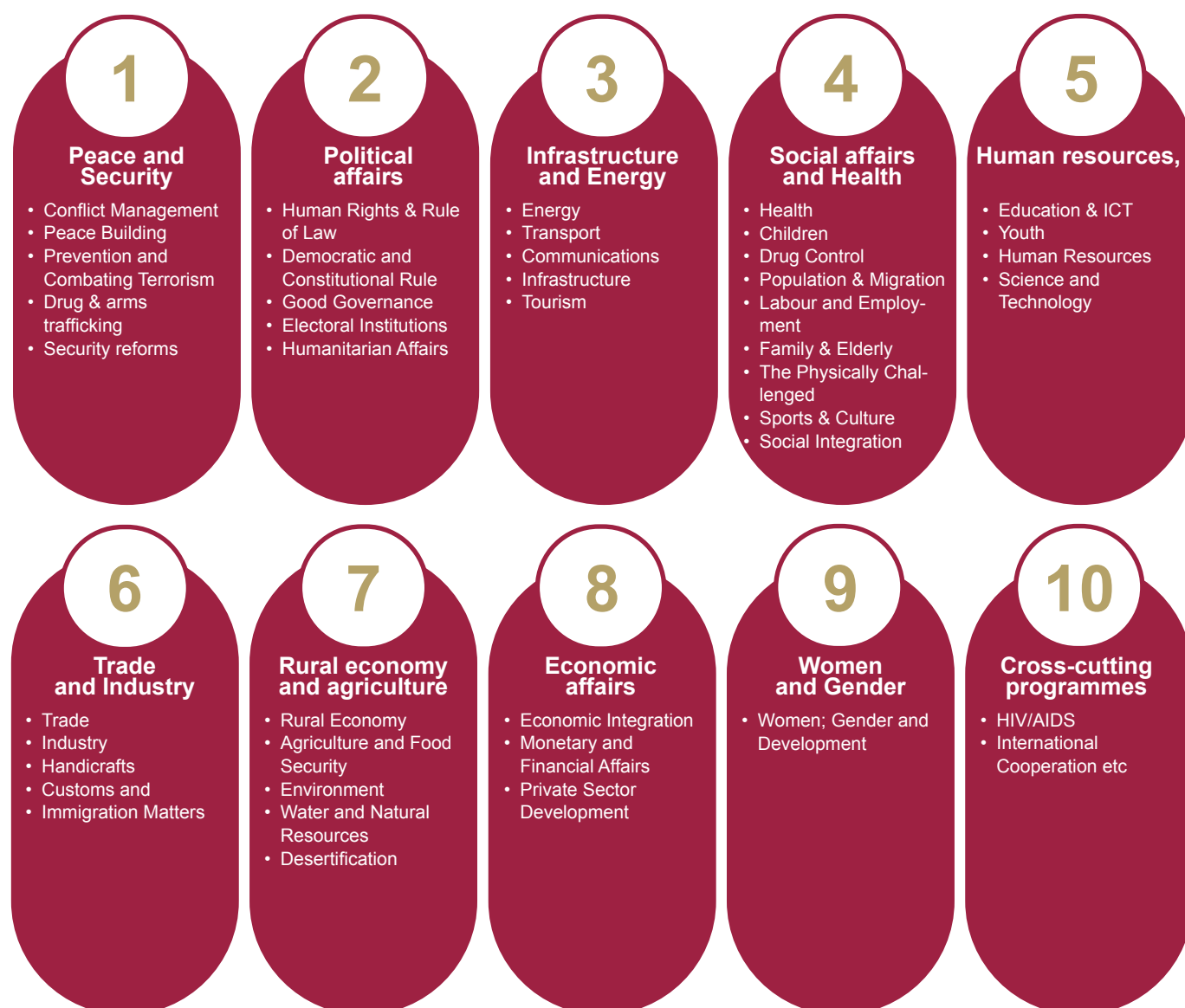- HIV/AIDS
- International Cooperation etc

Figure 3: ECOSOCC SCC clusters and thematic areas. Source: AU-ECOSOCC.

The recent most important addition to the use of structures is the **establishment of national chapters** as a means of decentralising ECOSOCC's work and outreach to the national level. Currently, the 26 chapters serve as vital hubs for citizen involvement, advocacy, and awareness-raising on AU agenda, and are expected to be formed in all 55 Member States. In 2023, the existing national chapters were utilised to popularise the ACDEG and other AU initiatives aimed at addressing governance challenges on the continent. Apart from serving as conduits for disseminating information about AU activities to citizens, and channelling feedback from citizens to the AU, ECOSOCC's national chapters also serve as means by which citizens hold elected members of the General Assembly accountable for their work. They also provide opportunities for capacity-building and training of CSOs in African countries. In relation to the usefulness of the national chapters, a CSO source interviewed as part of this report noted that:

> **"The efforts and initiatives over the last 4 years have made a world of a difference in raising awareness of the AU's purpose, work, and methods. The fact that we now have National chapters makes a big difference."**

The second category of ECOSOCC engagements involves establishing platforms for CSO involvement and input into continental policy, or creating awareness on ongoing continental policy processes. Within this category, ECOSOCC has specific platforms established solely to facilitate citizens' engagement and inputs into topical continental issues.

Key among these is the **annual Citizens Forum on Democracy,** where topical continental issues are discussed. The forum was birthed from the outcomes of the 2022 AU Reflections Forum on UCGs and Terrorism in Accra, Ghana. Since the launch of the forum, it has served as a major platform for bringing together representatives from various sectors, including academia, media, youth groups, women groups, advocacy organisations, community-based organisations, faith-based organisations, and regional CSO networks, to reflect and exchange on various issues. The most recent instances of this forum, for instance, was dedicated to UCG and "Democracy and Digital Governance in Africa" in 2023 and 2024, or instance, respectively. Beyond the networking opportunities it provides among CSO actors, the convenings facilitated robust discussions on pertinent issues and benefitted more than 280 representatives of African citizens. The resulting outcome statements from the fora were declarations that reflected citizen views and inputs into ongoing continental efforts.

Another key platform is the **annual ECOSOCC Civil Society Pre-Summit Forum**, which focuses on thematic issues aligned with the agenda of the annual AU Summits. This forum **offers CSOs the opportunity to review and engage with AU policy documents scheduled for discussion** at various levels of the Summit. It also serves as a space for CSOs to provide recommendations on critical decision points. In some instances, these recommendations are formally presented to the AU Assembly by a CSO representative, and they play an important role in contributing to policy deliberations and outcomes.

ECOSOCC's sensitisation activities are another engagement tool in this category. However, they are mostly geared towards creating awareness about AU programmes and activities. In this direction, ECOSOCC has held numerous dialogues across multiple countries. In 2023,

activities benefited stakeholders in Zambia, Kenya, Mauritius and others, through virtual engagements. These convenings helped raise awareness about ongoing AU programmes and processes, including the Free Movement Protocol and other related topical issues. **The use of sensitisation activities has played a pivotal role in enhancing citizens' understanding of ongoing processes and helped garner support for AU agendas.**

ECOSOCC also uses national dialogues within selected member states to engage stakeholders. The most recent example of this includes ECOSOCC's convening of a dialogue involving stakeholders in the 2023 Sierra Leonean election, to contribute to managing pre-electoral tensions and securing stability in the country.

In fulfilling its diaspora mandate, **a Global Africa People-to-People Forum** has also been established as an annual platform for fostering closer relations and collaboration between citizens in the diaspora and those in Africa. Since 2022, the forum has helped advance the collective interests of people of African heritage, fostered strategic partnerships, and promoted cross-cultural exchanges. It serves as a major means by which the AU is actualising its commitment to include the diaspora in continental efforts and activities.

Initiatives such as the annual **Young Africans Writing Competition (YAWC)** are also used as a means of engaging citizens. Launched in 2021, the YAWC provides young Africans with a means to express themselves on topical continental issues through written essays. Apart from expressing their views on issues, it serves as a means by which African youth advocate for change and participate in governance processes.

policy research, which are part of the ECOSOCC Resource Centre. Currently, **20 major publications have been produced** under this domain. They continue to serve as the major means by which ECOSOCC generates best practices, documents continental experiences, and facilitates citizen input into continental policy making.

Through these categories of approaches, ECOSOCC has emerged as a major entry point for actualising Aspiration 6 of Agenda 2063 as it engages CSOs whose work intersects with the AU on various issues. As depicted in Figure 4, in a survey of 222 CSOs as part of this study, **139 respondents identified ECOSOCC as the major organ they engage with among 15 AU organs and institutions** (see Figure 4).

Of all the CSO respondents, **ECOSOCC emerged as the AU organ the majority (40%) have interacted with the most** (see Figure 5). Notwithstanding this, about 60% of CSOs still engage the AU outside of the ECOSOCC framework. Following the adoption of the African Union-wide Harmonised Accreditation Framework to grant observer and consultative status, and engage relevant organs and at relevant levels within the AU, the longstanding challenge of accreditation is yet to be addressed. If done, this would enhance and improve the use of ECOSOCC as the framework for engaging the AU.

Currently, while considerable effort has gone into initiating these platforms, much work remains in ensuring that the individual entry points remain operational and guided in achieving the intended goals.
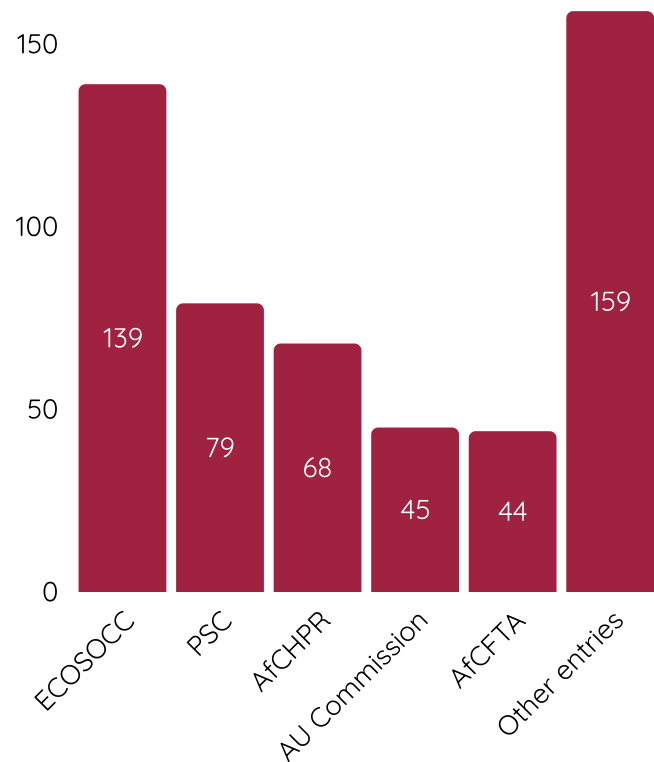

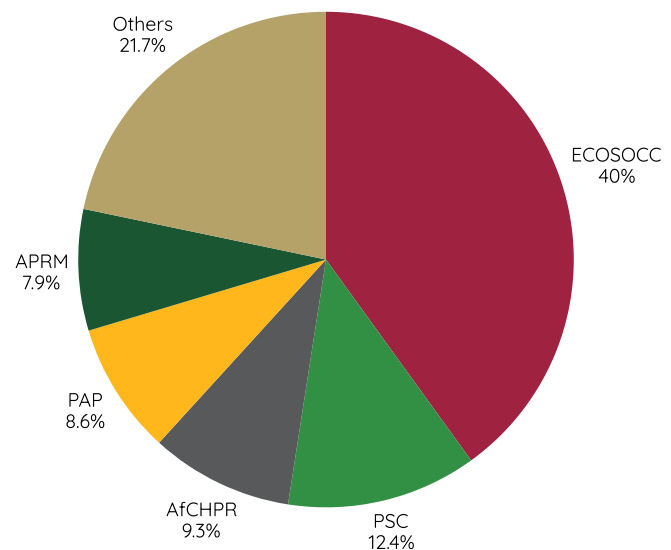Figure 4: CSO Actors identifying ECOSOCC as their main entry point. Source: Survey results.

Figure 5: AU Organs CSO have engaged with. Source: Survey.

Africa Peer Review Mechanism (APRM)

The Africa Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) is a mutually agreed instrument voluntarily adopted by AU Member States as a **self-monitoring mechanism**. It is a specialised Agency of the AU which was established in 2003 within the framework of the implementation of NEPAD.[32] It is often seen as **Africa's unique and innovative approach to improved governance in Africa, at the local, national, and continental levels.**[33] It seeks to foster the adoption of policies, standards, and practices that lead to democratic governance within AU Member States.[34] For instance, in collaboration with AGA, APRM monitors the implementation of ACDEG.

The APRM offers space for African Citizens through formations such as CSOs which participate and contribute to the systematic assessment and review of governance and democratic processes, aimed at enhancing the political and economic development of the continent. As such, **the APRM has created avenues for citizen participation in public issues**. It provides a niche that African citizens can use to promote democracy, governance, human rights, and the rule of law.[35]

Mandate
Promote governance through peer review & citizen input.

Engagement channels
National and continental consultations, Youth symposia and Civil society & expert forums.

Statistics
23 countries have undergone the APRM and 4 Youth Symposia (since 2019).

Challenges
Limited implementation of review recommendations and coordination gaps with AU governance organs.

Impact
Model for citizen input in governance assessments.

In 2017, the APRM's mandate was expanded through an AU Assembly decision, tasking it with monitoring governance implementation, assisting member states in their interactions with credit rating agencies, serving as an early warning tool for conflict prevention, and producing the Africa Governance Report. This broadened mandate has deepened the relationship between the APRM and African CSOs, particularly in the development and validation of national governance reports and the Africa Governance Report itself. This collaboration is underpinned by the APRM's recognition of the vital role CSOs play in promoting accountable governance and sustainable development.

