

POLICY BRIEF 2020

SILENCING THE GUNS THROUGH BUILDING RESILIENT DEMOCRACIES AND ACCOUNTABLE GOVERNANCE

INTRODUCTION:

Despite some notable normative, institutional and functional peace dividends accrued over the past decade, violent conflict remains a central challenge plaguing the African continent. In 2019, Africa recorded an alarming 36% upsurge in violent conflicts.¹ Fuelled by developmental, governance and peace deficits, which have been amplified in the current COVID-19 context, violent conflicts have unleashed a broad range of adverse repercussions for human security, democratisation and development. Against this backdrop, the need for more proactive and sustained responses to effectively prevent, manage and resolve conflicts on the continent is urgent and pivotal for charting the way forward for lasting development in Africa. This urgency was encapsulated in the African Union's (AU) 2020 theme of the year which focussed on 'Silencing the guns: creating conducive conditions for Africa's development'.

Acknowledging the indispensability of democratic governance for silencing the guns in Africa, the African Governance Platform, under the auspices of the African Governance Architecture (AGA) secretariat,² convened the 9th High-Level Dialogue (HLD) on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance under the theme "Silencing the Guns through Building Resilient Democracies and Accountable Governance" on 10-11 December 2020. This flagship initiative assembled high-level representatives from AU Member States, Re-

gional Economic Communities (RECS), AGA Platform Members, representatives from the AU organs and UN agencies, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), academia, media, think tanks and youth and women organisations working on issues of governance and peace building to dialogue on various dimensions of the issues animating the relationship between efforts to silence the guns in Africa and building resilient and accountable governance structures.

The two-day virtual dialogue offered a collaborative, open and inclusive space for meaningful policy-oriented deliberations on the inextricable nexus between democratic governance and sustainable peace in Africa. The central objective resonated with the year's theme, as well as the goals set forth in Article 3 of the AU constitutive Act, and aspirations 3 and 4 of Agenda 2063 which envisions "an Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and rule of law," and "a peaceful and secure Africa." The HLD took place in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic – a mixed blessing, which not only inflicted considerable negative impact on all aspects of Africa's developmental processes, but also lent an opportunity to rethink, reflect and develop new approaches to address the complex and growing governance challenges across the continent. Finally, it afforded the various partner institutions the opportunity to reflect on institutional perspectives and revisit commit-

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ments towards Silencing the Guns through building resilient democracies and accountable governance on the continent.

The HLD identified trends, challenges, opportunities and initiatives that can revitalise governance in Africa and bolster sustainable peace and development in Africa. This policy brief is generated from the discussions and conclusions of dialogue and is supplemented by relevant secondary data meant to substantiate the core messaging of the meeting. Structurally, the brief

unfolds in five main sections. After the introduction (section 1) which captures the background and rationale of the HLD, section two details the key emerging trends and challenges for building resilient democracies and accountable governance in Africa. Sections three and four respectively highlight opportunities and distil policy recommendations directed towards important stakeholders such as: AU Member States, AU/RECs, CSOs, as well as Development partners and the UN system. The general conclusion is summed up in section five.

GENERAL TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

Africa's peace, development and governance profile reveal a complex melange of timid progress and persist cases of violent conflicts, terrorism, climate change, widening effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, enforced displacements and fragile peace accords. Africa's contemporary governance, peace and security landscape is defined by the following major challenges and issues.

Persistent violent conflicts: Over the past decade, violent conflicts, which had significantly scaled down in scope and frequency, appear to have regained momentum and continues to rage across the continent of Africa. The number of non-state conflicts has dramatically increased, peaking in 2017 with 50 non-state conflicts, compared to 24 in 2011.¹ In 2019 alone, a grim total of 21,600 incidents of armed conflict, including civil unrests, riots and popular protests, were recorded in Africa - an alarming upsurge from 15,874 in 2018.² This not only suggests state fragility which undermines efforts towards realising the aspirations of Agenda 6023, but present new and daunting threats to democratic governance, peace and stability.

Transnational insecurity: Despite regional and sub-regional counter-efforts, the continent is frequently besieged by emerging transnational insecurity complexes such as organised crime, trafficking and violent extremism as witnessed in the Lake Chad Basin, the Great Lakes, the Sahel and the Horn of Africa regions. These transnational insecurity complexes highlight the fact that the prevailing intra-state governance and human security dilemmas on the continent have become regionalised into security complexes that require regional responses.

