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# **The African Union Diaspora Initiative**

**Presentation by**

**Dr. Jinmi Adisa, Director, Citizens and Diaspora Directorate (CIDO)**

**African Union Commission, to the Annual Diaspora Consultation with Formations  
and Communities in North America, New York, USA, 21-22 October 2010**

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**Protocol and Greetings,**

It gives me great pleasure to address this august assembly of Africa and its Diaspora on the AU's Diaspora Initiative. To begin with, I would like to express our sincere gratitude to Ambassador Antonio Tete, our host and Permanent Representative in New York and his staff, for working with us to make this happen. This is a precedent setting event which we hope will set the pace for an annual consultation process with the African Diaspora in US, the Caribbean and South America, Europe and the Middle-East, amongst others. In organizational terms, this is also an exercise in intercollegiality that serves as an inspiration for the Commission and various organs of the Union to work together as one in the spirit of cooperation and solidarity that underpins the purpose of the African Union. The presence of Ambassadors of AU Member States and our family in the Diaspora completes this process.

**OBJECTIVES OF THIS DIALOGUE**

A key component of the African Union Diaspora initiative is regular dialogue with members of the Diaspora. This process of global consultative dialogue began as part of the process of building up the momentum for a global African Diaspora Summit which is scheduled to be held in South Africa within the next year or after. The Eight Ordinary Session of the Executive Council of the African Union held in Khartoum, Sudan from 16-21 January 2006 had authorized this process and directed the Commission of the African Union and the Government of South Africa to cooperate actively to operationalize this process. Active engagement between the two parties fostered the convening of Regional Consultative Conferences (RCCs) in the various regions of the world with significant Diaspora population to formulate a roadmap for ensuring effective Diaspora participation in the integration and development agenda of Africa.

The purpose of the RCCs was to promote effective stakeholder community within the African Union that embraces its Diaspora community. The RCCs created forums for consultation with the African Diaspora Community on programmes of the Union and

efforts to integrate the Diaspora within it. It enabled continental Africans to join hands with their counterparts in the Diaspora to set an agenda for renaissance and development. It provided platforms through which African leaders can learn at first hand the difficulties encountered by their brothers and sisters in the Diaspora with a view to mapping out strategies through which the African family can work together with them as well as governments of the countries in which they are domiciled to overcome the problems. Through these RCCs, Africa began to create a mechanism that will enable it to leverage the dispersal of its people around the world into a framework of solidarity and action to develop Africa and influence global affairs in a positive direction that will serve Africans in particular and mankind in general. This consultative process served the African Union well in the build-up to the African Diaspora Ministerial Conference which was held in South Africa in November 2007.

The revitalization of this consultative process is intended to continue to galvanize African Diaspora constituencies around the world, particularly in the lead up to the African Global Diaspora Summit that will consolidate the Draft Programme and Plan of Action for the AU's Diaspora Initiative, set enhanced criteria for effective and wholesome participation of the Diaspora in the affairs of the AU and unite and mobilize Africans within and outside the continent and harness their collective efforts towards the building of the African Union and African development.

## **THE INITIATIVE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE AFRICAN UNION**

This initiative derives its justification in the transformational agenda that gave birth to the African Union. The OAU which preceded the African Union was focused on the agenda of political independence and decolonization. However, the distortion of the state system in the aftermath of political independence gave rise to the military dictatorships and one party state. As the state disconnected from society which had the inherent capacity to promote auto-centred development, the continent was engulfed in a variety of social crises and conflicts. Thus the OAU moved from fixation on independence towards the resolution of conflicts. In the period of the cold war, this was buttressed by ideological conflicts among the superpowers which paved way for client-patron relationship that often encouraged political repression. The end of the cold war paved

the way for a transformational orientation as African leaders and societies alike began to focus on the requirement of development.

That focus underscored the symbiotic relationship between peace, security and development. It fostered the realization that the wave of the conflict engulfing the continent had its roots in the crisis of development. Africa therefore, had to engage with the crisis of development to ensure peace, security and stability.

This development imperative stimulated a different approach from the OAU in the building of the African Union. The OAU was focused largely on political leaders. However, the Constitutive Act as the new fundamental law of the Union recognized that the requirement of development must be premised on active and total mobilization of all relevant forces in society. Hence, the Act is specific that the Union will be people-centred, people-driven and people-oriented, based on a partnership between governments and all segments of civil society, particularly youth, women and children. This vision of a developmental Commonwealth in the African Union has two logical corollaries. First, it implied a need to go beyond governments and representatives of states to incorporate the energies of African people in their different professional and other works of life. The Citizens and Diaspora Directorate of the AU Commission (CIDO) and the Economic, Social and Cultural Council were created and given specific responsibilities to seek and harness the contributions of all these non-state actors to the efforts of the Commonwealth. Second and significantly, the people-centred aspiration highlighted the fact that a significant part of the African population that reside outside the shores of the continent either through slave trade or successive waves of migration including the ancient and modern, would be part of the new African Union system. There was a clear recognition and acceptance among policy actors that these Africans are part of the broader African population and Africa cannot be whole again or achieve its development and political objective except through a process that enables the integration of its Diaspora and permits their wholesome and active participation in the process of African reconstruction and development.

