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COMMISSION TO THE 3RD AU-CIVIL SOCIETY CONSULTATION
ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AU-EU PARTNERSHIP
AGREEMENT, ABUJA, NIGERIA,
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On behalf of His Excellency, Mr. Jean Ping, the Chairperson of the AU Commission and His Excellency, Mr. AkereMuna, the President of the General Assembly of the Economic, Social and Cultural Council of the African Union, it is with great honor that I welcome all delegates to this 3rd AU-Civil Society Consultation on AU-EU Partnership Agreements. Following the paths of its two illustrious predecessors held in Bamako, Mali, and Nairobi, Kenya, this important meeting comes at a pivotal period. African and European leaders are scheduled to meet in November this year to review the progress of their partnership, reflect on its achievements and shortcomings and make necessary adjustments to rectify the shortcoming and consolidate the achievements. The onus is thus on both African civil society and their European counterparts to provide appropriate inputs for this exercise in a holistic and partial sense.

PROVIDING INPUTS

The holistic appraisal will focus on the total package and measure the partnership across the range of desires and expectations of the cross-section of people in both regions, that led to its inception. In a partial sense, the review would measure the niche of civil society in this wider context. The partnership was celebrated as a “people-oriented” endeavour. The time has now come to measure whether or not it lived up to its promise in this regard. Did the rhetoric match the reality? Were the cross-sections of society involved effectively in the process upstream and downstream? Did this particular endeavour go beyond the state-centric? If so, how and what remains to be done? If not, why not and what can and should be done? What is the responsibility of state actors and civil society in this context? What forms of “people-oriented” partnership without and across the two regions would need to be put in place to enable this objective.

His Excellency, Mr. AkereMuna, the Presiding Officer of ECOSOCC has directed the Secretariat in CIDO to make this a working session outside the paraphernalia of ceremony and protocols. He believes that this will come at a later stage of the Intercontinental meeting and when African Civil Societies are effectively well placed to enable their contributions to this process.

CHALLENGES AND ASSOCIATED CONSIDERATIONS

In setting the stage for this exercise, it would be useful to recognize four main challenges confronting this meeting. One is to review the state of play of the implementation process. Two, is to situate and re-configure civil society to effectively play its role within it, including the monitoring and evaluation of this partnership. Three, is to work out the modalities of interfacing with relevant actors in state, parliaments etc, towards this purpose. Four, is to preview the next AU-EU Summit and support the process of its effective preparations and conduct so that it can lead to anticipated outcomes.

INTERCONTINENTAL CSO DIALOGUE

In configuring the effective participation of civil society, there is a need to seriously consider a “bridge over the Atlantic process” which is an intercontinental CSO dialogue. This dialogue would mark the meeting of minds of people across the continent beyond governments. Parliaments have already done this - and civil society actors should do the same. Such a meeting will go a long way in giving a “people-oriented” and “people-driven” label to the Lisbon Declaration.

Even so, in order to produce laudable outcomes, the meeting must be well prepared. It must also be a meeting that is not anticipated as a jamboree or festival but one that is oriented at dealing with the vital issues at stake which is to promote effective civil society participation and contribution to the AU-EU partnership. The success of such a meeting must be guided by the lessons of history. It has been on the card for the last two years and what has hindered it is that previous preparations were not guided by the fundamental principles of equality in partnership which is at the core of the Lisbon Declaration. There have been attempts to superimpose programmes and themes by the European side and to select African representatives. There have also been clear-cut attempts to delegitimize ECOSOCC as the main civil society organ of the African Union.

Fortunately, the various consultations between African and European sides have created an awareness that such strategies would be counterproductive and the stage is now set for a realistic intercontinental civil society “handshake across the Atlantic” to support AU-EC partnership. The timing of this rapprochement on the eve of the forthcoming Summit in November 2010 gives much room for encouragement. However, as African CSOs approach this historic moment organizations must continue to acknowledge the wisdom of experience in the context of their colonial background. For as Santayana has observed “those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive them.”

REQUIREMENTS FOR PREPARATION

The first lesson therefore is that the preparations for the Intercontinental forum must be approached with markers. The first significant point of reference in this context is to approach the enterprise with a measure of realism. Too often, African civil society organisations are encouraged to accept the notion that the values they share with other civil societies outside the continent is absolute and

sets them against governments. This can be true in some cases but is necessarily false in others. There are indeed values that African CSOs share with European counterparts that sets them apart from governments such as promoting effective civil society participation in governance. But there are also others they share with their governments such as desire for African integration and development which sets them apart from European governments and perhaps also a significant part of European civil society. This must be recognized. There are no absolute concordat of values across civil society lines within the two regions. The focus of activity must therefore be on areas of convergence as well as areas where differences and difficulties can be negotiated into compromises and frameworks for concerted action.