Civil society also plays a key role within the APRM National Governing Councils (NGCs), which are the primary national-level mechanisms driving the APRM process. Each NGC in APRM Member States includes civil society representatives, often led by leaders of umbrella CSO networks, thereby ensuring that diverse citizen voices are reflected in governance assessments and reforms.

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32 AU, African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). Online here.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Senzo Mchunu, APRM celebrates 18 years of promoting good governance on the African continent, Department of Public Service and Administration, South Africa 16 March 2021. Online here.

Even though the APRM is mandated primarily to serve the purpose of promoting good governance, self-assessment, and peer learning among African states, its process for collating data for assessment over the years has made it an indispensable platform for citizen engagement. As observed by the APRM's 2021-2023 Strategic Plan, since its establishment,

> the APRM process has been an indispensable vehicle for conducting grand, national policy debates on the past, present and future of APRM Member States, in an open, frank, and non-intimidating manner, and environment. It has therefore created new spaces for citizen participation in public affairs, and provided a niche that progressive Africans could use to create a better understanding of democracy, as well as greater awareness of the political issues at stake; and in the process facilitated the promotion of continental African citizenship.[36]

Through its national structures in member states, particularly, the APRM mobilises citizen participation in country review processes, spearheads the implementation of national programmes of work, produces governance reports reflecting the reality of the governance situation in member states, and contributes to the generation of APRM's continental governance reports. This makes the APRM not just a tool at the disposal of member states for self-assessment and peer review but also a mechanism for citizen participation and contribution to the search for good governance on the continent. In the 23 countries that have undergone the APRM country review processes since its inception, the APRM has served as a revolving platform for creating awareness of citizens and non-state actors on issues of governance and the required continental standards. It has also enhanced the structure and level of engagement between state and non-state actors on governance issues.

Unlike other platforms that generate advisory opinions and advise to AU leadership structures, **citizen inputs into APRM's Country Review Reports (CRRs) directly feed into the APRM Forum of Heads of State and Government's review of member states.**

In relation to the involvement of citizens in Agenda 2063, the APRM has served as a critical tool for the promotion of development, good governance, and youth engagement, as an important component of its success.[37] Increasingly, the APRM has become a vehicle for ensuring that the youth constitutes a critical part of the AU development agenda.[38] The APRM's approach to youth engagement is anchored on Assembly/AU/Dec.363(XVII) 2011 which requested the APRM to incorporate the monitoring of the implementation of the African Youth Charter and the Plan of Action of the Youth Decade, with a particular focus on youth social, political, and economic development within Member States.

Since 2019, the APRM has held youth symposia to harness the potential of young people in governance and development. The first symposium was held in N'djamena, Chad in July 2019,[39] the second in Nairobi, Kenya in 2021,[40] the third in Kampala, Uganda in July 2022,[41] and the fourth in Johannesburg, South Africa in December 2023.[42] These symposia and other APRM

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36 APRM, Governance as a Tool for Africa's Integration, Strategic Plan 2021 – 2023, p.15-16. In February 2020, the AU Assembly adopted the Plan as covering 2021-2024.

37 Lennon Monyae & Steven Gruzd, Role of the Youth in APRM's Quest for Good Governance, Development and Democracy (2018) South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA).

38 Ibid.

39 Stephen Enoch, 3rd APRM youth symposium underway in Kampala July 2022, online here.

40 Ibid.

41 APRM, 3rd African Peer Review Mechanism Continental Youth Symposium - Comprehensive Report (2023).

42 Adam Randera, ACCORD attends 4th APRM Youth Symposium 22 December 2023, online here.

youth engagements have contributed towards the mainstreaming of young people in all APRM processes, including: the creation of an APRM Youth Network, revision of APRM Questionnaire to include a youth toolkit, and the establishment of an APRM youth desk by the APRM Secretariat, to bridge existing gaps in youth participation in APRM CRRs and programmes. As such, **young men and women are no longer sidelined in APRM processes** as they have an avenue to contribute to Africa's development agenda.

While civil society is formally recognised as an integral stakeholder within the APRM's statutory structures and is fully acknowledged in the APRM Statute, there remains significant **room for strengthening its engagement throughout the process.** Historically, civil society participation has been concentrated around the periods preceding and during the APRM country review. However, this engagement tends to diminish post-review, particularly in relation to the implementation of National Programmes of Action (NPOAs) and the monitoring of progress reports. Ensuring sustained and structured civil society involvement beyond the review phase is essential for enhancing accountability and the overall effectiveness of the APRM mechanism.

A mechanism for citizen participation and contribution to the search for good governance on the continent.

The African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (AfCHPR)

The African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (AfCHPR) is one of the continental institutions charged with the mandate to **protect human and peoples' rights on the continent**. Its role complements that of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, through its jurisprudence. In seeking to attain this, the AfCHPR places a premium on nurturing strategic relationships with a wide spectrum of human rights stakeholders who variously advance and channel citizen interest on the continent so as to benefit from their specialised input into the work of the Court. It also attempts to serve the African people by improving access to its procedures, increasing efficiency in its work and attaining Member States' compliance with its decisions.[43]

Mandate
Deliver justice for human rights violations.

Engagement channels
A platform for individual citizens and CSOs to submit cases on human rights.

Statistics
357 cases; 88.5% from individuals, 6.2% CSOs.

Challenges
Few states allow direct access and weak enforcement.

Impact
Empowers individuals and CSOs to seek justice at the continental level.

In this pursuit, the Court currently employs a number of approaches towards engaging citizens. As an adjudicating body, the Court provides a platform for individual citizens and CSOs to submit cases on human rights for consideration. Since its establishment, **a total of 357 applications have been received** for adjudication. Of this, **88.5% have originated from individual African citizens, while 6.2% have been from African CSOs working in the interest of citizens.** Though the substance of the applications may not be a direct input into AU's human rights policymaking, the Court's judgements, orders, and advisory opinions, often triggered by submissions, are important sources of insights into Africa's human rights legal frameworks. So far, the Court's 397 decisions (235 Judgments & 162 Orders) and 15 advisory opinions, have collectively helped bring clarity, and contributed to shaping or interpreting Africa's continental legal requirements and standards on matters of human rights.[44] In its 2021-2025 strategic plan, the Court regarded such functions as part of efforts towards "enriching the texture of African human rights law and thereby making it more and more relevant to all African citizens."[45]

Between 2008 and 2023, the Court had an average of 14.15% yearly growth in the number of applications before the court. The state of the Court's engagement with citizens as a platform for legal matters has therefore increased over time (see Figure 6) despite a significant decrease in new cases after 2019, owing to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The finalisations of judgments and orders increased from 23 cases in 2020 to 36 in 2021 and 43 in 2022 and remained higher than its pre-2020 numbers at the time of compiling this report. This is in line with planned efforts to increase the efficiency of service as part of efforts to increase the impact on the African people.

43 Strategic Plan of the African Court.
44 See here the latest statistics on the Court.
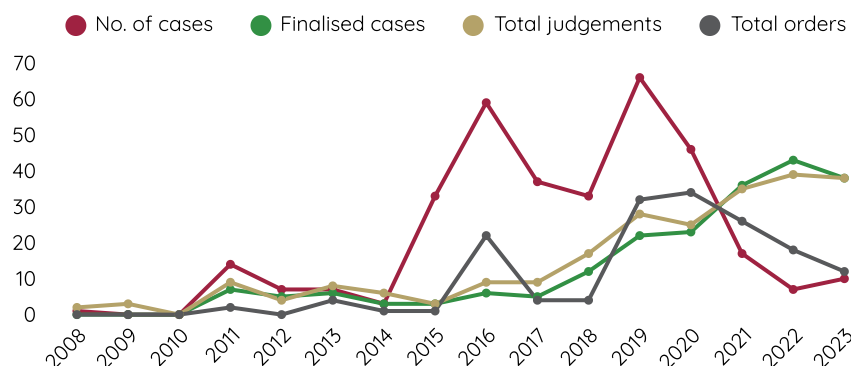45 Strategic Plan of the African Court, p.4.

Figure 6: Trends of cases, finalisations, judgments and orders before the African Court, 2008-2023. Source: The ACHPR.

In 2012, a **legal aid programme was initiated to provide legal services to indigenous people and needy applicants** in an attempt to enhance the quality of cases reaching the Court and to encourage citizens' access and engagement with the Court. As part of this programme, the Court has trained about 100 lawyers who provide pro bono services to individuals requiring their services. In 2022, four (4) cases benefited from the programme and helped enhance citizens' access to justice.

The Court's **biennial Judicial Dialogue platform** is a mechanism which brings together judges of national, regional, and continental courts as well as other stakeholders to deliberate topical human rights issues. This has become an avenue where various representatives and stakeholders of African citizen interest groups, including the media, CSOs, professional organisations/institutions, and resource persons from various institutions, interface with the Court. Since its inaugural gathering in 2013, the platform has been used six (6) times as of 2023, with the most recent having brought together over 100 participants drawn from its primary stakeholders. These approaches are complemented by sensitisation visits to AU Member States, targeting senior government officials on a variety of issues, ranging from ratification to the signing of the Court's protocol to depositing Article 34(6) Declaration, allowing individuals and NGOs to bring cases directly to the Court. During such visits, efforts are made to interact with other stakeholders, such as CSOs, bar associations, and national human rights stakeholders, through seminars. Since the establishment of the Court, such visits have always resulted in raising awareness as well as increases in either the ratifications or the number of cases emerging from countries visited. This suggests a direct correlation between the Court's outreach efforts and the rate of citizen participation, in some cases. In 2022, for example, the Court undertook four sensitisation visits to Comoros, Mauritania, Zambia and Ethiopia.[46] The sensitisation missions and judicial dialogues contribute to the Court's citizen engagement and enhance the realisation of Aspiration 3 of Agenda 2063.

Since its establishment, the Court has also held media training sessions aimed at equipping journalists with the know-how to report on the Court so as to enhance awareness. There are a number of journalists who, through these engagements, regularly publish about the Court's work in the eight countries that have ratified the protocol. This extends the Court's work to citizens. The Court also capitalises on the power of social media to avail its work to the African people. It makes use of Open Court proceedings, and livestreaming of hearings and delivery of judgments. It also publishes judicial reports online to make its work accessible. Notwithstanding the use of these platforms, the Court suffers from challenges associated with low awareness among African citizens, of its existence and how to access and litigate at the Court.

46 AU, Activity Report of the AfCHPR, presented to the Forty-Second Ordinary Session of the Executive Council, EX.CL/1409(XLII), held from January 16 to February 16, 2023.

The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR)

Established in 1981 as an independent Organ under Article 30 of the African Charter to promote the human rights of African citizens, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) plays quasi-legislative and judicial functions within the AU system. It currently **collaborates with citizen groups, human rights defenders, and CSOs, in its efforts to fulfil the mandate of promoting and protecting human rights in Africa.** The responsibilities of the Commission include: the review of state reports; adoption of general comments, guidelines and resolutions; review of individual complaints and making decisions on them; and the granting or denial of observer status to organisations.[47]

Mandate
Monitor, promote, and protect human rights in Africa.

Engagement channels
NGO Forum, Observer status for CSOs, Special Rapporteurs, and Working Groups.

Statistics
Over 500 NGOs granted observer status.

Challenges
Underfunding and overlapping mandates with other AU bodies.

Impact
Longstanding voice for civil society on rights.

The Commission's engagement with citizens currently takes several forms, including promotion missions to the Member States, High-Level Panel discussions and engagements on topical issues during Ordinary sessions, processing of human rights/complaints from citizens, groups, and CSOs, and working with CSOs and National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs).

Within these major forms of citizen engagement, the Commission's recent report to the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the AU points to the active use of its statutory Ordinary sessions for panel discussions and engagements on topical issues during Ordinary sessions. At its 75th Ordinary Session held in a hybrid format in Banjul, Gambia, from 3 to 23 May 2023, a total of ten (10) panel convenings were held on topical issues ranging from the effective implementation of guidelines of freedom of speech, accelerating the implementation of the AfCFTA, and the Reform of the Judicial and Quasi-judicial Organs of the African Union, among others. In its efforts to deepen understanding on various topical issues, the Commission also organised various panel discussions during the 77th Ordinary session in Arusha, Tanzania, from 20 October to 9 November 2023. Apart from the outcomes of the meetings in deepening shared understanding of CSOs and AU structures on various issues, the meetings collectively contributed to the use of the Ordinary sessions of the Commission as a platform for CSO engagements with the AU, on the promotion and protection of human rights in Africa.

Apart from using promotional missions to member states, one of the Commission's main avenues for citizen engagement is currently centred around its engagements with NHRIs and CSOs, to complement state reports on human rights in states. Pursuant to Decision 33 of the

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47 AU, African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). Online here.