Soon after the launching of the African Union in Durban, South Africa in 2002 therefore, the Assembly of Heads of States met in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia to establish, among other things, a legal framework that would create the necessary and sufficient conditions for putting this decision into effect. Hence, it adopted the Protocol on the Amendment to the Constitutive Act of the Union which in Article 3 (q) invited the African

Diaspora to participate fully as an important component in the building of the African Union. In adopting the decision, the Protocol symbolically recognized the Diaspora as an important and separate but related constituency outside the five established regions of Africa – East, West, Central North and South. Thus although there is no specific legal or political text that states this categorically, it, in effect, created a symbolic sixth region of Africa.

## **REBUILDING THE GLOBAL AFRICAN FAMILY**

The transformation agenda of the continental organization underlined the need for African renaissance to be built on a platform of self-rehabilitation through which Africa connects with its hitherto missing or amputated parts to become dynamic and whole again. The rebuilding of the global African family as an essential actor in economic development and a prime actor in global affairs became a primary element of the agenda of the Union.

Certain inherent challenges confronted the continental organization in this regard. The first was to define precisely who or what constitutes the African Diaspora: the first step in this process was to consult the Diaspora. Thus in accordance with Decision EX/CL Dec. 6 (III) of the Executive Council of the Union held in Sun City, South Africa from 31-25 May 2003, the Commission of the Union convened a technical workshop of the Experts from the continent and the Diaspora in Trinidad and Tobago with a view to defining the Diaspora. That definition was presented to the Permanent Representative Committee of the Ambassadors in preparation for the 6<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session of the Executive Council from 27-28 January 2010. The Member States then decided that a Committee of States Experts be convened to review and finalize the definition.

## **DEFINITION OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA**

The meeting of Experts from Member States met in Addis Ababa, from 11-12 April 2005 and adopted the definition as follows:

“The African Diaspora consists of peoples of African origin living outside the continent, irrespective of their citizenship and nationality and who are willing to contribute to the development of the continent and building of the African Union.”

This definition was adopted at the next Ordinary Session of Council and Assembly in July 2005.

The definition has attracted some criticisms. Though it was adopted by consensus, two delegations at the meeting felt strongly on the need for a two-part definition, one of which would capture the academic or intellectual aspects and the other that would be related to the political needs of the Union. Another delegation insisted on the need to add “permanently” to “living outside the continent.” Thereafter, others have argued that the phrase “willingness to contribute to the development of the continent and the building of the African Union” should be left out. Nothing should be demanded or expected from the Diaspora. They should simply be recognized ipso facto as is the case with the Jewish and Israeli Diaspora.

The criticisms are useful but they do not sufficiently address the complexity of the subject. The definition was arrived at after serious and deep reflection. The Experts agreed that any working definition must combine the following key characteristics as necessary and sufficient conditions.

- A. Bloodline and/ or heritage: the Diaspora should consist of people living outside the continent whose ancestral roots or heritage are in Africa
- B. Migration: The Diaspora should be composed of people of African heritage, who migrated from or are living outside the continent. In this context, three trends of migration were identified- pre-slave trade, slave trade, and post-slave trade or modern migration:
- C. The principle of inclusiveness. The definition must embrace both ancient and modern Diaspora; and
- D. The commitment to the African cause: The Diaspora should be people who are willing to be part of the continent (or the African family)

The AU definition comprises all these elements. A two-part definition would not be a working definition. Also, the distinction between the academic and political in this instance will be artificial. The AU is intrinsically a political and economic organization. Adding “permanently” before those “leaving outside” will imply that economic migrants or the modern African Diaspora would not be part of the working definition. This would be discriminatory and would also ignore an important and dynamic element of the

Diaspora community. The final criticism regarding implied commitment of the Diaspora to rebuilding the African Union ignores the debate and decision of the Assembly of African Heads of States at the 1<sup>st</sup> Extra-Ordinary Summit of the Union in January 2003 which allied the Diaspora project to the building of the Union.