Governance Deficits: In 2015, the Mo Ibrahim index of African Governance noted that 'overall governance progress in Africa is stalling.'³ This trend had persisted and, on some counts, deteriorated. The typology of conflicts on the continent of Africa shows that many of the conventional threats to peace and security are direct fallouts of democratic governance deficits such as: poor diversity management, corruption, weak social safety nets and public service delivery, poor human rights and rule of law records etc. Socio-economic deficits have also incessantly placed high demand for democracy which is met with poor supply. These fuel tensions, crisis and violent conflicts. The same can be said about unconventional threats such as terrorism, violent extremism, organised crime, breakdown of public order, illicit financial flows, and unconstitutional change of government. Understanding the governance-peace nexus, and addressing deep-seated governance deficits that underlie conflicts, is therefore, fundamental to achieving the goals of silencing the guns in Africa.

Weak state-society relations: Limited state authority remains a perennial challenge to inclusive and participatory governance as states grapple with weak capacity to deliver services to their populations. This has fuelled and sustained violent extremism, which stands tall as one of the biggest threats to the future of democratic governance, as well as the conflict management systems constructed over the years in Africa. The emergence of alternative informal structures of governance to fill the vacuum of state authority provide the avenues for terrorism to fester and violent extremist groups to use as haven for their activities. Violent extremist groups operating in such havens usually enjoy support from the local

communities and use that as a platform to expand and sustain their activities with detrimental consequences on the stability of African states.

The rise of populism: Populism is a viable indicator of growing discontent, especially in contexts where citizens perceive socio-economic hardships as the result of the failure of democracy to meet their aspirations. Africa's population continues to increase, especially the continent's youth, along with demands for change, respect for human rights, and strong accountable governance to meet the various socio-economic deficits. This is happening in a context of deepening corruption trends and a vicious cycle of a widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, sustained by state-capture and abuse of office by public office holders. This has created vulnerable young populations some of whom are easily recruited into acts of violence by actors perceive violence as vent for expressing their frustrations.

Endemic Enforced Population Displacement:

As a result of the above challenges, violent conflicts on the continent have continued to place immense pressure on local populations and resulted not on in high conflict-related fatalities but also mass displacements of people. Deliberations in the HLD took note of the fact that in 2020 alone, conflict and violence triggered the displacement of an estimated 4.8 million people in Africa and the Middle East, a million more than what was recorded in the first half of 2019, according to reports by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). More than anything, this depicts a sober state of governance, security and peace on the continent requiring urgent action.

Fragile Peace Accords: Years of negotiation and mediation processes have culminated in landmark victories following the signing of peace accords in conflict-ridden countries on the continent. These accords embody promising aspirations of warring factions for peace and reconciliation after decades of violent confrontations. However, recent trends suggest that peace accords remain fragile due to weak implementation of agreed tasks, deep-seated mistrust among key stakeholders and recurrent inter-communal violence. This has led to the existence of several weak transitional arrangements with risks of easy relapse.

Fragile Infrastructures of Peace: Hitherto, institutions tasked to mediate between governments and their citizens remained weak in fulfilling their social contract with citizens. The multiplication of national dialogues across the continent sturdily points to the failure of governance institutions in charge of mediating diversity in the African society. Thus, some countries continue to be confronted with the twin challenge of deficit of legitimacy and lack of public service delivery which undermine national cohesion and state survival.

Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW):

The proliferation of arms continues to serve as a handmaiden for violent conflicts on the continent. This problem points to complex challenges of territorial control due to predominantly porous African borders. It also highlights the weaknesses in the current strategies and responses to the management of supply of arms on the continent which have been exploited to incite violent conflicts.

Shrinking Political Space:

Across the continent of Africa, it has been noted that the civic and political space has continued to shrink. Concurrently, the plight of human rights defenders in many countries remains wanting. Political marginalisation, otherwise referred to as othering has also continued to leave large sections of the African society outside the formal realm of governance as enfranchisement and distribution of socio-economic resources remain biased based on political allegiance. The shrinking of the political space is more nuanced when considering disaggregation of political participation by the youth and women social categories, which continues to remain marginalised. In accentuating this predicament, it has been noted that gender-based violence has continued to be on increase across the continent of Africa.