25th Ordinary Session of the ACHPR protocols[48] are established for bestowing observer status upon CSOs in their collaborative endeavours, and granting affiliation status to NHRIs in accordance with ACHPR Resolution 370. In its 2021-2025 Strategic Framework, the Commission acknowledged that its collaboration with NHRIs and CSOs in producing shadow reports is "important to the work of the Commission as it makes the Commission aware of human rights issues that may have been overlooked in State reports."[49] Therefore, state of the Commission's engagement with CSOs can also be measured by the extent of its structured engagement with civil society and NHRIs, and the growth of such engagements. As of 2023, the Commission had granted Observer status to a total of 561 CSOs and affiliation status to 36 NHRIs and specialised institutions (see Figure 7).[50] Despite rejecting a number of applications for various reasons, **between 2015 and 2023, the number of Affiliate NHRIs grew by 50%, while the number of CSOs with observer status has grown by approximately 15.67%**.
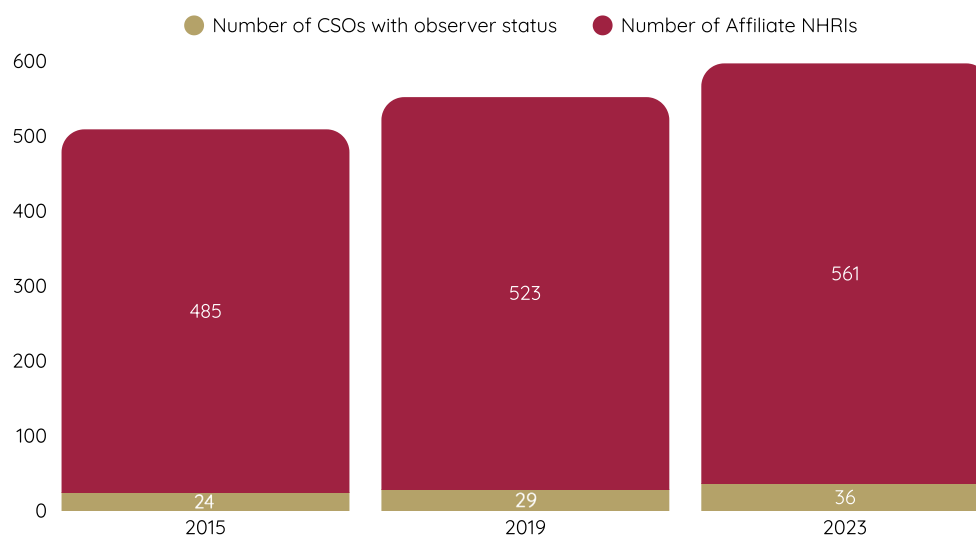
Figure 7: NHRIs and CSOs affiliation to the Commission. Source: AfCHPR.

In line with Article 45 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, **any person, group of persons, or CSO is allowed to lodge a complaint with the Commission alleging violation of the Charter.** This provides an opportunity for African Citizens to engage with the Commission on issues related to Aspiration 3 of Agenda 2063. To enhance good governance and protect human rights and the rule of law, individuals and CSOs have been submitting complaints on allegations of human rights violations by AU Member States to the ACHPR.

The Commission's engagement with citizens through the processing of Complaints submitted to it on alleged human rights violations suggests a high volume of communication from individuals and CSOs. **As of 2024, one hundred and eighty-five (185) communications were pending consideration by the Commission.** While there is an obvious backlog of communications from citizens to be addressed, the twenty (20) Communications which were admitted in 2023, the two (2) which were not admitted, and those that were struck off the list are all ways by which the Commission actively engaged with citizens on the subject of human rights and its promotion and protection on the African continent. It also underscores the Commission's active engagement in addressing various human rights issues across the continent through the examination and decision-making process concerning human rights complaints and communications.

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48 Decision 33 of 25th Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), online here.
49 African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, Strategic Framework 2021-2025, online here.
50 African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, Non-Governmental Organisations, online here.

During the public segment of the Commission's sessions, CSOs participate in deliberations of the Commission. A key mechanism enabling this engagement is the Forum on the Participation of NGOs in the Ordinary Sessions of the ACHPR. **Recognised as one of the most significant platforms for civil society engagement within the African human rights system, the Forum convenes biannually ahead of each Ordinary Session of the Commission.** It provides a structured space for African and international CSOs, human rights defenders, and other stakeholders to deliberate on urgent human rights concerns, share experiences and best practices, and formulate resolutions and recommendations. These contributions are formally submitted to the Commission and serve as a direct means for CSOs to influence the Commission's agenda, ensuring that the voices of citizens and grassroots actors are reflected in continental human rights deliberations.

Beyond its role in shaping the Commission's agenda, the Forum has evolved into a vital **platform for networking, advocacy, and capacity-building among CSOs across Africa**. Through thematic panel discussions, workshops, and special interest group meetings, the Forum strengthens collaboration and facilitates collective action on cross-cutting human rights issues. It also provides a rare space where the concerns of marginalised groups such as women, youth, persons with disabilities, and indigenous communities, are brought to the forefront of regional dialogue. In doing so, the Forum bridges the gap between community-level advocacy and the ACHPR's institutional mechanisms, enhancing the responsiveness of the Commission to diverse human rights realities on the continent. This inclusive and participatory approach exemplifies the Commission's broader commitment to citizen engagement and democratic governance in Africa.

However, citizen engagement during the sessions of the Commission is limited by the fact that **only CSOs that have been granted observer status by the Commission can participat**e. Its major challenge is that a significant number of countries, specifically 24, are not up to date with their reporting obligations under the Maputo Protocol. This indicates a widespread challenge with compliance and adherence to the established reporting schedules. The lack of timely reporting hinders the Commission's ability to monitor and assess the overall human rights situation effectively in member states.

The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child's (ACERWC)

As the **only continental entity within Africa's human rights institutions charged with the mandate to promote and protect children's rights and welfare**, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) engages with citizens as an integral means of reaching its goal. Its mandate is drawn from Article 42(iii) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (the Charter), which provides for ACERWC to "cooperate with other African, International and Regional Institutions and Organisations concerned with the promotion and protection of the rights and welfare of the child."[51] Given that the **ACERWC does not have a field presence, it pursues its goal of engaging its target audience through collaborations with member states' CSOs**.

The Committee's first means of engagement is through the **submission of communications**

Mandate

Promote and protect the rights and welfare of children in Africa.

Engagement channels

Complaints, shadow reports, forums and observer status.

Statistics

24 complaints, 40 CSOs have observer status; 20 NHRIs are affiliated.

Challenges

Limited CSO engagement, low case/report submissions, and weak awareness/access.

Impact

State accountability on child rights and citizen input into AU child rights policies.
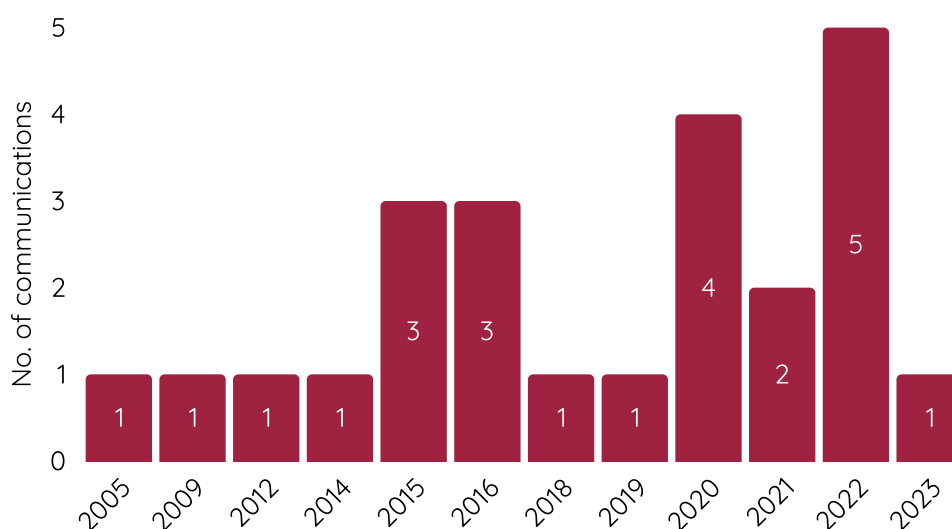
complaints on the violation of the rights of children, in accordance with the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and its associated decisions. Under Article 44 of the Charter, individuals and CSOs can file complaints in relation to a violation of a right contained in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. After the complaint has been filed, the ACERWC determines whether a Member State has acted in a manner that violates the Charter.

Figure 8: Communications to ACERWC, 2005-2023. Source: AfCHPR.

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51 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child at Article 42.
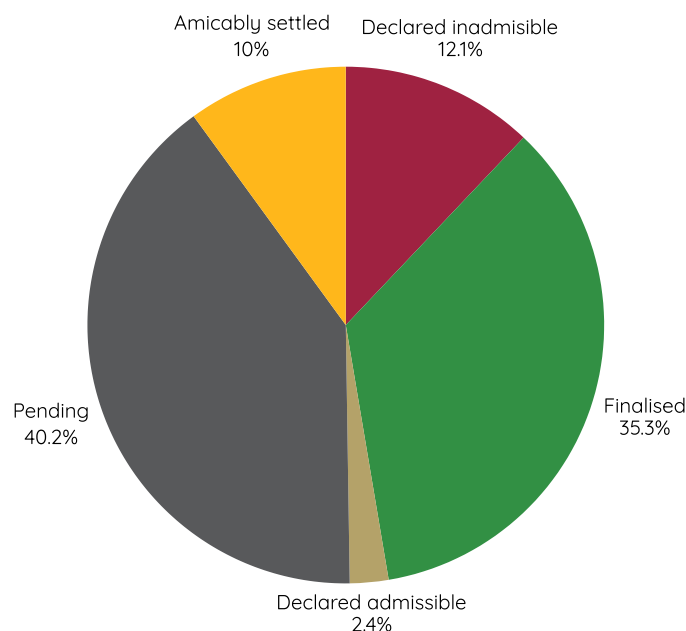
Figure 9: Status of cases at the ACERWC, 2005-2023. Source: AfCHPR.

Between 2005 and 2023, the Committee received 24 Communications, seven of which were finalised, five declared inadmissible and eight were pending (see Figure 9). The communications and their decisions constitute a means of exchange between the Committee and citizens, on matters related to the rights of children, given the fact that decisions made by the Committee go back to the state for implementation. Through their response to cases, the 11 members of the Committee help shape the nature of state responses to the rights of children in Africa. They also inform continental understandings of the existing frameworks on the rights of children.

The second major avenue for interaction between ACERWC and African citizens is through the **submission of shadow reports by CSOs**. This is the major avenue through which CSOs provide input into the work of the Committee. In some situations, shadow reports provide complementary information that may be missing from the statutory biennial reports that member states submit to the Committee. This offers CSOs the opportunity to share information and expert advice on topical issues, the majority of which often help the Committee to track trends, monitor issues, and assess the state of implementation of decisions by member states.

The third major means of engagement is through **the involvement of CSOs in the Committee's ordinary and extraordinary sessions, and events organised by the Committee during their inter-session period**. This takes the form of a CSO Forum organised in collaboration with a CSO coalition comprising members from the five African regions. Under the auspices of this arrangement, the CSO Forum convenes sessions that bring together CSOs working on child rights issues to deliberate on issues of concern to children in Africa in the lead-up to the Committee's ordinary sessions.[52] The outcome of such meetings is then presented to the annual Ordinary sessions as input into the subjects under discussion. Apart from the Committee's engagement with CSOs through the CSO Forum, the Committee has granted observer status to 40 CSOs and affiliation status to 20 NHRIs. This grants the selected organisations space to participate and contribute to the Committee's session discussions in their areas of expertise. It also allows them to submit shadow reports for consideration.

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52 Online here.

As part of its work, the Committee often embarks on **follow-up visits to member states**. The Committee believes that "[B]y increasing knowledge and buy-in from African states…, there will naturally be a trickle-down effect to African citizens."[53] During such visits, the Committee organises dialogues with CSO actors who also help mobilise child participation in such events, thereby enhancing the Committee's reach to its beneficiaries.

In accordance with Article 42(iii) of the Charter, the **ACERWC can grant CSOs observer status**. The observer status grants CSOs the privilege to participate in the ordinary and extraordinary sessions of the ACERWC, closed or private meetings of the ACERWC, events organised by the ACERWC during the inter-session period, as well as events held during country visits. This provides room for citizen engagement in ACERWC activities, thereby contributing to efforts towards the actualisation of Aspiration 3 of Agenda 2063. Through these avenues, the Committee's engagement with citizens continues to grow, as evidenced by the increasing demand for observer status. The Committee currently plans to have at least two CSOs per country, with observer status, as a means to facilitate its work. Notwithstanding these, some countries do not allow CSOs to submit reports, and that has implications for the state of engagement with citizens in such countries. This has also resulted in a low submission of cases from member states, as evidence by Figure 8.

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53 ACERWC 2021-2025 Strategic Plan document, p.42, online here.

Peace and Security Council (PSC)

The PSC was established by the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council (PSC Protocol) as a **"standing decision-making organ for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflicts" in Africa**.[54] With the support of other components of the Africa Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), the PSC functions as a collective security and early warning instrument that ensures timely and efficient responses to crises and conflicts in Africa.

To guarantee effective prevention and response to conflicts in Africa, the Protocol establishing the PSC promotes citizen engagement in the activities of the PSC. Under Article 20 of the Protocol, the PSC is required to encourage:

Mandate
Promote peace, security, and stability across Africa.

Engagement channels
Open sessions, CSO consultations, and the Livingstone Formula.

Statistics
120 open sessions, 44 field visits.

Challenges
Ad hoc engagement and weak follow-up on CSO inputs.

Impact
Open space for CSOs in peace and security.

"non-governmental organisations, community-based and other civil society organisations, particularly women's organisations, to participate actively in the efforts aimed at promoting peace, security and stability in Africa. When required, such organisations may be invited to address the Peace and Security Council."

