The African Union, preceded by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), has a long history in disaster risk reduction and management. The OAU made significant strides in enhancing disaster management and response in the 20th Century, with the 1963 call for African solidarity and international cooperation echoed over the six following decades. The OAU Council of Ministers that met biannually brought matters of concern to the Assembly of Heads of State and Government. The 1960s Council of Ministers' meetings mainly addressed decolonization and liberation struggles.

In the 1970s, drought started to feature prominently in the OAU meetings as it began to hit various African countries. In 1973, Sahelian countries formed the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel/Comité permanent inter-État de lutte contre la sécheresse au Sahel (CILSS) to combat drought and natural hazards.

During the Nineteenth Ordinary Session of the OAU Council of Ministers, the Ministers adopted technical and financial assistance for some projects on arid and semi-arid African lands (CM/Res. 283 (XIX)). During the Twenty-First meeting, the Ministers addressed the drought problem in West Africa. They urged Member States to provide adequate support to the OAU programme on establishing regional food reserves in Africa. During the Twenty-Second Ordinary Session, the ministers rallied the Member States to make financial contributions towards alleviating the impact of drought in countries, especially the Sahelian countries.

In 1974, during the Twenty-Third ordinary session, the OAU Council of Ministers welcomed the establishment of the CILSS. They also established an assistance fund for drought-stricken people on the Continent. The OAU Member States particularly countries in the North Africa region availed a US$200 million. The Council of Ministers requested the fund transfer to the African Development Bank (AfDB), which would then administer the fund on behalf of the OAU. The session also called upon the Secretary-General to ensure that drought remained an agenda for future meetings. Another Emergency Relief Fund was set up at the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia to enable the General Secretariat to take practical action towards addressing drought.
The Twenty-Fourth Ordinary Session of the OAU Ministers 1975 notably registered their concern with the effects on socio-economic development by drought and tropical cyclones. It, therefore, urged the development of national meteorological services to assist African governments on a sound scientific basis in mitigating the effects of drought, tropical cyclones and other weather-related disasters. During the following Twenty-Fifth Ordinary Session, the Malagasy delegation brought the issue of the increasingly frequent occurrence of tropical cyclones to the attention of the ministers. In turn, the OAU Council of Ministers called for establishing sub-regional specialised research institutes to prevent and control natural disasters. During the Twenty-Sixth ordinary session, the Ministers recommended the Ad Hoc Committee on Drought to be called the OAU Ad Hoc Committee on Drought and Natural Calamities.

In the 1980s, drought remained prevalent in many African countries, leading to the OAU establishing the Special Emergency Assistance Fund for Drought and Famine in Africa in July 1985. The fund aimed to assist African countries affected by drought and famine. It was also to provide immediate financial and material assistance in support of national activities and programmes designed to reduce the impact of drought and famine in Africa.

The OAU provided grants to Member States affected by disasters. For instance, it offered funding to Tanzania in 1999 towards the country’s efforts to repair infrastructural damage caused by storms in 1998. Further, in 1999, the AU called for establishing a "major regional coordinating centre to help build the Continent's capacity to prevent natural disasters and mitigate their effects when they do occur".

Into the 21st Century, the African Union adopted the Africa Regional Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction in 2004. Also, it carried out activities to implement the Hyogo Framework for Action from 2005 to 2015. The African region adopted the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030. Africa was the first region to domesticate the Framework through the Africa Programme of Action (PoA) as a tool to implement the global Framework.

In 2017, the AU established the Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) Unit under the "Building Disaster Resilience to Natural Hazards in Sub-Saharan African Regions, Countries and Communities" with solid support from the European Union (EU) and the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS). In 2019, the AU Commission fully incorporated the Unit into its Structure following the AU institutional reforms.

With support from the Government of Sweden, the AUC and UNDP developed the Sahel Resilience Project in 2019 to foster risk-informed solutions for sustainable development in
Western Sahel and Lake Chad Basin countries. The AUC also established the Africa Youth Advisory Board on Disaster Risk Reduction (AYAB DRR) and the Africa Science and Technology Advisory Group on DRR (AF-STAG DRR).

The AU launched the inaugural Africa Biennial Report on Disaster Risk Reduction to track the Continent's progress in reducing disaster risk and losses in August 2020. With the continued support of the Governments of Sweden and Italy, AUC and UNDP developed the Africa Institutional and Operational Framework for Multi-hazard Early Warning Systems and the Africa COVID-19 Recovery Framework.

The quest for effective multi-hazard early warning systems (MHEWS) for early action took a concrete step with the commitment of the Government of Italy to support the AU in initiating and supporting the process. The AUC led a multi-national team for a study visit to the Italian Civil Protection Agency and Europe for benchmarking in 2019. In February 2020, the AU and its partners developed the Africa Roadmap for MHEWS.

With the guidance of H.E. Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairperson of the AUC, and H.E. Ambassador Josefa Sacko, Commissioner for Agriculture, Rural Development, Blue Economy, and Sustainable Environment of the AU, the AUC organised the inaugural Africa Multi-hazard Early Warning Systems (AMHEWS) Conference in 2021. In a landmark moment that fulfilled the dreams of Africans for a regional coordination centre, the AU launched the Africa Multi-hazard Early Warning and Action System (AMHEWAS) Situation Room for Disaster Risk Reduction in December 2021.

Africa marked several milestones in February 2022. The 35th Assembly of the Africa Heads of State and Government adopted the Africa Institutional and Operational Framework for Multi-hazard Early Warning Systems and the Africa COVID-19 Recovery Framework. In another policy development, the Assembly appointed H.E. Felipe Nyusi, President of the Republic of Mozambique, Africa's Champion of Disaster Risk Management. On 28 February, the facilities of the AMHEWAS Situation Room for DRR were handed over to the AUC by the Government of Italy. The Situation Room is now linked to a regional Disaster Operations Centre hosted at ICPAC-IGAD and the Continental Multi-hazard Advisory Centre hosted by ACMAD.
In December 2022, the AUC and the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria organised a meeting of Heads of Disaster Management and Civil Protection of AU Member States to establish the Continental Mechanism of Civil Capacity for Disaster Preparedness and Response. February 2023 also turned out to be historic, with H.E. President Filipe Nyusi, the AU DRM Champion becoming the first sitting Head of State or Government to visit the AMHEWAS Situation Room. Also, within the same month, the AU Member States also technically validated the Africa Urban Resilience Programme (AURP). The AU, supported by its Commission, continues to provide strategic guidance to Member States towards strengthening disaster resilience on the Continent. Internally, the AUC has established an Inter-Departmental Working Group on DRR.

So far, nineteen sessions of the Africa Working Group on Disaster Risk Reduction (AWGDRR) have been organised, including the last one in Malabo in March 2023. The AUC is developing the second Africa Biennial Report on Disaster Risk Reduction, set for technical validation by the AU Member States in June 2023.

The Government of Sweden supports disaster risk reduction and recovery communication at the AU Commission through UNDP within the framework of the Sahel Resilience Project. The substantial support to the DRR Unit by the European Union within the framework of the 11th European Development Fund Intra Africa, Caribbean and Pacific Natural Disaster Risk Reduction Programme enabled the Unit to support the project’s implementation.

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