The COVID-19 Pandemic:

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has spread across all African countries, poses an emerging challenge to the quest for Silencing the Guns on the continent. The pandemic has deepened the pre-existing socio-economic inequalities and strained resources available to governments to respond to national challenges. With the projected contraction of economic growth, the continent is expected to face several challenges. GDP losses in 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19 is estimated between

\$145.5 billion (baseline) and \$189.7 billion (worst case), from the pre-COVID-19 estimated GDP of \$2.59 trillion⁴. Some losses are carried over to 2021, as the projected recovery would be partial. For 2021, the projected GDP losses could be from \$27.6 billion (baseline) up to \$47 billion (worst case) from the potential GDP of \$2.76 trillion without the pandemic. These effects are expected to adversely affect Africa's poverty index thereby pushing more citizens further below the poverty line and rendering them more vulnerable to violent conflicts.

In the political vein, the pandemic has been exploited by a number of governments by constricting the political space through cracking down on dissenting political voices. Human rights, constitutionalism and rule of law has also come under duress during states of emergencies instituted as part of COVID-19 control measures. Violent extremist groups have also leveraged the COVID-19 crisis to expand their footprints on the continent. According to ACLED, violent attacks in the region's hotspots rose by 37% between mid-March and mid-April 2020, along with pandemic-related propaganda, some of which liken the lockdown measures to a "war on Muslims".⁵

Democratic rollback: Despite the normative advancements at continental and regional lev-

els aimed at promoting democratic governance, peace and security, the continent continues to grapple with challenges of peace and democratic political transitions. Military takeovers and political tensions associated with constitutional tinkering of presidential terms are all too familiar. After decades of work towards building resilient democracy, this disquieting trend threatens peace and stability.

Climate Change-induced Conflicts: Climate change aggravates the natural disasters that play an important part in conflict ignition or exacerbation in Africa. It is estimated that a 1 % temperature increase could heighten risks of civil war by 4,5 % implying a projected 54 % increase in armed conflicts by 2030.⁶ In the last century, climate change affected 3-20 % of conflicts, and its growing weight in Africa doubles as a cause and consequence of conflict. Of the 20 countries most vulnerable to climate change in Africa, 12 are at varying degrees of conflict.⁷ As extreme weather events, such as floods, droughts and desertification worsen, the consequent human insecurity nourishes the insurgence of armed conflict in fragile regions like the Sahel (where people rely on pastoralism and agriculture), weak institutions and economies, injustice, violence and social insecurity are already prevalent.

HARNESSING OPPORTUNITIES FOR BUILDING RESILIENT DEMOCRACIES AND ACCOUNTABLE GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA

In responding to the above challenges to democratic governance, peace and security in Africa, the following opportunities can be explored and harnessed in a bid towards Silencing the Guns on the continent:

Harnessing exiting Normative Frameworks: Africa is the first continent to adopt a binding instrument on democratic governance in the form of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG). The Charter sets forth common democratic principles and standards and serves as a solid safeguard against democratic reversals. The continental and regional normative instruments for the promotion of democratic governance, peace and security which anchor the synergy between the African Governance Architecture and the Africa Peace and Security Architecture offer an opportunity for revitalisation of continental and regional efforts

in collaboration with Member States towards Silencing the Guns. The Lusaka Roadmap, in particular, maps out a pathway to peace and centralises the role of deepened democracy in achieving peace and security in Africa. Also, in addressing the socio-economic challenges on the continent, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), founded in 2018 as one of the flagship projects of Agenda 2063, came into effect on 1 January 2021. The AfCFTA offers Africa an important thrust for socio-economic transformation through equitable distribution of development opportunities to countries across the continent.

Utilising Institutional Mechanisms: In order to better harness the capacity of early warning and response to conflicts, the African Peer Review Mechanism serves as an important structural framework for Africa's democracy, peace

and security. With specific regards to women's role in silencing the Guns in Africa, the existing continental initiatives offer an opportunity for galvanising women's participation in governance and conflict prevention. For instance, the establishment of FEMWISE to mobilise women for deployment in mediation mechanisms; the African Women's Leadership Network (AWLN) which has led to mushrooming of women leaders on Agenda 2063; and the launch of the Platform for

Women in Leadership in Africa by the AUC in collaboration with the UNDP.

Utilising Information and Communication Technology: The Digital governance space has opened up exponentially across Africa. This offers more opportunities for promoting innovation towards social, economic and political transformation especially for the youth on the continent.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking the current general trends, emerging challenges and available opportunities into consideration in relation to Silencing the Guns in Africa, a number of constructive ideas emerged during the deliberations in the HLD. The ideas showcase the importance of the following policy trajectories for key stakeholders, particularly AU Member States, AU/RECs, CSOs and the international community at large.