Furthermore, **citizen engagement through CSOs is encouraged by the Livingstone Formula**, which, from December 2008, provided a basis for PSC and CSOs to start implementing Article 20 of the PSC Protocol as well as Rules 21 and 22 of the *Rules of Procedure of the PSC*.[55] The Maseru Conclusions of 2014, which seek to advance the implementation of the Livingstone Formula for collaboration between the PSC and CSOs also provide room for citizen engagement.[56]

In line with the provisions stipulated by the 2008 Livingstone Formula and 2014 Maseru Conclusions, **the AU's peace and security engagements with African citizens have gradually increased and improved over the years** across two major main modes of engagements. The first is through **PSC Open Sessions** during which invitations for participation in the Council's deliberations are extended to wider stakeholder participation. Such sessions often receive submissions from CSO representatives and subject matter experts. Since the establishment of the PSC, the Council has held a total of 120 open sessions (see Figure 10), the majority of which have received crucial CSO input into continental discussions on topical issues, as summarised in Figure 10. This remains the Council's most regular means of citizens engagement since its formation, as it is often at the disposal of monthly chairs who control the choice of agenda items on the calendar of the Council.

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54 Chapter II of the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council. Online here.
55 See further details under session on exiting framework of this report.
56 Amani Africa, 'Second Annual Consultative Meeting between the PSC and Representatives of CSOs and ECOSOCC', 6 July 2023. Online here.

The second most important engagement avenue is through the **Council's annual consultative meetings with African CSOs.** Even though the implementation of this only began in 2022, the Council's engagements through the participation of CSOs witnessed a major milestone, with its first PSC-CSO convening in September 2022. This was followed by the second meeting in July 2023. Since the onset of this platform, the PSC's meeting with CSOs has become an annual convening during which topical issues are discussed.
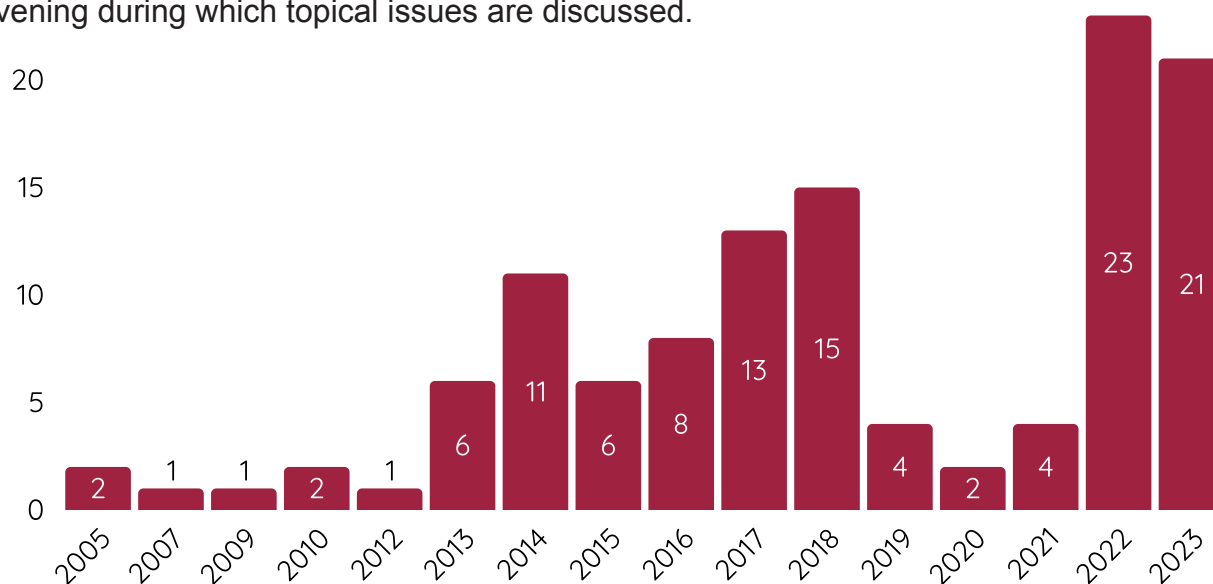
Figure 10: Number of PSC Open Sessions, 2004-2023. Source: PSC Secretariat.

In the PSC's working methods, provision is made for the use of field visits to member states in the pursuit of the Council's mandate. **Since the Council's establishment in 2004 to 2023, a total of 44 missions to 19 Member States have taken place for a total period of 132 days.** While most of the missions focus on government engagements, it is customary for Council members to hold meetings with CSO groups while in the country. This offers the opportunity for Council members to directly engage with Africa's grassroots representatives and to exchange information on topical issues that the Council is working on. In South Sudan, where Council visits have also included engagements with the CSO community, it provides the opportunity for the Council to inform citizens about what it is doing about the country's situation. It also provides the opportunity for CSO actors to directly interact with and contribute to the PSC's findings and decision-making processes.

Under the leadership of Ms Neema Chusi, the PSC Secretariat's first female head, the unit's partnership with CSOs working on the PSC appears to have significantly improved. This is evident not just from the rise in the number of PSC Open sessions since 2022, the participation of CSOs in PSC Retreats, and the number of collaborations between the PSC Secretariat and CSO partners have also increased significantly. Also important is a rise in the number of PSC Member States directly engaging, collaborating, or receiving support from CSO actors during their monthly chairing of the Council. In line with Aspiration 4 of Agenda 2063, the PSC's engagements with citizen groups provide a chance for exchange, and citizens' input into continental policy-making. These can be incorporated in the implementation of actions relating to peace and security decision-making on the continent. Since 2020, succeeding chairs of the PSC have organised thematic meetings in member states. Such meetings are often open to wider citizen participation on the specific thematic issues. Notwithstanding the progress made, the implementation of the Council's annual consultative meetings with African CSOs has taken more time than expected and the fact that only two have taken place since the Council's implementation raises major questions regarding the implementation of the Council's decisions.

The African Union Commission (AUC)

The Addis-Ababa based AUC functions as the AU's secretariat. It carries out the day-to-day activities of the AU.[57] The AUC comprises the AUC Chairperson, the Deputy Chairperson, and six (6) Commissioners who lead various departments. Through the office of the Chairperson and different departments, the AUC ensures citizen engagement in various activities of the AU.

The AUC has been supporting various initiatives that enhance citizen engagement in relation to Aspiration 3 of Agenda 2063. These initiatives involve young people generally, and young women in particular. To ensure the inclusion of African youth voices in AU decision-making processes, the AUC created the office of the **AU Special Envoy on Youth** in 2018. As noted in the AUC 2017-

📁	**Mandate** Inclusion of African youth voices in AU decision-making processes.
🔗	**Engagement channels** AU Special Envoy on Youth, AU-YVC, AYWL, PAPS, CSVRA and CSVMS processes and solidaity missions.
🗄	**Statistics** 70 public engagements, 1 million youth.
⚠	**Challenges** Weak coordination and limited follow-up.
★	**Impact** Broadened citizen input into AU initiatives.

2021 End of Term Report, the Office of the Special Envoy on Youth, together with the AU Youth Advisory Council, youth volunteers and networks, has become **a Pan-African vehicle for young people in Africa to engage with, and influence AU and global processes.**[58] The Office of the Special Envoy has visited 25 AU Member States as part of the 'listening tour' and more than **70 public engagements** have been conducted for youth in Africa and the African diaspora under the auspices of the office.[59]

The AUC has also created the **African Union Youth Volunteers Corps (AU-YVC)**. The AU-YVC r**ecruits, trains, and deploys African youth for a period of 12 months across Africa, promoting volunteerism and entrenching youth-led development in Africa.**[60] The young people who take part in this programme are placed at various AU organs and institutions. The programme provides African youth with an opportunity to serve and gain useful experience, soft and social skills, regional and international exposure, and key leadership skills.[61] In 2019, the AUC, in collaboration with UNDP, launched a similar programme specifically for young women, the **African Young Women Leaders (AYWL)** fellowship programme.[62] The AYWL equips young women with leadership skills and experience for decision-making in public, private, and multilateral institutions.[63]

In 2019, the AUC launched the 1 Million by 2021 Initiative. The initiative sought to reach one million young people in Africa with tangible opportunities in Education, Employment, Entrepreneurship, and Engagement.[64] According to the AUC 2017-2021 End of Term Report, the initiative supported youth

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57 AU, the AU Commission. Online here.

58 AUC, Taking Stock, Charting The Future African Union Commission End of Term Report 2017-2021, p.31-32.

59 Lennon Monyae, Young and Restless, 2 April 2023 Good Governance Africa, online here.

60 AUC, Taking Stock, Charting The Future African Union Commission End of Term Report 2017-2021, p.32.

61 UN Women, Young Women's Participation in Politics & Decision-Making in African Union Member States: A Working Paper (2020), p.35.

62 Ibid., p.35-36.

63 Ibid.

64 AUC, Taking Stock, Charting The Future African Union Commission End of Term Report 2017-2021, p.32.

development in these important areas and bolstered Africa on the path of development and acceleration of interventions towards the improvement of the lives of young people in the Continent.[65]

One of the key departments of the AUC that is relevant to the attainment of Aspiration 4 of Agenda 2063 is the **Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security** (PAPS). PAPS has made efforts to ensure citizen engagement through CSOs. In February 2023, PAPS established the African Union Network of Think Tanks for Peace (NeTT4Peace) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.[66] This network provides an opportunity for African citizens, through CSOs and PAPS, to engage in the AU policy space on issues related to peace and security in Africa.[67] Earlier in February 2022, a coalition of CSOs convened the inaugural strategic retreat with PAPS in Nairobi, Kenya, to build collaboration and synergy on peace and security in Africa.[68]

The AUC also seeks to ensure citizen engagement towards the attainment of Aspiration 4 of Agenda 2063 through **Country Structural Vulnerability and Resilience Assessment (CSVRA) and Country Structural Vulnerability Mitigation Strategy (CSVMS) processes**. With the technical support of the AUC and RECs, the CSVRA and CSVMS processes provide an avenue for AU Member States to identify their structural vulnerabilities and develop resilience and conflict prevention and mitigation strategies.[69] The CSVRA and CSVMS processes provide room for citizen engagement through consultative meetings, which aim to harness citizens' capacity to identify vulnerabilities and mitigation strategies. The consultations include participants drawn from academia, traditional and religious authorities, CSOs, media, and think-tanks.[70]

The AUC has also been ensuring citizen engagement in peace and security matters through the **Office of the Special Envoy of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission on Women, Peace and Security**. In 2014, the AUC Chairperson appointed the Special Envoy with the mandate to "ensure that the voices of women and the vulnerable are heard much more clearly in peacebuilding and in conflict resolution".[71] Thus, the Office of the Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security seeks to mainstream gender and equal participation of women in peace processes, including conflict prevention, management, and resolution. The Special Envoy supports citizen engagement, especially of women, through Solidarity Missions to conflict-affected areas such as Somalia, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Central African Republic. The Special Envoy also organises high-level meetings and conferences with academia, media, CSOs, women grassroot organisations, research institutions, and the private sector.[72]

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65 Ibid,

66 Tim Murithi, AU's Network of think tanks for peace: an avenue for bringing the AU closer to the wider African public? Amani Africa (12 June 2023), online here.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 Continental Structural Conflict Prevention Framework (CSCPF).

70 The Ghana Country Structural Vulnerability and Resilience Assessment (CSVRA) and Country Structural Vulnerability Mitigation Strategy (CSVMS) Report 2017.

71 AUC, The Office of the Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security at a Glance (2016).

72 Ibid.

The Africa Governance Architecture (AGA)

Now merged with the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), the Africa Governance Architecture (AGA) – now AGA-APSA – is a platform for **dialogue between various stakeholders mandated to promote good governance and strengthen democracy in Africa.** It is an important vehicle for the AUC's engagement with African citizens. The AGA draws its mandate from Article 3 (g) and 4 (c) of the Constitutive Act, which promotes citizen engagement and popular participation in Africa's democratic and governance consolidation across the continent. Given AGA's central role in the promotion of democracy and governance on the continent, it has been a central part of entire AU efforts to involve citizens in governance. It supports the citizen domain in pursuit of the goal of "enhancing popular participation and citizen engagement in the attainment of democracy, governance, and respect for human and peoples' rights.[73]

Mandate
Promote good governance, democracy, peace, and security in Africa through popular participation and citizen engagement.

Engagement channels
High-Level Dialogue (HLD), CSO Forum, Continental Youth Consultation and Gender Pre-Forum.

Statistics
13 HLD.

Challenges
Coordination across AU organs and ensuring continuity between pre-forums and HLDs.

Impact
Institutionalised citizen-policy engagement across governance and peace domains.

AGA's engagement strategy operates through four interlinked pillars: the **Youth Engagement Strategy (YES)**, the **Women's Empowerment Strategy (WES)**, the **Civil Society Strategy (CSS)**, and the **Knowledge Management Strategy**. These pillars work through a variety of mechanisms, including consultations, advocacy, digital platforms, data generation, and feedback loops. They provide the requisite **entry point for various segments of citizens at the local, national, regional, and continental levels for engagement** with the African Governance Platform and the AU in general.

In operationalising these pillars, the AGA-APSA has a functional platform that has become a central hub for engagements between sections of African society and policy actors. The AGA-APSA Platform which is a central meeting point for AU organs and institutions, allowing coordinated, complementary action on governance issues. Member institutions, including the AU Commission and RECs, utilise this space to harmonise governance efforts and facilitate meaningful interaction with citizens. While this is institutional, it shapes and streamlines the overall citizen engagement approach of platform members yielding phenomenal benefits for continental engagement.

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73 African Union, AGA-APSA Citizens' Engagement Strategy 2025 – 2030, p.12.

