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From Margins to Mainstream: the evolving role of civil society in the African peace and security landscape

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Introduction

In global relations, Africa has long been stigmatised as a continent at war with itself. Admittedly, the continent has hosted and continues to experience several deadly conflicts that threaten human, national, and international security and defy efforts to resolve them. There is a shift in the nature of conflicts on the continent from traditional conflicts (interstate and intrastate) to more complex security challenges, including terrorism, and other forms of violent extremism, weak states, electoral violence, unconstitutional change of governments, and corruption, to name but a few.

Across Africa, the peace and security landscape is becoming increasingly complex and fragile. Insurgencies plague countries from Mali to Mozambique, while Sudan teeters on the brink of state collapse after more than a year of brutal power struggles between the army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces. The conflict in Sudan has displaced at least 10 million civilians and has put more than 750,000 at imminent risk of famine.¹ The risk of interstate conflict is also growing, particularly in the Horn of Africa and Great Lakes regions. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, at the time of this research the M23 rebels have continued their advance in Northern Kivu, capturing the strategic town of Kanyabayonga and further destabilizing the eastern provinces. Meanwhile, the recent coups in Niger and Burkina Faso add to the alarming trend of unconstitutional changes of governance in West Africa, raising serious concerns about the region's political stability.²

Central to addressing these conflicts and ensuring peacebuilding is the African Union's Peace and Security Council (PSC), established within the African Peace and Security Architecture. The PSC's mandate to promote peace, security, and stability across the continent is ambitious, requiring multifaceted approaches and the involvement of various stakeholders.³

The evolving role of civil society in Africa's peace and security landscape represents a critical yet underexplored dimension of the continent's stability and progress. Historically, African civil society organisations (CSOs) have operated on the periphery, often marginalized and under-recognized in formal peace and security frameworks as these are dominated by state and international actors.⁴ However, recent developments highlight a significant shift as CSOs emerge as pivotal players in peacebuilding. The historical evolution of civil society efforts with peacebuilding, both through the PSC and independent efforts, reveal a complex interplay between official state actors and non-state entities; the journey from exclusion to a more inclusive approach has been gradual, marked by significant

¹ International Crisis Group, "Eight Priorities for the African Union in 2024" (14 Feb 2024) Crisis Group Africa Briefing No. 195, 1 <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/b195-eight-priorities-au-2024.pdf>> accessed 08 August 2024.

² International Crisis Group, "Special Coverage, Global: On Our Radar" (09 Aug 2024) International Crisis Group <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/our-radar>> accessed 08 August 2024.

³ [Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union, Art 3.](#)

⁴ National Development Agency, *Review of the State of Civil Society Organisations in South Africa* (2008).

milestones but also by challenges that continue to hinder effective collaborations.

This paper explores the influence of African civil society by highlighting how the sector is impacting on the peace and security landscape in Africa. It provides an analysis of the role of CSOs by outlining how CSOs contribute to peace building, promote human rights, and foster community resilience.

Civil Society Organisation

Civil society is regarded as a crucial pillar of any democratic system and plays a key role in restoring and strengthening democracy. It can also support participatory local governance and act as a check on political power, advocating for better governance on behalf of the public.⁵ CSOs are critical cog within a state's ecosystem and therefore should remain a relevant actor that is fit for purpose. CSOs operate within different areas of focus, from grassroots organising on specific issues to policy influencing, post conflict reconstruction and electoral participation.⁶

An enabling legal and socio-political environment can enhance the role of civil society while a restrictive environment coupled with financial constraints and limited technical expertise to navigate delicate political environments inevitably hinders its effective functioning. One can posit that the latter is what ultimately leads to civil society being viewed as ineffective and thus, not fit for purpose. The convergence of all the above has influenced the perception and the lens through which CSOs are viewed.

Civil society engagement with the PSC

Despite being significant role-players within society, CSOs have not traditionally been accorded a formal position of prominence, particularly in Africa. Non-state actors, including CSOs were often sidelined by the OAU since its inception in 1963 due to its strong focus on state sovereignty and non-interference. This focus on formal state actors frequently overshadowed the contributions and voices of important groups including CSOs.

