A CIVIL SOCIETY GUIDE TO SILENCING THE GUNS IN AFRICA

Overview

The AU has declared 'Silencing the Guns' as the theme for 2020 to mobilise all stakeholders to prioritise efforts on peace and effective socio-economic development. The root causes that lead people to violent conflicts, including poverty, historical injustices, inequality, unemployment, gender based violence, and corruption are key elements to be addressed.

It is important to note that while the AU can set an agenda, it is ultimately up to the discretion of member states to enact it. For this reason, it is essential to focus on building political will and maintaining cohesion, as well as creating mechanisms to both support member states in addressing conflict in Africa, and to hold member states accountable for their own part in fuelling the crisis.

Civil society has a critical impact on agenda setting, awareness creation, implementing innovative and holistic responses, and applying pressure in ways that impact political will.

A variety of civil society actors furthermore work on key areas that address the root causes of violence and the proliferation of weapons on the continent.

It is thus vital to make visible the connections between the work of key civil society sectors in Africa and the AU's 'Silencing the Guns' campaign, to accelerate the attainment of an end to violence and impunity in the region in ways that create a conducive environment for Africa's development and benefit the African people.

This booklet is thus intended to be a resource for civil society engaged in preventing, responding to, reducing and seeking the elimination of conflict in Africa as well as civil society actors concerned with widespread human rights violations on the continent.

It is divided into two parts; the first externally-focused strategic advocacy areas, and the second internal. We hope it serves as a useful reference for collective, holistic and innovative approaches to engagement with the issues raised.

In order to silence the guns in Africa, there is a needed focus on the causes of conflict and possible responses and interventions.

PART A

EXTERNALLY-FOCUSED STRATEGIC ADVOCACY AREAS

DRIVING FORCES OF CONFLICT IN AFRICA	IMPLICATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY
Presidential term elongation, authoritarianism and undemocratic elections Within auhoritarian, undemocratic regimes, there is a greater propensity of political contest (including within political parties and actors themselves) to become violent whether at local, provincial or national level of governance. Violent conflict can also be driven by desire to access public resources for personal economic gain and further political consolidation.	**Advocate for political party reforms and good internal democratic practice** This means practices founded on inclusivity and on deeper forms of accountability. Civil society can work to ensure the promotion and adoption of normative frameworks addressing democratisation such as the recent guidelines on access to information and elections in Africa by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance - including through running effective campaigns for their implementation.
Unequal societies Inequality and conflict are inextricably linked. Consequently, continuing inequality between households or individuals, between groups, as well as perceived inequality creates obstacles to silencing the guns. When individuals and groups are deprived through a system that is unjust, corrupt and non-inclusive, it sets society on a collision course for conflict.	**Ensure the implementation of policies that are responsive to and reduce inequalities** Elevating the principles of access to essential services such as health, education, as well as opportunities for sustainable livelihoods both personal and collective is imperative. Initiatives to effect this are negatively impacted by unbridled corruption in all its forms – from corruption by government officials to illicit financial flows. As a result, initiatives to halt the haemorrhaging of our resources and to reimagine the functioning of our economic systems need to be strongly supported if we are to succeed in silencing the guns.

DRIVING FORCES OF CONFLICT IN AFRICA	IMPLICATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY
Exclusion, social integration and discrimination These damaging societal ills effectively result in the *de facto* or *de jure* denial of citizenship based on gender, status, ethnicity, religion, or political opinion. An illustrative example was the willingness of armed rebels in Côte d'Ivoire during the early 2000s to give up arms on condition that they be granted citizenship. There is a need for preventing denial of, and easing access to citizenship to unlock barriers to the full enjoyment of rights such as freedom of movement, freedom to participate in public affairs and the national discourse, to determine how one wishes to be governed, to halt gender discrimination, persecution and total disenfranchisement.	**Advocate for a coherent and non-restrictive regional migration regime** Key to supporting this is the development of a set of national migration policies that favour the conferring of citizenship, and the capacity to catalyse these policies to thwart the challenges to free and safe movement within the continent, to end xenophobia and the culture of other-ing in order to assert the dignity and belonging of every African to the continent regardless of where they may find themselves, ensure that they are counted and that they are included. Should this fail to happen, individuals and groups have nothing to lose in taking up arms and have no incentive to engage in dialogue especially if they are left without bargaining power.
Governance and the militarisation of politics The military plays a major role in some countries; from Zimbabwe where the army has been seamlessly attached to politics since independence and tightened its grip after the *coup,* to Sudan, where the military hijacked a revolution that ousted a dictator and directly influenced the formation of a government of people, or Gambia where regional intervention made a big difference, but threat of return to military dictatorship remains.	**Ensure disentanglement between military and politics is prioritised** This includes through a critical evaluation of existing interventions, such as the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance which does not go far enough in ensuring that avenues of gaining power through electoral contest are devoid of militarised manipulation.

DRIVING FORCES OF CONFLICT IN AFRICA	IMPLICATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY
Gender-based violence before, during and after conflict Violence articulates itself in gendered ways, consequently the root causes of gender-based violence (GBV) must be addressed if the guns are to be silenced. Conflict exacerbates GBV, particularly sexual violence. Despite this, the causes and consequences of GBV are rarely adequately addressed – rather a gender perspective is viewed as an additive element and applied *ad hoc*, rather than centralised at inception. GBV during conflict is rooted in the broader framework of existing gender inequality and discrimination. Thus efforts to end conflict-related GBV will be ineffective should they fail to take a holistic approach that will address this phenomenon generally, including the use of illegal firearms in post-conflict contexts that fuel the scourge of femicide.	**Maintain an understanding of gender as a system that distributes life chances as central to this work** We need to have an intersectional and gendered understanding of the structures that perpetuate violence and the gendered nature that creates those structures, in order to be successful in dismantling them. Structural discrimination, harassment and violence against women, sexual and gender minorities that inhibit their full, equal and meaningful participation in political and public life (including during elections) needs to be adequately addressed. This requires centring the voices and perspectives of women, sexual and gender minorities, engaging in continuous self-reflection and critique in our responses to conflict on the continent on the lenses through which we approach our work, and insuring that a gender perspective is applied in every stage of planning, intervention, evaluation and engagement.