The AGA-APSA Platform has identified a number of flagship activities and programmes involving direct engagement with the African citizens such as the biennial **High-Level Dialogue (HLD) on Democracy, Human Rights, Governance, Peace and Security.** This platform promotes direct inclusive dialogues amongst a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including AU policy organs, CSOs, media, academia, religious and traditional leaders, and the private sector. It provides the platform for policy discussions and inclusive exchange on pressing issues in the domain of democratic governance, human rights, and peace across the continent. The HLD is usually preceded by three other important platforms namely, the **CSOs' Forum,** the **Continental Youth Consultation,** and a **Gender Pre-Forum.** These platforms serve as avenues for dialogue between specific sections of African citizenry and policy actors. Gender and youth platforms hold annual convenings which are used by CSOs and other citizen groups as entry points for engaging regional and continental policy actors on topical issues, aiming to contribute to continental deliberations and policymaking efforts. While the pre-forums happen before the HLD itself, the AGA-APSA Secretariat ensures that the outcomes of the pre-forums are fed into the final deliberations at the HLD, as an innovative way of respecting the dedicated platforms while maintaining inclusive dialogue in sharing the overall outcomes of the HLDs. Table 1 below summarises the topics covered as part of the HLD and its gender and youth pre-forums since 2012.

Year	Location	Theme
2012	Dakar, Senegal	The State of Democratic Governance in Africa
2013	Dakar, Senegal	Enhancing Constitutionalism and Rule of Law in Africa
2014	Dakar, Senegal	Silencing the Guns: Strengthening Governance in Resolving Conflicts in
2015	Kigali, Rwanda	Women's Equal Participation and Leadership in Political Parties in Africa
2016	Arusha, Tanzania	Reflecting, Celebrating, and Advancing Human and People's Rights in Africa with a Special Focus on Women
2017	Pretoria, South Africa	Enhancing Youth Participation and Representation in Governance in Africa
2018	Gaborone, Botswana	Winning the Fight Against Corruption: A Sustainable Path to Africa's Transformation
2019	Kampala, Uganda	The Year of Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons: Towards Durable Solutions to Forced Displacement in Africa
2020	Virtual	Silencing the Guns through Building Resilient Democracies and Accountable Governance
2021	Virtual	Renewing African Renaissance as a Lever for Building a Democratic, Peaceful, and Prosperous Africa
2022	Cotonou, Benin	Breaking the Cycle of Unconstitutional Changes of Government through Strengthening Democratic Governance Systems in Africa
2023	Addis Ababa, Ethiopia	Delivering Peace Dividends through AfCFTA Implementation
2025	Accra, Ghana	Justice, Rights, Reparations and State Building

The African Academy of Languages (ACALAN)

The African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) is a specialised agency of the AU which has a mandate to **promote and develop African languages to foster integration and development on the African Continent.**[74] The ACALAN has its headquarters in Bamako, Mali. Its objectives include the promotion and development of the use of African languages in general, and vehicular cross-border languages in particular, in partnership with the former colonial languages; ensuring the development of African languages as a factor of African integration and development; and promotion of convivial, functional multilingualism, at all levels of the society, particularly in the education sector.[75]

In line with Aspiration 6 of Agenda 2063, ACALAN has adopted various modalities for citizen engagement. These include offering active support to post-graduate level students in African languages and linguistics through its **Pan-African School for Translation and Interpretation (PASTI)** training. The school offers young Africans training on translation and interpretation, to enable African languages to become true working languages and languages of instruction in multilingual contexts. They train dictionary compilers and terminology developers, facilitate workshops, and have hosted the launch of an interactive platform for African languages.[76] The various modes of citizen engagement by ACALAN promote the realisation of Aspiration 6 of Agenda 2063 since they strengthen the use of African culture, values, and ethics as a bedrock of Africa's development.

Mandate
Promote and develop African languages.

Engagement channels
PASTI and workshops on dictionary compilation, terminology development, and African language use.

Impact
Multilingualism, cultural identity, and inclusive development through language.

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74 AU, The African Academy of Languages (ACALAN), online here.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.

The AfCFTA Secretariat

The AfCFTA provides an unprecedented opportunity for **African states to integrate and advance their participation in the global economy**.[77] It is a game-changing opportunity for Africa to trade and diversify its economy and enhance its resilience and influence as a strong global player and partner.[78] After the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the AfCFTA is **the largest free trade area in terms of the number of member states and regional economic communities participating**.[79] With the potential to open a market of 1.4 billion people and a combined GDP of up to 3.4 trillion US Dollars, the AfCFTA will significantly contribute to the transformation of Africa.[80] As intra-African trade increases, Africa's trade position and influence within the world will also advance.[81]

The AfCFTA Secretariat which has the responsibility to coordinate the implementation of AfCFTA is developing different methods of engaging African citizens to unlock its promise. The AfCFTA Secretariat's commitment to citizen engagement has been demonstrated through the adoption of a **Private Sector Engagement Strategy**, the holding of conferences that entail high-level dialogues and networking opportunities, the hosting of the **AfCFTA Moot Court Competition** to engage African youth, and the creation of the **AfCFTA Hub Platform**. These citizen engagement avenues contribute to the realisation of Aspiration 7 which aims to position Africa as a strong global player and partner.

Mandate
Boost intra-African trade and global competitiveness.

Engagement channels
Private sector strategy, Youth moot court, AfCFTA Hub Platform.

Statistics
1.4 billion people, $3.4 trillion GDP.

Impact
Economic integration and global influence.

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77 UNCTAD, UNCTAD and AfCFTA Secretariat strengthen ties to boost regional integration and trade in Africa 10 October 2022. Online here.

78 African Business, Seizing Opportunities: Navigating Business Realities for Scalable African Solutions in the Era of the AfCFTA 15 January 2024. Online here.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

4.2 Trends of curent engagements

As discussed in the previous section, the AU currently uses multiple institutional entry points in its efforts to fulfil its vision of a people-centred organisation. Of the numerous organs and units discussed in this report with specific regard to the Agenda 2063 aspirations, **five major characteristics define the current trend of the AU's engagements.** These include: commitment to citizens engagement, diversity of citizen engagement approaches, diversity of thematic scope, use of CSOs as citizen proxies, and the adoption of Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and bilateral engagements.

Commitment to Citizens Engagement

All the AU organs are required to contribute to continental citizen engagement efforts. Their strategic organisational strategy documents clearly indicate a commitment to citizen engagement and/or involvement as part of what they seek to achieve. Apart from sharing the engagement efforts of the specific organs, this paper reflects a conscious attempt to translate Africa's continental policy commitment to citizen engagement into operational-level guidance. This move has ensured that citizen involvement is not relegated to the background in continental priorities and activity implementation at all levels.

There is also a demonstration of increasing efforts to engage the diaspora. Efforts led by CIDO and ECOSOCC include the establishment of regional diaspora networks and the provision of frameworks for diaspora participation in AU structures. This trend signifies a growing acknowledgement of the diaspora's potential contributions to the continent's development agenda.

Diversity of Citizens Engagement approaches

Of the twelve AU entry points discussed in this report, none engage citizens through the use of a single platform. The average AU organ makes use of at least three citizens' engagement approaches. Awareness creation, thematic citizens forums, and country visits serve as basic forms of engagement. This diversity of approaches offers the advantage of benefiting a wide range of actors or citizen groups and their related sub-categories. At a macro-level, the cumulative effect of the use of multiple approaches by the different organs establishes the AU's multifaceted approach to engaging with African citizens through channels such as parliamentary platforms, civil society dialogues, diaspora networks, communications through human rights institutions, civil society forums, inputs into state reports, and national CSO chapters, among others. This diversified strategy reflects the recognition of the diversity of interests and stakeholders on the continent, and the need to inclusively harness their contributions to continental development.

While most of the platforms and approaches for engaging citizens are currently active, not all the institutions have fully entrenched their statutory platforms or maximised the use of the platforms they have initiated. Many of the platforms are also not fully operational. Apart from the institutional annual forums, most engagement platforms are run on an ad hoc basis rather than as regularised avenues for periodic meetings. Additionally, most organs have civil society for a for engaging citizens either through workshops, conferences, and pre-summit events. However, the regularity of convenings of such platforms and the number of CSO representatives that can participate depends largely on resources available to the AU, rather than the readiness of the AU or citizens to contribute to continental policy making.

Diversity of thematic scope

Even though peace and security remain the most common themes around which the majority of actors engage with the AU, CSO engagement is not limited to peace, security, or governance issues alone. As depicted by Figure 11, the AU's current citizen engagement efforts address a wide range of issues including social affairs, development issues, humanitarian matters, health-related themes, trade and investment issues, governance and democracy, youth, education, environment, agriculture and food security, human rights, and climate change, among others. Of this, peace and security, social affairs, development issues, humanitarian matters, and health-related themes constitute the top five. The wide range of issues reflects the AU's interest in harnessing the wide involvement of citizens as well as its appreciation of the diverse roles CSOs play in the continental search for peace, stability, and prosperity.
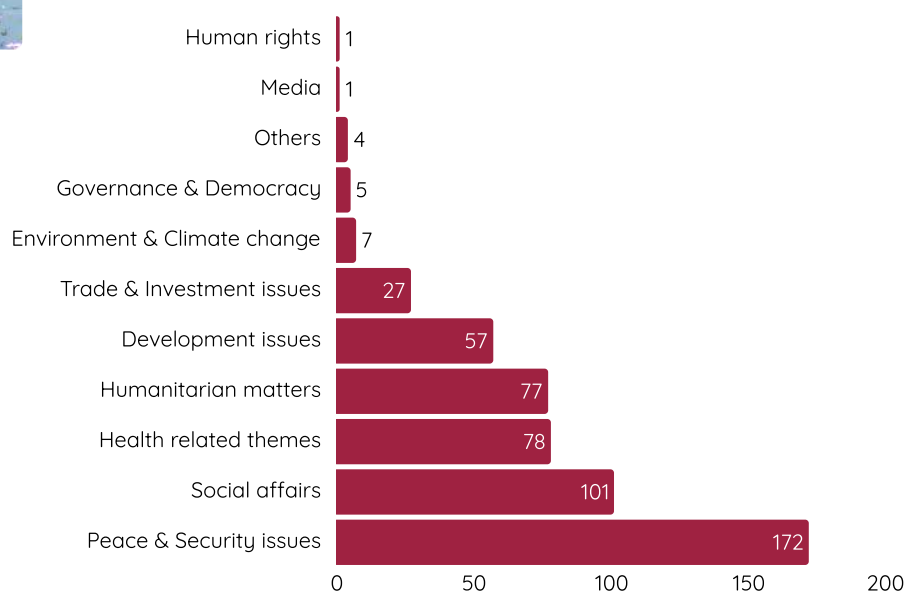

Figure 11: Thematic areas of engagement by CSOs. Source: Data from survey.

Currently, citizen groups benefiting from AU's citizen engagements are diverse, including CSOs, think tanks, private sector entities, trade unions, and media organisations, both Africa-based and some from the diaspora. This diverse engagement approach seeks to leverage the strengths and expertise of different groups to address the complex and multifaceted challenges facing Africa. By engaging with the various groups, the AU is able to ensure more comprehensive, representative, and effective engagement with African citizens. However, among these groups, CSOs have the highest representation as beneficiaries of the AU's citizen engagement efforts (see Figure 12). This underscores the dominance of CSOs and their role as reliable proxies for African citizens, given their involvement in grassroots mobilisation, community development, and advocacy. Direct engagement of citizens by the AU, apart from communications from individuals to continental human rights institutions, is limited.

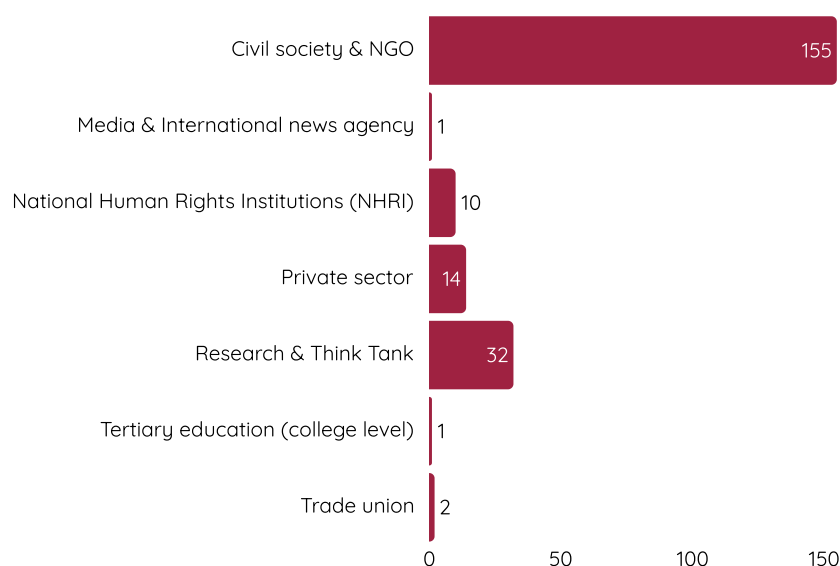**Use of CSOs as a Proxy to citizens' engagement**

Figure 12: Categories of organisations engaging the AU. Source: Data from survey.

Use of Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and bilateral engagements

In an effort to bolster the involvement of CSOs in engagement efforts, the increasing use of Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), observer status, and bilateral engagement arrangements currently serves as a pivotal tool in mainstreaming the relationship between existing platforms and citizen groups. At a general level, NGOs and CSOs granted observer status to gain access to AU meetings, speaking opportunities, and related session documents. However, their lack of voting rights limits their direct contribution to decision-making outcomes. Nonetheless, they exert influence through advocacy, expert testimony, and by submitting reports and recommendations that inform AU deliberations.

Specific observer statuses with AU organs deepen engagement on particular issues or fields. For instance, ACERWC grants observer status to NGOs focusing on children's rights, enabling them to contribute insights and data on children's welfare and rights across Africa. Similarly, ACHPR offers observer status to organisations dedicated to human rights.

Through this status, these entities participate in sessions, contribute to shaping human rights discourse and policy development, submit reports, engage in discussions, and aid in monitoring and implementing human rights standards. In a CSO survey for this report, however, the majority of CSOs (59%) described the current state of securing accreditation with the AU as difficult (see Figure 13).

