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Facilitating Dialogue among Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs)

Draft Concept Paper prepared by the

African Citizens' Directorate (CIDO)

African Union Commission

5 – 6 November, 2009

Abuja, Nigeria

I. Introduction

One of the defining features of the African Union (AU) that sets it apart from its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), is that it is designed as a people-centred and people-driven organisation. This finds expression in both the Constitutive Act and the Strategic Plan of the Union that provide for close relationship and active involvement of all segments of African societies and peoples in the activities, programmes and decision-making processes of the Union. To translate these prescriptions into action, the AU has created formal channels and structures of engagement with African peoples. Two major formal channels for mainstreaming African peoples' participation in the work of the Union are: the Pan-African Parliament (PAP) and the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC). However, because of the diverse and unstructured character of African civil society, the Union has adopted a pragmatic and flexible approach in its engagement with African civil society beyond the ambit of these formal structures. This has included providing for informal modes of engagements with non-state actors, such as faith-based organisations whose contributions may not be properly captured through formal structures like the ECOSOCC and PAP. The effective combination of the various forms of engagement (formal and informal) is harnessed through the work of the Citizens and Diaspora Directorate (CIDO) of the Commission of the African Union.

II. The AU and Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs)

Although religion has at times served as a justification and motivation for violence and war, it has at other times, helped prevent conflict by encouraging tolerance and compassion among members of society, brought about reconciliation, facilitated the resolution of otherwise intractable conflicts, assisted in the reconstruction of broken societies and served as platforms for strategic partnership in humanitarian action and development. Overall, established religions in all their variety have easily provided the most extensive networks of "civil society" in the world.¹ Moreover, the potential of established religion in stirring consciences to practical action of every kind has been acknowledged by both academics and practitioners.

Yet for established religion to realise its full potentials for constructive practical action, it must first overcome its potential for polarisation that some time derive from intolerance. It is within this context that the Commission of the African Union, through its Citizens Directorate, CIDO, intends to employ a programme for inter-faith (religious) dialogue to mobilise faith-based groupings, to discuss ways of promoting religious tolerance and peaceful co-habitation and also how to harness faith based organisations to contribute to the work of the Union. This approach is informed by the fact that Africa is a multi-religious continent and some of the political tensions that have occurred in parts of the continent have either originated from religious intolerance, or have been given religious coloration by political actors. Furthermore, the ever-present threat of terrorism has religious undertones

¹ Wolferson, cited in Graduate Institute, 2005:4.

– either in the form of misrepresentation of some religious teachings or by perceptions by some religious groupings that there is a deliberate ploy to undermine core values of their religions. Some parts of the continent have been identified as potential safe havens for terrorist activities because of their vulnerability created partly by poverty and underdevelopment. Dialogue amongst the various religious groups in the continent has a potential to prevent religion from being used as a justification for conflict. It could also greatly contribute in the global fight against terrorism and facilitate useful and constructive partnership between faith-based organisations and the African Union.

III. The Process

The possibilities associated with the need to harness the efforts of faith based groups to the desire for integration on the African continent is enormous. The people of the continent are a very religious group of people. The landscape is dominated by churches, mosques and traditional religious sites and devotion. Almost every action and sentiment of the broad generality of Africans are governed by their faith. The difficulties of governance, human rights and democracy in the current political settings are often attributed to the lack of linkages between behaviour and religious sanctions. The pursuit of discipline, integrity, fairness and equity in public life emphasized the need to stress the element of conscience and responsibility among the citizen ring.

The process of inter-faith dialogue is designed to tease out these linkages and establish precisely how they can become effective instruments for national and continental rejuvenation. The elements of this process must include appropriate partnership principles. Such principles must encompass the prospects of tangible community benefits accruable to all participants. The process of interaction itself must involve both cooperation, association and relative autonomy on the basis of mutual trust and mutual respect. The dialogue must honest and sincere with emphasis on improving conditions of African citizens among the Union and respective national constituencies within it. The Dialogue must promote a learning curve through which all sides can learn with each other and grow in perception and understanding of reality that can then be used to transform society in a practical progressive and meaningful context.

IV. The objectives of the partnership/dialogue

The objectives of the dialogue must derive its content and inspiration from this process. In particular, it must seek to achieve the following precise goals as follows:

1. To evolve a framework for dealing with the ambivalence of religion and spirituality as socio-cultural forces that are conducive for development and humanitarian action on the one hand, and carry the risk of misuse and political instrumentalisation on the other;

2. To develop a practical and sustainable working relationship between the AU and credible faith-based organisations capitalising on their shared values and mutual interests;
3. To explore the expertise and capacity of faith-based organisations that can be harnessed to advance the course of the African Union and its work particularly in the areas of conflict prevention, good governance, promotion of human rights, development and climate change;
4. Sensitise faith-based organisations on issues that are of critical importance to the AU such as conflict prevention, humanitarian action, promotion of human rights, good governance, development and climate change;
5. To jointly define an agenda for action and to constitute a joint steering committee that will guide AU-faith-based organisation's partnership towards the upcoming major conference to be held in March 2010;
6. To develop guidelines for such a relationship, including mapping out clear channels for structured inputs by faith-based organisations into the decision-making processes of the AU and vice versa;
7. To place the partnership in context, taking into account, the plurality of actors. In this particular regard, faith-based organisations must be made to see the need to engage with actors of other faiths and with secular organisations on the basis of mutual respect and understanding of joint common values;
8. To discuss on criteria of selection of participants for the upcoming meeting.

V. Methodology

The proposal is for an inter-faith dialogue consisting of representatives of the various main religious groupings on the continent to examine and map out strategies and a framework for effective contribution of faith based groups in the peace, security and development agenda of the AU in particular. Emphasis will be placed on the need to promote peace and security and to prevent and combat terrorism. There will also be a consideration on how the traditional areas of faith based group efforts in its devotion to God, provision for the poor and giving solace to the sick and dying can be effectively used to support pertinent aspects of AU agenda such as refugee support and assistance to Internally Displaced Persons. Beyond this, there will be consideration of areas for initiatives such as mediation, peace-building and related efforts building on the case studies such as the situation in Darfur and the experience of the Mano River Union and the recent internal crises in Kenya etc.

Apart from this, emphasis be placed on the institutional structures and processes for ensuring that this effort is mainstreamed as a continuous input within the wider AU

framework. The issue of how to nurture this framework on a systematic basis will thus be one of prime consideration. The twin issues of how to marry substance and process will inform anticipation and consideration of the expected outcomes.

VI. Expected outcomes

- Establishment of an Inter-faith Dialogue Forum (IDF) for the purposes of bridging the gap between this important and strategic segment of the civil society and the African Union;
- Establishment of a steering committee of about five members to coordinate the activities of the forum and its partnership with the AU;
- Experience sharing on interfaith dialogue;
- Create increased awareness and participation of FBOs in AU initiatives, policies and programmes;
- Production of a program and an agenda for action;
- Development of a work plan for the institutionalisation of inter-religious dialogue and the partnership between the AUC and FBOs towards the conference to be held in March 2010.

VII. Focus for consideration

- Promoting religious harmony and tolerance amongst all religions and faiths in the continent;
- Fostering religious integration amongst faith based organisations within the continent;
- Locating the place of FBOs in a people-driven and people-owned African Union;
- Harnessing the FBOs contributions to the AU's work in the areas of Governance and Human Rights, Elections, Conflict Management and Development Action and Climate Change;
- Produce and disseminate information material on the virtues of religious dialogue and inter-religious tolerance.