The importance of civil society in silencing the guns necessitates a look inward. What are problems within the civil society sector and the ways in which it engages on silencing the guns in Africa? How can civil society engage more effectively with AU organs and mechanisms? What are the opportunities and potential solutions?

PART B

INTERNALLY-FOCUSED STRATEGIC ADVOCACY AREAS

INHIBITORS OF EFFECTIVE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIONS	POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS
An apex body in crisis Civil society organisations (CSOs) are facing critical challenges. Within the African system, these challenges are ingrained from the very apex; ECOSOC which has a mandate as an advisory organ to enable African citizenry to fully engage in dialogue on cultural, social and economic issues for the attainment of inclusive development. The body is meant to advise political leadership on how it can operationalise objectives, principles and policies of AU into concrete programs, and evaluate these. ECOSOC seeks to contribute to promoting human rights, rule of law, good governance, democratic principles, gender equality and children's rights, but suffers from issues of legitimacy as its membership is not representative of the civil society constituency in the region which affects its efficacy and relevance. ECOSOC needs to attend to those institutional design issues that make it skewed, including its narrow mandate, structural composition, and restrictive membership criteria	**We need to reimagine renewed ECOSOC** Civil society must take full advantage of the current reform process of AU bodies, which include the evolution of ECOSOC from a small department situated in the African Union HQ to a fully fledged AU organ with its own office and staff complement in Zambia. Despite this, it is also important to remain pragmatic. This means facing the current reality of ECOSOC's mandate and membership criteria, and collectively fashioning creative responses that allow for a broader range of access despite the existing obstacles. *African civil society need to move beyond critique and step into their agency to do this, as they have proven capable of doing in repressive environments domestically.* If a broader range of non-state actors can access ECOSOC, the procedures to articles 8(10) and Article 20 of the Protocol establishing the Peace and Security Council (PSC) which provide for civil society inclusion in the open meetings of the council and opportunities to address the PSC- as well as access to other AU institutions- can be effected. Enhancing civil society participation with African peace and security architecture, particularly the PSC is crucial if the guns are to be silenced.

INHIBITORS OF EFFECTIVE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIONS	POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS
Gaps and challenges faced by regional CSO platforms The impact of the issues of legitimacy and constricted civic space by the state is even greater on regional umbrella CSO platforms such as the East African Civil Society Organizations' Forum(EACSOF), the SADC Council of Non-Governmental Organisations (SADC C-NGO), and the West African Civil Society Forum (WACSOF) which have struggled to effectively function as coordinating mechanisms for the participation of non-state actors in regional issues.	**We need effective regional engagement** There is much needed advocacy concentrated on a renewal and transformation of these entities to ensure they progress from the present state of ineffectiveness to one of inclusion, leadership renewal and dynamic activism. This means advocating for creative approaches to addressing the challenges of restrictive membership criteria, promotion of leadership renewal, and elevation from a majority focus on national issues to include collaboration in elevating common challenges through the lens of a regional imperative.

INHIBITORS OF EFFECTIVE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIONS	IMPLICATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY
Fragmented approaches to addressing the primary challenges in the region Civil society is not tapping into collective power in the manner through which it engages with the African Union's institutions. There are a range of human rights based civil society actors that are only focused on engaging in Banjul, through the African Commission of Human and People's Rights. There are Addis Ababa focused organisations, primarily concerned with peace and security. Yet others who prioritise good governance and the promotion of democracy turn their attentions to Midrand – the seat of the Pan African Parliament, while organisations with legal expertise, seeking accountability and an end to impunity typically engage in Arusha with a focus on the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights. But the intersection of these issues are well documented. Impunity for human rights violations are the root causes of conflicts that occur and characteristic of their features. Whenever there is conflict, issues of democracy and governance are at their core.	**Bridging the gap between civil society actors working on peace and security or humanitarian issues on the one hand, and those working on human rights issues on the other** In acknowledgement that human rights play a key role in conflict situations and the limitations of disjointed approaches, the PSC has in recent years turned its attention to operationalising Article 19 of its founding Protocol, interacting and providing working methods for engagement with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and other African human rights bodies in a regular rather than ad hoc manner. For this to be as effective as possible, civil society needs to similarly break away from solo approaches of engagement and create effective and responsive cross-regional and cross-issue networks, adopt collective methods of working that tap into the insights gleaned from multidimensional perspectives, and function in harmonised and mutually-reinforcing ways.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic escalates the challenge of silencing the guns in Africa. State responses have made it more difficult to gain peace – at least in the short-term. 'Lockdowns' have limited rights and freedoms, increased unemployment, shrunk economies, widened inequality, and seen the growth of corruption and theft with impunity. Despite these challenging times, there are areas we still have control over; our own actions and abilities to develop recalibration strategies – to reform, critique, provoke, innovate, re-energiese and re-engage. It is within crisis that we can hone our statement of purpose and ensure we remain relevant to new challenges we are seeing, and emerging constituencies such as technology and data activists, youth advocates, and the diaspora.

Let us continue to engage in bringing about the fundamental aspirations of a continent at peace with itself and its people through reinventing ourselves to meet the challenges before us with ingenuity.