From the characteristics of all the available platforms and efforts, it is evident that the AU is making a efforts to involve African citizens in decision-making processes, policy formulation, and continental development agenda through diverse engagement platforms and mechanisms. Despite the challenges discussed in the next section, the collective network of engagement opportunities provided through the presence and cumulative work of all actors operating the platforms is adequate for the current demands of citizens' engagements. In a survey of 215 CSOs, 42.0% assessed the AU's engagements as active, while a significant number described it as being moderately active (see Figure 14). The major issue, however, relates to whether participation in any of these platforms constitutes adequate engagement commensurate with the level required for maximising the input of citizens.
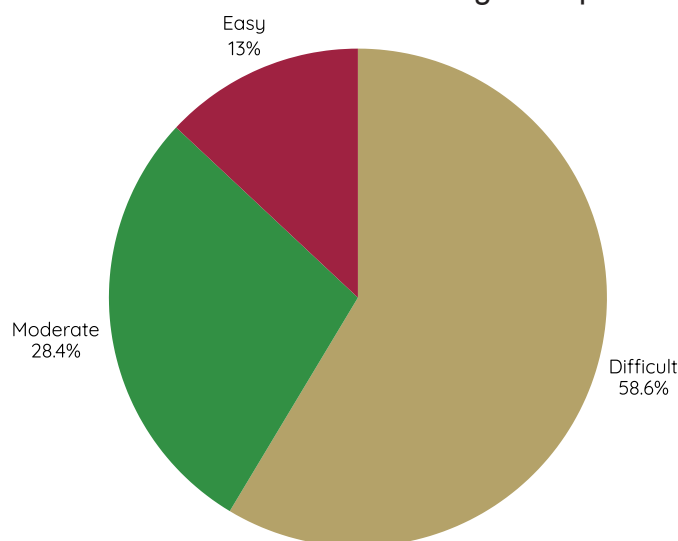

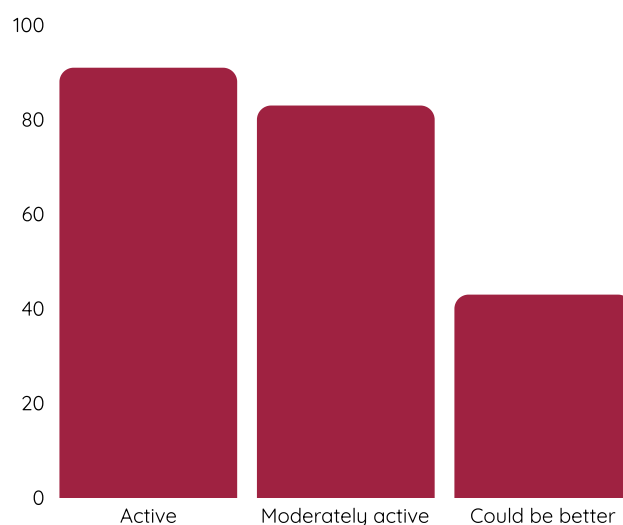Figure 13: Ease of securing accreditation. Source: Data from survey.

Figure 14: CSO Perception of AU entry points. Source: Data from survey.

ECOSOCC	68	ACERWC	8
ACHPR	13	APRM	7
PAP	13	African Court of Justice	4
CIDO	11	AfCFTA	1
PSC	10	Africa CDC	1
Total			**146** CSOs

Figure 15: Count of CSOs assessing the AU's engagement as "Active." Source: Data from sourvey.

05

Citizen Engagement Efforts at the Regional Economic Communities (RECs)

Just as the AU has prioritised the achievement of an AU of the people since the adoption of the Constitutive Act, its **regional building blocs have likewise increasingly recognised the importance of citizen involvement in regional integration processes and have been working towards operationalising that goal.** Although most of them have not integrated that orientation in their founding documents, the rise of citizen inclusion and citizen engagement has become evident with subsequent reforms and revised documents. This is particularly apparent in the efforts of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Southern African Development Community (SADC), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), among others. The sections that follow highlight the key citizen engagement strategies and platforms adopted by selected RECs. They illustrate the efforts towards the operationalisation of the commitment to engage citizens and the diversity of approaches employed by the different RECs involving the participation of citizens in the attainment of regional goals.

REGIONAL ECONOMIC COMMUNITY
5.1 The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

ECOWAS has long aspired to evolve from an **"ECOWAS of States" to an "ECOWAS of People."** This vision was formally articulated in the 1993 Revised ECOWAS Treaty, which provided for cooperation with regional civil society actors and encouraged the broad participation of citizens in the regional integration process in line with the aspirations of ECOWAS Vision 2050. This has informed the adoption of several legal frameworks, institutional structures, and the creation of diverse platforms for citizen engagement.[82] Institutions central to these efforts are the ECOWAS Parliament (established in 2000) and the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice (established in 2001). Also important are the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001), which emphasises citizen rights and democratic participation, and the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (2008), which outlines the role of civil society in regional peacebuilding efforts.

Beyond the ECOWAS Parliament and Community Court of Justice, which serve as mechanisms through which citizens' voices, through national parliamentarians and judicial processes, could be channelled into regional decision-making, ECOWAS particularly uses the mobilisation of CSO networks as a means of structuring citizen input into regional efforts through the various levels of civil society mobilisation.

A central platform is the **West African Civil Society Forum (WACSOF)**, established in 2003 as the official umbrella **body facilitating interaction between ECOWAS and CSOs across the West African subregion**. It has a **membership of more than 1,000 CSOs** and serves as a platform for amplifying citizens' voices in regional decision-making, and for facilitating dialogue between CSOs and ECOWAS institutions. In addition to its use of 18 thematic working groups as a structured means of channelling CSO input, it has focal points in each of the ECOWAS member states through which topical issues such as peace and security are channelled into regional matters.

An "ECOWAS of People."

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82 ECOWAS parliament, Historical Background, online here.

WACSOF representatives regularly participate in ECOWAS statutory meetings, including sessions of the Council of Ministers, ECOWAS Parliament, Development Partners' Meetings, and Heads of State and Government Summits. Through these engagements, WACSOF presents position papers and recommendations on behalf of citizens and convenes an Annual General Meeting timed to coincide with the ECOWAS Summit, during which it presents a civil society communiqué to regional leaders. This ensures that citizen voices are reflected in high-level policy dialogue and decision-making.

Another critical dimension of citizen engagement lies in ECOWAS's early warning and peacebuilding efforts. **Through its partnerships with the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), ECOWAS integrates civil society input into its regional early warning efforts as part of its conflict prevention architecture.** WANEP mobilises field monitors who collect and transmit community-level conflict data into the ECOWAS early warning mechanism (ECOWARN), thereby linking grassroots realities to regional response systems. There are other dedicated avenues, such as the Mano River Women's Peace Network, through which professional associations also have formal avenues to contribute to ECOWAS policy formulation and implementation.

While ECOWAS's citizen engagement strategies have led to notable progress, a key limitation is that many **community-based organisations lack the institutional capacity, technical know-how, and access** to effectively engage at the regional level. This underscores the **need for sustained investment in civil society capacity building and improved mechanisms for grassroots participation** to fully realise the goal of a people-centred ECOWAS.

REGIONAL ECONOMIC COMMUNITY
5.2 The Southern African Development Community (SADC)

SADC's appreciation of the importance of citizen participation in its regional integration agenda has increasingly taken root since the 1992 Treaty, which underscores the need for **a development community based on popular participation and the involvement of people and key stakeholders in the implementation of policies.**

A major milestone in institutionalising this engagement was the creation of the **Southern Africa Civil Society Organisations Forum (SAf-CNGO)**, formerly the SADC Council of Non-Governmental Organisations (SADC-CNGO), in 1998 as a primary **regional platform for civil society engagement that serves as a vital link between grassroots civil society organisations and the SADC Secretariat**. This initiative marked an explicit acknowledgement by SADC that civil society had a critical role to play in regional policy discourse and implementation. SADC also engages with non-state stakeholders such as trade unions and business actors through the Southern African Trade Union Coordination Council (SATUCC) on regional economic development, labour rights, and employment issues. SADC also makes use of the SADC National Committees (SNCs) to bring together representatives from government, the private sector, and civil society in each member state to support the domestication and implementation of regional policies.

Of these efforts, the SAf-CNGO remains the major entry point, as its use of the **annual Civil Society Forum** remains a major flagship engagement central to regional citizens' engagement. These forums convene NGOs, community leaders, and activists from across the region on the sidelines of the SADC Heads of State and Government Summit to **discuss key regional issues and to generate a Civil Society Communiqué, which is then formally submitted to the SADC Summit Chair for consideration.**

(SAPSN), annually brings together a coalition of social movements, churches, and grassroots organisations on the sidelines of official SADC Summits. Though not formally sanctioned by SADC, these gatherings offer a critical **bottom-up perspective on regional integration and governance**. Coordination between SAf-CNGO, SAPSN, and SATUCC has helped unify civil society messaging and increase the visibility and use of these platforms as channels for engaging citizens.

At an institutional level, the SADC Parliamentary Forum (SADC-PF) serves as a consultative platform that channels citizen engagement through elected national-level representatives. Though not a legislative body, the Forum debates issues such as democratic elections, human rights, and free movement. It also advocates for regional reforms. For example, its advocacy is known to have played a pivotal role in the development of the SADC Principles and Guidelines on Democratic Elections.

SADC has also institutionalised stakeholder engagement through the SADC Business Council, which serves as an apex body for engaging private sector actors in the region, in line with Article 5 (2b) of the SADC Treaty, and the August 2017 decision of the SADC Council of Ministers directing Member States to develop mechanisms for private sector engagement. These platforms ensure that the voices of workers and entrepreneurs are represented in regional policy dialogues.

SADC's approach to citizen engagement, as seen through these major engagement platforms, is marked by a blend of formal mechanisms (e.g., recognised civil society platforms and structured consultations) and support for independent civic initiatives (e.g., People's Summits). **While structural and political constraints remain, there are platforms for structured engagements facilitating meaningful citizen participation.**

REGIONAL ECONOMIC COMMUNITY

5.3 The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS)

Citizen engagement within ECCAS has historically been limited, but recent institutional reforms, particularly the 2019 institutional reform process, marked a significant shift. Article 105 of the new Treaty acknowledges non-governmental organisations, associations, and socio-professional groups as official partners in the regional integration process. It designates certain organisations as Sub-Regional Partner Organisations and provides a legal framework for consistent and formalised citizen engagement.

Building on this legal foundation, ECCAS has shifted **from an era of fragmented project-based collaboration, to one underpinned by treaty-backed, institutionalised engagement mechanisms in which civil society and private sector networks are official regional partners.** Efforts have been made to establish participatory structures such as the Regional Youth Forum and an ECCAS Women's Platform to strengthen inclusion and representation within broader development and governance frameworks.

From project-based collaboration to engagement mechanisms in which civil society is a regional partner.

Within the peace and security domain, ECCAS engages civil society through several targeted mechanisms, including the Early Warning System (MARAC), which allows for the input of field correspondents, often from CSOs or academia, to gather data on conflict indicators at the national and local levels. These correspondents feed critical grassroots information into the regional early warning database. Since 2008, ECCAS has also incorporated civil society representatives into its election observation missions. Human rights defenders, women's groups, and legal experts have participated in observation teams in countries such as Gabon and the Central African Republic.

A particularly innovative initiative is ECCAS's support for thematic civil society networks focused on technical expertise. One example is the Network of Central African Environmental Lawyers, which engages legal professionals and civil society actors in shaping environmental policy and monitoring legal compliance. Similar initiatives, such as a planned Human Rights Defenders Network, use digital tools to connect regional civil society experts directly with ECCAS departments, thereby crowdsourcing citizen expertise in a structured and continuous manner.At the national level, ECCAS relies on its member states to establish National Focal Points for integration. These structures—mandated under the 2019 reforms—are expected to bring together ministries, the private sector, and CSOs, to coordinate national positions and inputs into ECCAS processes. While effective within specific domains, these the use of thematic civil society networks faces the challenge of limiting broader citizen participation.

5.4 The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)

Though IGAD has historically lacked explicit provisions for citizen participation in its founding documents, its early **engagement with civil society emerged more as a pragmatic response to operational needs and laid the foundation for more structured engagement practices over time**. The 2002 establishment of the Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN), through the CEWARN Protocol with the mandate to monitor pastoralist-related conflicts in cross-border areas of Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Sudan, marked a turning point, as it enhanced partnerships with civil society actors by relying heavily on local peace committees, community monitors and NGOs, to collect incident reports and real-time data. This arrangement served as a functional model for integrating grassroots participation in regional peace and security management efforts. A more concrete step came through the adoption of a new Strategy Framework in 2012, which institutionalised and expanded partnerships with CSOs initiated under the 2002 CEWARN Protocol.

As a result of the central role played by **CEWARN** in IGAD's goals and efforts, its interface with CSOs **makes it IGAD's most prominent citizen engagement entry point**, particularly in relation to peace and mediation efforts. Regional peace processes in South Sudan and Sudan, in particular, have included observers and participants from women's coalitions, youth groups, and religious organisations.

There are dedicated platforms for engaging specific citizen sub-categories. These include the IGAD Women, Peace and Security Forum (IWPSF), which serves as a forum for amplifying women's roles in peace and security in the region. Apart from supporting the implementation of UNSCR 1325, it serves as a major platform for the inclusion of women-led CSOs in peacebuilding and policy initiatives across the region. Also important is the Horn of Africa Youth Network, a coalition that connects and facilitates collaboration between national governments and IGAD. IGAD's growing partnerships and pilot initiatives show an incremental trajectory that illustrates the necessity of refining citizen engagements in ways that respond to regional needs.