This is not to imply that the AU definition of the African Diaspora is written in stone. It is a working definition and working definitions can be revised or improved upon if there are ample justifications for it. The Diaspora Initiative would always be work in progress and any work in progress would involve refinements of working models.

## **ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

Even prior to the agreement on a working definition, the AU Commission and Member States began the process of active engagement with the Diaspora with significant results. The Commission in particular embarked on outreach and sensitization programmes to popularize the AU's Diaspora Agenda among Diaspora communities in the different regions of the world beginning with Washington Forum in December 2002. This facilitated greater understanding of AU purpose, objectives and requirements within the Diaspora. Agreement on the definition of the Diaspora increased the momentum for this process.

Secondly, the Commission and the Union at large began the process of incorporation of the Diaspora in the agenda plans and programmes of the AU. Thus the two consecutive vision, mission and strategic plans of the AU articulated under Chairperson Konare and Mr. Ping successively have an integrated Diaspora component. Elements of the Diaspora from the US, Canada, Europe, the Caribbean and South America were involved in various brainstorming, working groups and networks discussions on all aspects of AU agenda, including participation in AU-CSO activities. The Diaspora have observer groups at various AU Summits. Moreover, an associate status was conferred informally on countries with significant African populations at Summit such that every AU Summit has representative of Caribbean countries at the highest level as participants at Summits and even at Council meetings. Prime Minister Gonsalves of St Vincent and Grenadier led the Caribbean leader to the recent Summit in Kampala and his proposals led to a resolution or declarations as one of the substantive outcomes of the Summit.

As part of this process, a close working relationship has been developed with Diaspora formations all over the world through mutual exchanges of information and AU Commission liaison and participation in Diaspora activities. AU regional offices have also intensified the process of facilitating close interaction in coordination with CIDO as the responsible directorate at Headquarters level. One evidence of this is the Consultation we are holding today.

The AU Diaspora programme has also facilitated working arrangements with pertinent regional organizations such as CARICOM and OAI. The former was represented at various AU meetings and arrangements are underway to define more explicit organizational structures arrangements, and agenda for collaboration that will support this arrangement. Indeed the Chairperson of the Commission, H.E. Mr. Jean Ping met recently with the outgoing CARICOM Chief Executive, Mr. Edward Carrington on the margins of the General Assembly Session in New York in September 2010 to discuss precise ways to formalize and advance this process.

In addition, the Union has begun the process of facilitating effective Diaspora representation in the affairs of the AU. This began with the allocation of 20 seats for the African Diaspora in the Economic, Social and Cultural Council of the African (ECOSOCC). As the process of representation must go through appropriate AU channels including the Executive organs, the Commission and the Union took the unprecedented steps of appointing 2 leaders of Diaspora representative networks in the Caribbean and Central America among the 5 nominated members of the General Assembly of ECOSOCC. One of these members, Mr. Khafra Kambon, was also elected to the Standing Committee by the General Assembly giving the African Diaspora the first formal representation in an AU structure.

The Diaspora was also closely associated with recruitment patterns and procedures of the AU. A conscious decision was taken to ensure that they were effectively represented on selection and interview panels. Indeed the Chairperson of the Panel on recruitment boards in 2003 and 2004 were mostly chosen from the Diaspora. Thus the Diaspora may wish to accept collective responsibility for the recruitment of over 60 percent of the present staff of the AU Commission. I myself attended two selection boards headed by Diaspora personnel to attain my current position.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES**

One important challenge associated with the issue of engagement was that of agreeing on appropriate organizational processes and structures. The African Union accepts a responsibility to support and animate this process but not to impose upon or to organize the Diaspora. Its efforts are to support the Diaspora to organize itself but within a framework that has specific reference as well as universal form but can also be adapted to the organizational processes of the African Union.

Within this context, there is emphasis on regional specificity. We recognize that the regions of the world are different and forms of engagement must recognize the specificities within them. For instance, in North America which includes the US and the Caribbean relationships would not be the same as that of Europe. In the Caribbean relationships are invariably at 6 levels. One is with governments with significant or majority African populations, the other is with Pan-African Institutions such as the Pan African Commission in Barbados, the other is with civil society networks such as the Pan Caribbean AU-CSO regional network. Fourth is with regional organizations such as CARICOM and fifth is the association of Member States of the Union with the national Diaspora communities or countries of region. The sixth level is where the Commission and Organs of the Union work appropriately with these formations, get them to support and reinforce each other and feed their outcomes individually and collectively to the AU framework. Caribbean exceptionalism is due to its peculiarities. In the US the boundaries are not exactly the same but four levels of relationships are clearly discernable – the Afro-descendant community, modern Diaspora element associated with national Diaspora movements, civil society Diaspora elements and the US government. We are exploring relations with the OAS as a complementary aspect of the pattern of interrelationships. The European nexus will have a similar pattern.

