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**Youth Participation and Representation in Governance and Democratic
Processes in Africa**

Press Statement

By

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**Members of the Media Fraternity
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen
All Protocols Observed**

It is always my pleasure to engage with African citizens, members of the media fraternity and civil society at large on the margins of our Summits and share with you our perspectives on the trends, challenges and prospects with regard to democratisation, peacebuilding and development on our continent. In fact, democracy, peace and development constitute the tripod that anchors the African Agenda 2063- the Continent's long-term development blue print. Let me refresh your minds that one of the seven key aspirations of the African peoples for the Africa we want by 2063 is "An Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children". Today, I will focus my brief on **Youth Participation and Representation in Governance and Democratic Processes in Africa** in line with the Decision of the African Union (AU) Policy Organs to declare 2017 the year of "Harnessing Demographic Dividend through Investment in Youths". This Decision is indeed timely for the Continent.

. Africa is regarded as the most youthful Continent, with 65% of our one (1) billion people below the age of 35 years. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the number of youth in Africa is projected to increase by 42% by 2030 and the current levels are likely to double by 2055. With over ten (10) million young Africans entering the labour market each year, there are mixed feelings on our ability as a Continent to harness the dividend that should accrue from having such a huge youthful population.

At the African Union, we recognize this challenge and see young people as a critical cornerstone for the realisation of the Union's vision of "an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and playing a dynamic role in the international arena". In this regard, the AU has over the years adopted normative frameworks to entrench the protection and promotion of young people's rights, including their right to participate in governance, democratic processes and decision making structures at all levels.

At the Member States level, we have seen political commitment to youth development exemplified by the ratification of the Youth Charter by 38 out of 54 AU Member States. Further to this, a significant number of Member States have domesticated the Charter through the adoption of national youth policies to guide implementation at country level. Several commendable initiatives are being undertaken at different levels – national, sub national and local levels - to empower young people economically, socially and politically. However, there are still challenges regarding the effective liberalization of socio-economic and political spaces to allow for meaningful participation and representation of young people in governance processes. Some of these challenges are:

- a) discriminatory cultural practices and norms that affect young people particularly young women's meaningful participation and representation in democratic and governance processes;
- b) marginalization and systematic exclusion of youth from governance and decision making processes through restrictive and prohibitive rules and criteria;
- c) limited access to quality education and decent job opportunities resulting in high youth unemployment rate estimated at over 12% by the International Labour Organisation; and
- d) huge gap between norm setting and implementation of international, continental, regional and national laws and normative instruments.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These challenges pose a great threat to our democratisation aspirations. Without adequate investment in addressing these challenges, our hopes of harnessing demographic dividend will only be a tall dream. In tackling these challenges, we must empower young people to play their role as responsible citizens and help deepen democratic practices on the continent. Young people are highly affected by the governance challenges of the continent but rarely considered in the efforts and programmes aimed at addressing them. This alienation is thus fueling frustrations and a sense of helplessness in the status quo.

For instance, our analysis from our Election Observation Missions over the last ten years show a worrying trend in youth voter turnout. This is further corroborated by a 2016 Afrobarometer report which concluded that “African youth are less likely than their elders to engage in a variety of political and civic activities, including voting, attending community meetings, joining others to raise an issue, and contacting leaders. Young women express significantly less interest in public affairs than young men”. While this is currently a global phenomenon, it calls for concerted efforts by African leaders aimed at the deepening of sustainable, democratic and participatory governance on the continent.

It is my firm belief that synergy of efforts by young people taking responsibility and working hand-in-hand with Government in their countries will accelerate progress towards the demographic dividend.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As part of our commitment to ensuring the meaningful engagement and representation of youth in democratic and governance processes on the continent, the African Governance Platform has over the last three years implemented the AGA Youth Engagement Strategy. Premised on a rights based approach to development for Africa’s youth, the strategy aims at the enjoyment, protection and respect of fundamental civil, political and socio-economic rights of young people including young women. Through the implementation of the strategy and its action plan, we have since 2013 convened annual Youth Fora to provide platforms for young people to engage with AU policies and programmes. We have also provided capacity building and supported youth-led initiatives through the provision of technical and financial resources to advance youth engagement on issues of democracy, governance, human rights, elections and humanitarian affairs on the continent.

As part of the activities focused on the theme of the year 2016, we convened four regional youth consultations in Accra, Windhoek, Kampala and Tunis to aggregate youth inputs into the African Human Rights Decade as per the decision of the AU Summit held in Kigali, Rwanda in July 2016.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I conclude, permit me to share with you a number of issues requiring urgent attention by stakeholders for the realisation of demographic dividends on the continent. These issues have been drawn from our analysis and reflections based on engagement with young people through our various consultations with them. These include:

1. The need for Member States to ensure universal ratification and more importantly, domestication and implementation of AU Shared Values instruments, particularly those that promote youth participation in democratic and governance processes, notably the 2006 African Youth Charter;
2. The need for policymakers to appreciate the heterogenous needs and concerns of young people when designing policies and programmes that affect them. In this vein, there is the need to strengthen efforts towards addressing peculiar systemic challenges faced by young women in fully participating in socio-economic and political spaces;
3. Member States must re-commit to increased investment in the productive and creative capacities of young people through quality education, skill and capacity building programs, technical and vocational education so as to equip them for the responsibility of advancing Africa's transformation and development; and,
4. Finally, there is need for you formations such as Pan African Youth Union, National Youth Councils, etc to play an active role in advocating for meaningful and effective youth participation and representation in democratic and governance processes on the continent.

Let end by welcoming the decision by the AU policy organs declaring 2017 as the year of "Harnessing Demographic Dividends: Investing in Youth". Let us all join hands to make the year of the African youth (2017) a resounding success.

I thank you for your attention.