Member States, should:

- Redouble their commitment in eliminating governance deficits through the full implementation of AU instruments on human rights, as well regional and continental frameworks related to democracy, governance and the rule of law, as well as elections management and constitutionalism. The ACDEG offers a solid framework which can help guard against democratic reversals on the continent. This same level of commitment required for the implementation of ACDEG should also be extended to international, continental and regional instruments on illicit arms and illicit financial flows.

- Enhance their public administration capacity to ensure effective delivery of public goods and services and the honouring of social contract with citizens. This will minimize opportunities for exploitation of ungoverned spaces which breed violent extremism and terrorism.

- Should direct more efforts in developing robust strategies for recovery from the pandemic in a way that accelerates the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

African Union and Regional Economic Communities, should:

- Strengthen existing synergies in early warning and early action in response to the numerous governance and security challenges on the continent. AU and RECs are well positioned to conduct evidence-based analysis which can support early warning followed by early action.

- Redouble efforts in supporting Member States to implement normative frameworks geared towards promoting democratic governance, peace and security. Besides offering direct technical support, the AU and RECs should explore strategies for funding national capacities especially in low-income countries because prevention is a long-term project which should be matched with sustainable resources.

- Review their normative instruments of democratic governance to incorporate emerging challenges such as state capture which continues to affect the political, social and economic life of most African societies. The existing normative frameworks are not adequate in addressing this emerging challenge.

Civil Society Organisations, Women and Youth-Led Organisations, should:

- Strengthen current efforts by forging stronger synergies at international, continental and national levels to galvanize the inclusion of women and youth in governance and leadership roles.

- Take advantage of the AU-UN African Women's Leaders Network which now has 25 national chapters across Africa, there is need to augment current efforts towards strengthening women's political and economic empowerment.

- Sustain efforts towards continued strengthening of capacity building on peace education given that the youth and women remain the most affected during armed conflicts.

International Community, should:

- Support initiatives undertaken by the AU and RECs in support of Member States efforts towards early warning and early action in response to governance, peace and security

threats on the continent.

- Reinforce synergies with African Governments to collectively chart concrete and meaningful paths to mainstream women and youth into governance, political and economic processes.

- Should forge partnerships with governments in Africa to deepen citizens' engagement through a two-way strategy involving enlightenment of the citizenry on government programmes while at the same time making the demands of the masses known to their government by working in collaboration with CSOs, the AU and RECs.

CONCLUSION

Whilst violent conflicts raged and jeopardised nascent democratic gains in most parts of the continent even before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic has exposed the weaknesses and exacerbated existing fault-lines on many fronts. However, there are existing normative and institutional frameworks which provide ample opportunities and avenues to be explored and harnessed to build resilient democracies and accountable governance systems which will ultimately contribute to silencing the guns on the continent.

NOTES

1. This policy brief is based on the Reflections At The 9TH High-Level Dialogue on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance: Trends, Challenges and Prospects.
2. Allison, Simon (2020), "Conflict is still Africa's biggest challenge in 2020" ISS, January 2020; available online at <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/conflict-still-africa-s-biggest-challenge-2020>. Accessed on May 28, 2021.; Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)
3. Following the operationalization of the AU institutional reforms, the former DPA merged with the former Department of Peace and Security to form the Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS).
4. Vik Bakken, Ingrid and Rustad, Siri Aas (2018). Conflict Trends in Africa 1989-2017, June. Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)
5. ACLED
6. Stremlau, John (2016). Africa's Democracies: Promises, Progress and Prospects. Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa. Johannesburg, South Africa.. p. 23
7. Africa Development Bank (2020) African Economic Outlook 2020 Amid COVID-19 https://www.afdb.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/afdb2004_aeo_supplement_full_report_for_web_0705.pdf Accessed on 17 May 2021.
8. Columbo, Emilia (2021), "Extremist Groups Stepping up Operations during the Covid-19 Outbreak in Sub-Saharan Africa", Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 01, 2021. Available online at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/extremist-groups-stepping-operations-during-covid-19-outbreak-sub-saharan-africa>, accessed on May 28, 2021.
9. Burke, M. B., Miguel, E., Satyanath, S., Dykema, J. A., & Lobell, D. B. (2009). Warming increases the risk of civil war in Africa. *Proceedings of the national Academy of sciences*, 106(49), 20670-20674.
10. Mulren, Owen (2020) "Climate Change and Conflict in Africa," Earth.Org, December. Available online at https://earth.org/data_visualization/climate-change-and-conflict-in-africa/. Accessed on May 31, 2021.

