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## 2015 International Day of Democracy

### *“Theme: Space for Civil Society”*

On this day 15 September, which marks the International Day for Democracy, we recall the founding vision of the African Union of *“An integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens...”* This year’s International Day for Democracy theme of *“Space for Civil Society”* could not be more relevant for our vision, since civil society is one of the vehicles by which civic participation and involvement can be promoted. The theme also bodes well with the seven aspirations of Africa’s global platform of action, Agenda 2063: the Africa We Want. In particular Aspirations three and six which foretell of an Africa *“of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law”* and *“whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people...”*

Agenda 2063 confirms that people should be and are at the center of our plans over the next fifty years, and thus civil society is an integral part for the pursuance of our agenda and our longer-term objectives. The role of the African civil society remains pivotal, we all recall that it was the Pan African Women’s Movement in 1962, which was civil society driven in character, that was the fore bearer to a Pan African continental platform of action and organization, the Organization for African Unity (OAU). We will also recall that in that year the Pan African Youth Movement (now Pan African Youth Union) was established.

We therefore cannot proceed on our development trajectory without the involvement of civil society. However, civil society also has a responsibility to the African citizenry to pursue the aspirations of the African people to live their lives in dignity and with equal opportunities. For today’s civil society on the continent they must put Africa first since they also share a joint responsibility to pursue the African Renaissance and Pan Africanism. No more should our civil society receive instructions from elsewhere but from our people. No more should the civil society be utilized to counter our progress as united nations of this continent. To effectively undertake this progressive tasks, Africa’s civil society must also unite behind a common agenda, as advocated for by Agenda 2063. Africa’s civil society must unite behind common goals and objectives, whilst pursuing progressive

partnerships with Africa's and the world's public and private sectors. For our part as the African Union, and because we value the inputs of the progressive civil society, we established the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) in 2002. The ECOSOC offers an opportunity for African civil society to play an active role in charting the future of the Continent, organizing itself in partnership with African governments to contribute to the principles, policies and programmes of the Union. More needs to be done to strengthen this vehicle since we also believe that ECOSOC is an integral part of the unity, democratization, prosperity and lasting peace journey of the continent.

Women and young people are the majority in all our societies, they are therefore critical to democracy and to the vibrancy of African civil society. As we celebrate 2015 as the Year of Women's Empowerment for the realization of Agenda 2063, they need to mobilise and organize, to take their rightful place in our societies, in all spheres of human endeavor.

We therefore take this opportunity to encourage Member States of the African Union to strengthen the participation of civil society bodies in ECOSOC and other platforms offered by the Union. In the end the States must create an enabling environment for the progressive and Pan African civil society to organize, assemble, and express themselves in an orderly and constructive manner.

That will ensure the protection of our hard earned freedoms. After all our freedom was not free, we all have a shared responsibility to protect it and ensure that our people live a quality life. As we pursue these objectives and other ideals we must place Africa first.

**Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma**

**Chairperson**

**African Union Commission**