As part of this process, the AU is supporting the establishment of regional networks in the various regions that can act as interlocutors, channels of communication and flow of information and active partners in enabling the process of mutual intercourse between Africa and its Diaspora. It is our expectation that such regional networks may also assist with the process of representation in AU structures and processes.

Our organizational approach is to enable the Diaspora to organize itself with AU support within the framework provided by executive organs of the Union, the Council and Assembly and with guidance of Member States of the Union within these organs.

The approach has not been without its difficulties. The Diaspora programme has created a phenomenon of rising expectations among the family abroad. This is laudable because it proves commitment. Yet, there are obvious signs of impatience. Moreover, civil society formations have not fully appreciated the organizational demands and imperatives of the AU. More often than not, the AU Commission is the whipping board for associated anger and frustrations. This is a burden that we are happy to bear.

More disturbing still is that there is some competition for power and influence within the Diaspora communities. This is a normal human disposition except that we see tendencies that can prove disruptive and which we must all try to rise above. There are some elements of the Diaspora within the US that wish to assume the natural leadership of the Diaspora agenda and to organize and centralize the Diaspora effort. Discussions at the Expert Workshop in Trinidad and Tobago provided clear evidence that such apparent paternalism would undermine the general effort. The challenge of organizing the Diaspora movement must embrace the need for autonomous regional coalitions to evolve and federate, if willing, but only by consent, at hemispheric levels, as may be deemed appropriate. The success of the Diaspora initiative, (to be assured) must dissuade focus on power blocs and stress an organizing principle based on democracy, within and among regions.

At the continent – Diaspora level, the focus must be on building bridges across the Atlantic with an organizational emphasis on commitment, common cause and reciprocal advantages. The Commission and the Union must encourage the formation and consolidation of cooperative structures for mutual collaboration as inputs for the next wider Pan-African Congress. Emphasis will also be given to the need to consolidate associations and structures that are already developed and to enrich their influence and base of support and harness them to AU processes. At a horizontal level, cooperative relations are being closely developed with regional organizations and relevant institutions such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Building on the first set of relationships in the US, Caribbean and Europe, increasing emphasis is being placed on global coverage with extension of focus to Central and South America, the

Middle-East, Asia and Oceania. Within this context, there will be some specific emphasis on Brazil which has the largest concentration of African population outside Nigeria.

Two other areas of focus are being pursued. One is to interconnect and integrate national, continental and sub-regional efforts to promote synergy, avoid duplication and ensure effective outcomes. Beyond this there is a new emphasis on developing and consolidating structures for effective legitimate and credible Diaspora representation and participation in various AU organs, structures and processes. Alongside this are developmental efforts to engage the Diaspora effectively in the development of the continent through the project for an African Volunteer Corps as announced by Chairman Ping during his visit to the US in April 2010. The issue of reciprocal rights and privileges are essential elements of this consideration embracing questions regarding dual nationality, the right of return, access to land, property and issues surrounding the right to an African Passport.

## **THE GLOBAL AFRICAN DIASPORA SUMMIT**

Recognition of the importance and complexity of these issues prompted the decision to organize the global African Diaspora Summit which will establish a comprehensive program and plan of Action, for the Diaspora Initiative. I will not dwell on this since there is a complementary presentation by the a representative of the Republic of South Africa, our active partner and one of the lead engagement partners in this process.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, I will like to stress that the Diaspora initiative is a resource laden project and so far, the African Union has not matched its vision and commitment with appropriate resources. The Diaspora budget of the AU over the last three years has been about 200,000 US dollars which is insufficient for an effective mobilization much less the commitment of programs and policies. The result is that issues which we need urgently to address such as procedures and modalities for representation of the Diaspora in the AU, support for organization of regional networks and the inception of the Diaspora volunteer program has not moved at the pace required which is as frustrating for the Diaspora as it is for the Commission. In organizing the RCCs we have been fortunate to have the intense support of South Africa as a partner and lead

state but now we have to diversify the base of support. To this end, we have approached donors and international financial institutions with some measure of success that provides impetus for us to move decisively ahead in 2011. There are also increasing evidence that the AU itself may increase support, albeit in a minor way. The challenge therefore is for the Diaspora communities to organize themselves effectively to address this challenge. Whatever level of support others might be willing to give us, we need to recognize that as a matter of integrity and self respect, the rebuilding of a family must ultimately depend on the commitment and sense of responsibility of its members and the devotion that they are willing to give to the enterprise. All charity must begin at home.

I thank you.