5.5 The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA)

Even though COMESA's regional integration agenda has historically been driven by governments and technocratic institutions, **with limited direct public engagement compared to other RECs, provisions for stakeholder involvement have existed since its inception**. Article 18 of the 1993 COMESA Treaty established a Consultative Committee of the Business Community and Other Interest Groups, which expressly recognised the organisation's commitment to including stakeholders, especially from the private sector, in regional integration efforts. **Early engagements were however limited primarily to business forums** organised on the sidelines of COMESA Summits. This evolved into a more permanent structure with the establishment of the COMESA Business Council (CBC) in 2005 as one of the eight organs of COMESA, tasked with facilitating dialogue between the business community in the region and other interest groups within the Common Market. It has observer status in key ministerial meetings, such as those on trade and industry, and contributes to policymaking through technical working groups on issues like trade facilitation, digital financial inclusion, and regional industrialisation. The CBC hosts the COMESA Business Forum at Summits to serve as a structured space for dialogue between heads of state and business leaders.

Beyond the private sector, the 2005 Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs directed COMESA to identify and accredit credible CSOs, and to work closely with them, particularly in the area of peace and security. In response to the Ministerial decision, **COMESA developed rules of procedures to accredit CSOs and establish formal working relations** for the promotion of peace and security across the region. Following the adoption of the rules of procedure in June 2007, **national consultations were held in 17 COMESA member states, and through these consultations, 30 CSOs were granted accreditation**. In its programming, particularly on governance, peace, and security, the involvement of CSOs has been reflected in promoting the COMESA Early Warning System (COMWARN) Structural Vulnerability Assessment (SVA) methodology; in managing conflicts through capacity building mediation initiatives to counter natural-resource based conflicts, and the promotion of trade-based practices for peacebuilding in transitioning communities. To facilitate these efforts, COMESA launched a Civil Society/Private Sector Online Platform in 2021, with the support of ECOSOCC. This platform provides an opportunity for interactive dialogues on policy issues between CSOs and policymakers in the region, is a platform for CSOs/Private Sector Organisations to showcase their work in areas of peace and security and share best practices. It also serves as a platform for engagement with other RECs, AU Organs, CSOs, and international organisations. It makes use of multi-stakeholder dialogues as a major means of engaging various sectors with the region's civil actors.

It is evident from efforts at the regional level that important strides have been made towards integrating civil society and citizen voices into regional governance. A notable trend is the growing institutionalisation of engagement mechanisms, as many RECs have transitioned from fragmented project-based interactions to more formalised treaty-backed frameworks that embed civil society participation in regional processes. Most RECs have adopted stakeholder-specific platforms centred around youth networks, women's forums, CSOs coalitions and private sector platforms as practical entry points for engagement, reflecting a pragmatic shift toward targeted inclusion.

Despite notable advancements, **access to these regional platforms remains limited for grassroots and community-based organisations**, owing to financial, technical, and logistical barriers that hinder meaningful participation. Weaknesses in the linkages between national and regional levels continue to undermine the effectiveness of citizen engagement. **National consultations are not always systematically connected to regional decision-making structures**, resulting in a breakdown in the feedback loop and diminishing the democratic legitimacy of regional integration efforts. Addressing these weaknesses will be critical to advancing a truly people-centred integration agenda in Africa.

REGIONAL ECONOMIC COMMUNITY

5.6 The East African Community (EAC)

The 2009 Protocol on the Establishment of the EAC Common Market operationalises the people-centered aspirations of the EAC Treaty by translating them into enforceable commitments that directly benefit citizens. By facilitating mobility and cross-border enterprises, the Protocol fosters regional inclusivity and economic empowerment. It further mandates Partner States to harmonise national policies to uphold the rights and dignity of individuals moving within the region, positioning the citizen not merely as a beneficiary of integration, but as a central agent in its realisation.

The 1999 Treaty for the Establishment of the EAC enshrines as a core operational principle **"people-centered and market-driven co-operation"** under Article 7(1)(a), emphasising broad-based inclusion. The Treaty obliges Partner States to uphold the principles of good governance, democracy, the rule of law, accountability, transparency, and the protection of human and people's rights (Article 6(d)). Importantly, the Treaty's objectives go beyond state-centric integration by seeking to "strengthen partnerships with the private sector and civil society," and to "promote a people-centred mutual development" (Article 5(3)(g–h)) underscoring the role of non-state actors and stakeholders in shaping the regional agenda through consultative and participatory processes.

In addition, the 6th **EAC Development Strategy (2021/22–2025/26)** translates the Treaty's normative commitments into immediate regional priorities. Consistent with Article 129 of the Treaty—which mandates the strengthening of consultative mechanisms—the Strategy explicitly aims to **"leverage deeper stakeholder participation" in EAC programs and processes**. It commits to strengthening institutional partnerships with civil society and the private sector, positioning these actors not merely as observers but as active implementers and accountability agents within the regional integration framework. The strategy's Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework is designed to assess the effectiveness of civil society participation, aligning with Treaty obligations to evaluate progress inclusively.

In 2012, the **EAC institutionalised the Consultative Dialogue Framework (CDF)** as a formal mechanism for structured engagement with civil society, private sector, and other interest groups in the regional integration process. Adopted by the Council of Ministers at its 26th Meeting (Decision EAC/CM26/Decision 06), the CDF provides a legally sanctioned framework to facilitate inclusive participation in EAC policymaking and implementation. It mandates dialogue at national and regional levels, with National Dialogue Committees (NDCs) established in each Partner State to convene government, CSOs, and business stakeholders. At the regional level, the Regional Dialogue Committee (RDC)—composed of representatives from the EAC Secretariat, organs, and apex bodies such as EACSOF, EABC, the East African Law Society, and others—oversees implementation. The CDF draws legal legitimacy from Article 127(4) of the EAC Treaty, which directs the Secretary General to facilitate forums for consultation between non-state actors and Community institutions.

To operationalise the above provisions, the Council of Ministers at its 26th Meeting adopted the Consultative Dialogue Framework (CDF) for Private Sector, Civil Society and other interest groups in the EAC integration process (EAC/CM26/DECISION 06). The CDF provides a mechanism for the involvement of the citizenry and is implemented in the context of multi-s takeholder partnerships to ensure that the objectives of widening and deepening cooperation among the Partner States in political, economic, social, cultural, health, education, science and technology, defense, security, legal and judicial affairs, are achieved for the benefit of the people of East Africa.

The **East African Civil Society Organizations' Forum (EACSOF) is legally recognised as the apex regional platform for civil society engagement within the East African Community (EAC)**, anchored in Article 127 of the Treaty for the Establishment of the EAC. This article obligates Partner States to create an enabling environment for civil society participation and mandates the Secretary General to convene consultative forums with non-state actors. In 2012, the EAC Council of Ministers adopted the Consultative Dialogue Framework (CDF) (Decision EAC/CM 26/Decision 06), which formalised EACSOF's role as the representative of civil society at the regional level. Within this structure, EACSOF sits on the Regional Dialogue Committee (RDC) and co-organises the Annual Secretary General's Forum, serving as the primary institutional interface for civil society engagement in EAC affairs. These mechanisms provide structured pathways for civil society to shape policy, ensuring that regional integration reflects the views, interests, and rights of East African citizens.

EACSOF has made substantive contributions to EAC policy and legislative development, particularly in areas of youth, gender, health, and access to medicines. It spearheaded early drafts of the EAC Youth Policy and collaborated on the EAC Gender Equality and Development Bill, which was passed by the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) in 2017. Both instruments drew heavily on inputs facilitated by EACSOF through regional consultations with grassroots networks. Additionally, EACSOF played a pivotal role in the passage of the EAC HIV/AIDS Prevention and Management Act (2012) by mobilising expert advocacy and public support. It also influenced revisions to regional anti-counterfeit legislation, ensuring that measures to combat fake goods did not obstruct access to affordable generic medicines for citizens — especially critical for HIV/AIDS treatment. These examples underscore EACSOF's transformative role in translating citizen concerns into legal and policy frameworks, reinforcing the EAC's commitment to a participatory and people-centered integration agenda.

The **tangible impact of citizen and civil society engagement within the EAC is increasingly visible in concrete policy outcomes and normative reforms**. Civil society, principally through EACSOF and its member organisations, has significantly shaped regional legislation, notably the EAC HIV and AIDS Prevention and Management Act, 2012, which stands as a model of participatory lawmaking. Its enactment was preceded by extensive civil society advocacy and expert input, fulfilling the participatory intent of Article 127 of the Treaty, which mandates structured consultation with non-state actors in policy formulation.

Moreover, CSOs have actively engaged in shaping regional governance and human rights frameworks, contributing to ongoing deliberations on the draft EAC Good Governance Protocol, which remains under consideration by Partner States. Beyond legislative advocacy, platforms such as the East African Health Platform and the Secretary General's Forum have enabled civil society actors to inject grassroots perspectives into regional discussions on cross-border health services, small-scale trade facilitation (especially for women), and youth entrepreneurship.

Civil society has significantly shaped regional legislation.

Lessons Learned and Practices in Citizens' Engagement

06

6.1 Best practices

CSO involvement in COVID-19 management

During the global COVID-19 pandemic, CSOs were essential in complementing the efforts of governmental and intergovernmental bodies such as the AU. Their agility, community-level reach, and ability to mobilise quickly made CSOs indispensable partners in managing health emergencies. The contribution of CSOs to the fight against COVID were largely around:

⭐ **Awareness and education:** During the outbreak of COVID-19, CSOs played a pivotal in disseminating critical information about COVID-19 prevention and treatment methods. They utilised their grassroots networks to reach remote and under-served communities where official health communication seldom penetrates effectively. Their efforts included translating health advisories into local languages and disseminating information via community radio stations and local events.[83]

⭐ **Supporting health initiatives**: Many CSOs directly supported the implementation of AU health initiatives by distributing health supplies such as masks and sanitisers, and setting up local handwashing stations. They also assisted in implementing vaccination drives by providing logistics support and mobilising community members to get vaccinated.[84]

⭐ **Monitoring and feedback:** CSOs contributed to monitoring the effectiveness of health policies and providing feedback to health authorities, including the AU's Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC). Their on-the-ground presence allows them to gather real-time data and community feedback, which is crucial for adjusting health strategies promptly.[85]

CSOs contribution to continental frameworks

CSOs are crucial stakeholders in formulating and revising treaties and frameworks at the AU level. Their involvement has ensured that various perspectives, especially those from grassroots and marginalised communities, are considered or reflected in policy-making processes. Their contribution to policy processes include:

⭐ **Consultation:** CSOs participate in consultative meetings and workshops discussing treaties and policy frameworks. For instance, in developing the AfCFTA, CSOs provided insights into the potential social impacts of increased trade, and advocated for protections for small-scale farmers and local industries.[86]

⭐ **Advocacy and lobbying:** CSOs have also used their platforms to advocate for or against certain policy elements, the most important have included issues of youth and women inclusion, the right of citizens, the closing of democratic spaces and continental norms on freedom of movement, among others. They lobby for the inclusion of human rights, environmental protections, and social equity clauses in new treaties.[87] Their advocacy have ensured that these treaties are socially responsible and incorporate important experiences from the grassroot.

⭐ **Research and expertise:** CSOs contribute research and expert analysis during regional and continental policy formulation. This helps bring data-driven insights and case studies that influence the direction of policy frameworks, making them more robust and effective.

83 Patterson, Amy S., and Emmanuel Balogun. "African responses to COVID-19: the reckoning of agency?." African Studies Review 64.1 (2021), p.144-167.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.

86 Aniche, Ernest Toochi. "African continental free trade area and African Union Agenda 2063: The roads to Addis Ababa and Kigali." Journal of Contemporary African Studies 41.4 (2023), p.377-392.

87 Viljoen, Frans. "Human rights in Africa: normative, institutional and functional complementarity and distinctiveness." South African Journal of International Affairs 18.2 (2011), p.191-216.

6.2 Lessons learned

Over the years, the experiences of the AU and its engagement mechanisms have yielded several important lessons that have informed the ongoing reform process. These include the following:

■ **Strengthening ECOSOCC:** There is a recognised need for ongoing reforms to enhance the operational capacity of ECOSOCC and other AU citizen engagement platforms. This includes improving administrative efficiency, ensuring transparent and merit-based selection processes for CSO representation, and strengthening the AU and civil society communication channels.

■ **Decentralisation:** To overcome logistical challenges, there is a growing acknowledgement of the need for decentralising engagement initiatives, allowing for more localised or regional approaches that can tailor strategies to specific community needs and contexts. The operationalisation of the ECOSOCC National Chapters is a step in this direction. Building sustainable funding models: Lessons have been learned about the risks of over-reliance on external donor funding. There is an increasing emphasis on developing sustainable funding models, including domestic fundraising, private-sector partnerships, and other innovative financing mechanisms.

■ **Enhancing political engagement:** Effective citizen engagement requires not only the involvement of CSOs but also the buy-in of political leaders. Advocacy efforts must be intensified to highlight the benefits of inclusive governance to political leaders and policymakers. Also, advocating for legal and regulatory reforms that facilitate rather than restrict the operation of CSOs is crucial. This includes lobbying for laws that support freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly. This is important because strong CSOs at national levels translate into strong CSOs engagement within the AU system.

■ **Leveraging technology for wider reach:** The potential of digital technology to facilitate more inclusive engagement has been increasingly recognised. Investing in digital literacy and infrastructure can help mitigate some geographical and logistical barriers to engagement. A key challenge in the dissemination of information beyond CSO actors is the limited resourcing of most CSOs, which constrains their ability to broaden the reach and impact of AU-related engagements.