PREPARATORY MISSION

With this in mind, there is a renewed emphasis on preparations. His Excellency, Mr. Muna, in his discussion with Mr. Ruddschasser, DG European Development at the EU Commission during the European Development Day process held in Stockholm late last year stressed the need for a preparatory meeting between a few selected representatives of the Steering Committee on both sides to develop a theme and work programme for the Intercontinental forum which are then approved in principle by their principals. This selected Committee could be 4 or 5 members and this meeting might consider selecting representatives of the African side quickly and arranging for a meeting a pre-Dialogue preparatory meeting soon possibly in April 2010, with their European counterparts.

TIMING AND DATES

Following this, would be the need to set actual dates for the dialogue itself possibly in May/June or August so that it can feed effectively into preparations for

the November meeting. It is expected also that the preparatory Committee would also suggest some possible dates. In doing so, it must take into account African sensitivities, particularly the upcoming World Cup in South Africa and the Summit of the AU which will take place in July this year. At the same time, it must reconcile the demands of a date with requirements for urgent action.

GUIDELINES FOR THE MEETING

Third, this meeting may like to issue guidelines for consideration in this and other related contexts. How many participants would be involved in the actual dialogue. The Steering Committee may also acknowledge or consider the need for drawing in expertise from the wider civil society in all key areas of clusterconsiderations to give more substance to the African endeavour, if required. This will also associate the wider expertise incivil society with ECOSOCC led initiatives as conceived by the founding fathers and mothers of the AU. In selecting this delegation, some consideration should be given to gender and youth sensitivity. I would not recommend parity in this case because the overriding concern is expertise.

The other issue that must be given consideration is the framework of discussion and how the outcome will processed. How will the dialogue be prosecuted as a partnership of equals? Where will it take place and how will it be financed? It is essential that the Steering Committee begins with a statement of principle that it will finance its own participation, select its representatives and expect the Europeans to do the same. The Presiding Officer of ECOSOCC has asked me to inform you that ECOSOCC has the funds to finance this participation and it is essential that this be communicated to the other side. The principle of equal partnership begins with financing of co-participation. Similarly, the agenda and work programme for the dialogue must be guided by a principle of mutuality.

This cannot be a meeting in which Africans are considered as a laboratory for testing theories. All issues to be considered must be such that can add value to the process and the merits of performance on both sides of the Atlantic must be fed into the process. Differences must also be acknowledged, where they exist, as a matter of integrity.

It is also important that the Dialogue should agree on how outcomes will be processed. Will representations be made at the actual Summit itself by designated representatives or through both sides respectively? What is the preference of civil society in both contexts? In order to appraise this issue effectively, there must also be some reflection at this preparatory stage on expected outcomes.

POST DIALOGUE EXPECTATIONS

This touches on the wider issue of post-dialogue expectations. The measure of any activity is what happens after. How would the proposed Dialogue input into behavior and performance? In his submission to the European Development Days, H.E. Mr. AkereMuna, highlighted the need for this forum to go beyond tokenism. He believed that this dialogue must evolve or come up with elements of a programme of action which leaders on the two sides will be required to commit to either in a partial or wholesome manner. His emphasis also touches on the issue of sustainability. Will this be a one-off event or an integral part of the process of the meeting of minds of the people in both continents. If so, it must be budgeted for as part of the wider programme at the three levels – first at the continental level – to allow for appropriate inputs, second at the intercontinental level as a spur to action and third, at the grassroots local community level to forge necessary tools for accomplishment.

Beyond deliberating on civil society role, this consultation should also look at the issue of interface with other actors at state, parliamentary, judicial level, etc. What is the experience of the last two years in this context? What is the scope for improvement in the next partnership circle? What instruments, tools or procedures can be forged for this purpose?

These are some of our preliminary reflections on the agenda of this very important meeting. It is our expectation that the conduct and deliberations of the meeting will be guided by some of these critical considerations. It is also our inspiration that the results of this meeting would address concerns about ensuring that the AU-EU process becomes effectively a stakeholder community enterprise.

The issues and concerns raised here clearly demonstrate that the task before this meeting. The AU Commission has full confidence in the ability of African civil society delegates to address them and do so properly. In doing so, we urge each and every delegate here to approach the meeting with the wisdom of the poem of Robert Frost that “the woods are lovely dark and deep but I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep and miles to go before I sleep.” In this regard, I have a message from H.E. Mr.; Ping, the Chairperson of the AU Commission as follows: Do not sleep before you keep those promises.

I thank you.