6.3 Barriers to Effective Citizen Engagement

The AU and its engagement platforms, including the ECOSOCC, have faced several key **challenges that impact the effectiveness of citizen engagement across the continen**t. These challenges are broadly categorised into political, logistical, and financial constraints as noted below.

⚠ Political challenges

In some member states, there is **limited political will to integrate civil society inputs into national policy-making processes**. This resistance sometimes stems from governmental concerns about the political power of CSOs or from **entrenched political interests that may be threatened by broader citizen participation**. This has often resulted in the existence of stringent regulations and bureaucratic hurdles at the national level with the aim of limiting the operational capacity of CSOs. These national ideological orientations are sometimes translated into AU positions or reflected in the AU outlook with regard to civil society engagement. This ultimately affects citizen engagement efforts as CSO actors struggle to register, receive funding, or hold public gatherings, thereby limiting their potential to advance the AU's citizen engagement agenda.

According to feedback from CSOs surveyed for this report, citizens and **CSOs sometimes face political sensitivities and repression when attempting to advance the AU's ideals and activities**, particularly on issues related to human rights, governance, and democracy. There is a prevailing perception that some governments restrict civic space, harass activists, and suppress dissent – making it difficult for civil society to voice their concerns, advocate for change within AU structures, or inform citizens about continental processes to form the basis for accountability. During field missions by AU actors, CSOs organised by government actors to contribute to continental discussions are sometimes perceived as already influenced to advance government narratives. As a result, they may fail to provide continental actors – including the PSC – with perspectives that differ from those of government.

⚠ Downstream implementation Challenges

Currently, the number of **AU platforms directly engaging African citizens is limited**. Instead, the majority of existing engagements make use of CSO actors as proxies to citizens. The underlying assumption is that when CSOs engage with the AU, they channel citizen concerns to the AU and, in turn, also transmit AU priorities to the people, through awareness-raising initiatives and stakeholder engagements. Currently, the extent to which the use of CSOs as proxies is able to achieve intended objectives remains uncertain, primarily due to two key factors.

First, Africa's vast and varied geography – combined with inadequate infrastructure and unequal access to technology – poses significant challenges for CSOs in reaching remote and marginalised communities across the continent. Even in contexts where CSOs demonstrate strong grassroots presence, there is **no consistent intersection between continental, regional, national and grassroots CSOs in matters related to AU.** There is, therefore, no guarantee that information reaching the cluster of CSO groups that operate at the continental level always has a way of seeping through to actors at the grassroots level, consistently.

The second constraint relates to **limited budgetary availability for CSO actors,** which limits the extent to which CSOs interfacing with the AU are able to translate the outcomes of their engagements into activities that directly target or benefit citizens at the grassroots level, or effectively channel citizen input to the AU to complete the communication loop. Apart from being forced to rely heavily on international donor funding, which can be inconsistent and may come with strings attached, reliance on external funding can sometimes skew the priorities of African CSOs away from serving as the conduit for applying the priorities of the AU and for connecting the grassroots with regional and continental decision-making. An interviewee noted that "these challenges impact the extent to which CSOs are able to carry out return actions in the field after encountering the AU." Their inability to transmit the information implies that, in some cases, AU engagement efforts are incomplete as there could still be a gap between CSOs and actual citizens' uptake. This imposes challenges at the downstream level of the AU citizen engagement spectrum where promoting awareness, participation, and accountability among grassroots actors is supposed to take place.

⚠ Financial Constraints

CSOs are not the only actors facing limitations originating from funding constraints. Interviews with stakeholders across AU citizen engagement platforms consistently identified this as a key challenge. While the **commitment to achieving a citizen-centred organisation is reflected in AU frameworks and policy provisions, it is yet to receive the requisite funding** provisions to support the implementation of activities that actualise that commitment.

As such, in some cases, even though operational and technical-level policy actors are aware of the need to involve CSOs and citizens at every stage of deliberation in the policy formulation and implementation spectrum, they lack the funds to facilitate their involvement. This hinders the effectiveness of the AU's engagements as the various platforms tend not to maximise their utility. This not only undermines the principles of transparency and accountability, but also risks disenfranchising the very communities the AU aims to empower – ultimately weaking its vision of becoming a citizen-centred organisation for the continent.

⚠ Lack of unity and specialised capacity

Despite the widespread presence of CSOs across Africa, their engagement in diverse thematic areas, and their commitment to advancing the AU's Agenda 2063, meaningful contribution is sometimes hindered by a lack of coherence and unity among them. As a result, CSOs often find themselves competing AU engagement on issues that are closely aligned or duplicated. This dynamic complicates engagement efforts, requiring AU actors to tactfully navigate ompeting interests – often working with multiple CSO actors whose objectives could be more effectively advanced through coordinated action. This also implies that sometimes there is ample concentration of engagement on particular issues but not necessarily on other matters that are equally important for AU engagement. This often results in patchy AU outreach to citizens since the lack of CSO engagement in certain thematic areas combined with concurrent saturation of their presence in other themes ultimately sells some aspects of the AU's work more than others.

Even in situations where CSO actors engage in a well-streamlined and united manner, it is common to find that, despite their willingness to support, they often lack the specialised capacity required to advance crucial AU requests or to develop innovative solutions to major

challenges. This often results in capacity gaps, even in contexts where AU actors demonstrate a strong willingness to engage and CSOs show clear commitment to supporting AU initiatives. This gap is particularly evident among grassroots CSOs, which often do not have sufficient training, international experience, or exposure to effectively navigate multilateral contexts. Consequently, when engaging with major policy organs in a multilateral setting, some CSOs struggle with understanding the context and knowing how best to advocate their inputs to policies effectively to ensure policy uptake.

⚠ Limited Consultation and Participation

Despite efforts to promote citizen participation, the AU citizen engagement and consultation mechanisms do not always effectively engage citizens and CSOs in decision-making processes. According to the CSO Survey conducted for this report, **the majority of CSO actors report being invited to participate an average of two times per year**, across multiple thematic areas. Although indicative of some level of CSO involvement, **this figure does not reflect sufficient opportunities for substantive involvement in continental decision-making processes**. In some cases, CSO engagement is **treated more as a procedural requirement rather than an integral part of the decision-making process**. This occasionally leads to tokenistic engagements, infrequent consultations, or a lack of meaningful follow-up, thereby undermining sustained and impactful CSO involvement and meaningful engagement.

⚠ Challenges Posed by Language Barriers

Although the AU has recognises six official languages, its **proceedings are often conducted primarily in English and French – creating barriers for citizens and CSOs whose official languages fall outside these two.** Language barriers can hinder effective communication, access to information, and participation in AU initiatives, particularly for those who are not proficient in English or French. This often implies that even in situations where the AU willingly wants to engage, there are many **national and grassroots CSO actors who are left out due to linguistic limitations.** These barriers diminish grassroots CSOs' influence on AU policies, restrict their access to vital resources and funding opportunities, and perpetuate inequalities in policy-making processes that fail to reflect local needs and perspectives. Addressing these challenges requires promoting linguistic diversity within AU frameworks, providing sufficient funding to support interpretation and translation services across all six official languages, and supporting capacity-building initiatives that empower CSOs to engage more effectively across diverse linguistic communities.

⚠ Lack of Overarching Citizen Engagement Strategy

The AU currently **lacks a comprehensive framework document or strategy guiding the various citizen engagement efforts** by all the different actors. As such, despite the existing platforms, there is a general lack of coherence in the approaches adopted by different AU units. There is also lack of guidance on the effective involvement of citizens in policy processes. Without clear guidelines and standardised practices among the different AU entry points, citizen involvement in AU initiatives varies widely, impacting the inclusivity and transparency of decision-making processes from unit to unit. The routing process for CSO participation and AU engagement is also unstructured. It is difficult for a CSO that is beginning to engage to know exactly what the process entails. Establishing an overarching framework or strategy would provide clarity on roles, responsibilities, and methodologies for engaging citizens, ensuring their voices are systematically integrated into AU policies and programs.

Policy Issues for Consideration and Recommendations

07

Considering the current state of AU citizens engagement and its associated challenges, the following recommendations are proposed to improve the AU's engagement with citizens.

For the African Union

- **Regularisation of platforms:** Currently, multiple units employ varied approaches to engaging citizens. While this offers room for reaching a broader stakeholder group, critical consideration of the efficacy of the various approaches is viral, to inform the extent to which each can be maximised in the AU's efforts to engage citizens on the African continent and in the diaspora.

- **Capacity-building of CSO actors:** With the exception of international CSOs that have experience operating in multilateral settings, the majority of CSOs required to interface with the AU do not always have the requisite policy experience to optimise expectations from AU citizen engagement. Given their indispensable role in achieving the AU vision of a people-centred organisation, it is important for the AU, through ECOSOCC, to establishe a platform for consistently building the capacity of the CSO actors, to maximise their partnership benefits.

- **Harmonisation of engagement modalities:** Observer status and MoUs remain key mechanisms for regularising the engagement of AU units with various CSO actors. However, there is no clarity regarding the means of securing these, as different organs and units have different approaches to granting them. The Executive Council has approved the AU Harmonised Mechanism for the Granting of Consultative and Observer Status to CSOs, developed by ECOSOCC at the request of member states. It is important that this operationalisation process gathers wide representation and input. It needs to be fast-tracked to help shape AU engagement and CSOs' approach to participation in continental policymaking.

- **AU Citizen Engagement Framework Document:** The AU currently lacks a comprehensive framework document for citizen engagement, which hinders consistent and effective participation across the Union. Without clear guidelines and standardised practices, citizen involvement in AU initiatives varies widely, impacting the inclusivity and transparency of decision-making processes. Establishing an overarching framework would provide clarity on roles, responsibilities, and methodologies for engaging citizens, ensuring their voices are systematically integrated into AU policies and programs.

- **AU CSO Fund:** Funding challenges continue to limit the extent to which CSOs interfacing with the AU can translate the outcomes of their meetings with the AU into activities that multiply and translate the AU's reach to the grassroots. It is important for the AU to consider establishing a dedicated funding pool which could be accessed by CSOs meeting defined criteria for the implementation of specific AU activities and projects, particularly Agenda 2063 projects. Given the important role of the ECOSOCC national chapters, an AU CSO fund is particularly important to sustain their roles and maximise their capacity to amplify AU policies at grassroots level. By supporting CSOs with reliable funding, the AU can empower them to not only initiate but also sustain meaningful initiatives that align with AU priorities and local needs, in line with Agenda 2063.

- **Facilitating the creation of a conducive environment for CSOs:** Given the challenges CSOs sometimes face in their operations, the AU should advocate for favourable legal and regulatory reforms in member states, to facilitate rather than restrict the operation of CSOs. Efforts should also be made to provide support and protection for CSOs operating in politically sensitive or unfavourable environments to ensure they can safely continue their contribution at the grassroots towards achieving Agenda 2063.

- **Maximising use of technological solutions:** Given the challenges in reaching grassroots communities and the costs associated with traditional methods of engaging CSOs, the AU should consider spearheading efforts to invest in promoting and supporting initiatives aimed at improving digital infrastructure. This would facilitate better outreach to remote and marginalised communities. The use of new technology to involve citizens remotely, and live streaming of AU activities are important means to mitigate geographical and logistical barriers to engagement. The use of Virtual Town Halls could be regularised and institutionalised to serve as a point where citizens can interact with AU officials regardless of their physical location. By leveraging technology, the AU can bridge the gap between the Union and African citizens, ensuring that information flows effectively in both directions.

For Member States

- **Support for CSOs:** The dominance of foreign funding in the CSO sector frequently fuels friction between civil society and governments, regarding the the origins and motives behind CSO advocacy efforts. Promoting an open dialogue policy with CSOs often cross-fertilises ideas and helps address such tensions. This is important in providing the needed conducive environment for maximising the contribution of CSOs to the development of member states and the continent at large.

- **National Funding for CSOs:** CSOs play a crucial role in advancing democracy, promoting human rights, and addressing socio-economic challenges at the grassroots level. By investing in CSOs, national governments can foster innovation, inclusivity, and community empowerment. This enhances social development, strengthens governance, and promotes Agenda 2063. Member states could consider allocating funding to selected sectors, prioritising areas where CSOs can maximise achievements aligned with national and continental development goals under Agenda 2063.

For Civil Society partners

- **Promoting Unity and Collaboration:** Given limited resources, CSO actors should prioritise forming strategic partnerships and coalitions. This approach will maximise efforts, prevent duplication of work, and ensure the judicious use of resources, ultimately enhancing the overall impact and effectiveness of their contributions to the AU's citizen engagement efforts.

- **Develop multi-tiered intra-CSO Networks:** CSOs are urged to establish a structured multi-tiered network that connects continental, regional, national, and grassroots organisations. This network should facilitate regular information sharing and collaboration among CSOs, ensuring that AU priorities and citizen concerns are communicated consistently across all levels. Monthly virtual and in-person meetings, workshops, and training sessions can strengthen these connections and improve the coordination of efforts.

- **Diversify Funding Sources:** To reduce dependency on international donor funding, CSOs should explore and develop diverse funding sources. This can include forming partnerships with the private sector and other development funds. By diversifying funding streams, CSOs can
maintain greater autonomy and alignment with AU priorities, easing tensions with Member States and enhancing their engagement with citizens.

- Leverage Technology for Engagement: CSOs are encouraged to utilise digital platforms, social media, and mobile applications to increase awareness and participation among grass-roots actors regarding Agenda 2063. These tools can be used to disseminate information about AU initiatives, gather citizen input, and promote accountability. Interactive platforms can also facilitate real-time communication and engagement between the AU, CSOs, and citizens.