The formation of the African Union (AU) in 2002 was intended to mark a departure from this approach, recognising that the complexities of modern conflicts required a more inclusive and participatory framework where civil society could play a pivotal role.⁷ With this acknowledgment of complexity, the AU adopted normative frameworks that provide for civil society engagement with the continental body's peacebuilding work.

⁵ Peacebuilding Initiative, "Civil Society: Civil Society & Peacebuilding Processes" (n.d.) <<http://www.peacebuildinginitiative.org/index0ecb.html?pageld=1754>> accessed 20 August 2024.

⁶ EB Gariba "Post-conflict development in Liberia" (13 May 2011) *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* 11(2).

⁷ Institute for Security Studies, "Peace & Security Council Report Issue 169" (2024) 11.

Normative frameworks

The [Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union](#) (PSC Protocol), adopted in 2002, articulates the inclusion of civil society in its operations. [Article 20](#) of the Protocol states that the PSC shall encourage non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations, and other civil society organisations, in particular those representing women, to participate actively in efforts to promote peace, security, and stability in Africa.

The [Livingstone Formula](#),⁸ adopted in 2008, clearly set the conditions for civil society engagement with the PSC. It emphasises that while the PSC retains control over its procedures and decisions, it should consult with civil society, particularly in conflict situations. It outlines specific criteria that civil society need to meet in order to qualify for engagement with the PSC, such as being registered in an AU member state and upholding the objectives and principles of the AU. The adoption of the [Livingstone Formula](#) was a significant milestone in institutionalising civil society's role within the AU peace and security architecture.

The significance of the [Livingstone Formula](#) was further reinforced by the [2014 Maseru Conclusions](#),⁹ which sought to address some of the limitations and challenges that had emerged in the implementation of the [Livingstone Formula](#). The [Maseru Conclusions](#) emphasise the need for greater inclusivity and calls for the development of more robust mechanisms to facilitate civil society engagement with the PSC's work, highlighting the importance of including vulnerable communities, particularly in the areas of conflict prevention, management, and post-conflict reconstruction.

While these normative frameworks provide for civil society engagement, their implementation has often been limited, compounded by the lack of transparency in how civil society are selected to participate in PSC meetings. In recent years, however, the PSC has made considerable strides in strengthening its engagement with civil society, with two significant milestones involving the convening of consultative meetings. The inaugural consultative meeting between the PSC and civil society held in September 2022 acknowledged that civil society – with its proximity to grassroots communities and deep understanding of local dynamics – is indispensable as a partner in the effort to address Africa's peace and security challenges.¹⁰ The second consultative meeting with civil society, held in July 2023, focused on

⁸ [Conclusions on a Mechanism for Interaction Between the Peace and Security Council and Civil Society Organizations in the Promotion of Peace, Security and Stability in Africa.](#)

⁹ [Report on the Outcomes of the Civil Society Organisations \(CSOs\) Consultation in Maseru on the Implementation of the Livingstone Formula.](#)

¹⁰ AMANI Africa, "The role of civil society organizations in African Union's decision-making processes: Agenda setters, participants, collaborators and shapers?" (30 December 2023) AMANI Africa <<https://amaniafrica-et.org/the-role-of-civil-society-organizations-in-african-unions-decision-making-processes-agenda-setters-participants-collaborators-and-shapers/>> accessed 10 December 2024.

deepening collaboration and improving the mechanisms for civil society participation in the PSC's decision-making processes.¹¹ One key outcome of the 2023 meeting was the decision to institutionalise these consultative meetings as an annual event.¹² With this decision, the AU recognises that achieving its core mission of continental integration depends on the meaningful participation of African people in its processes.

Civil society in peacebuilding

While the PSC now provides a formal avenue for civil society to contribute towards peacebuilding within the AU peace and security framework, civil society has traditionally contributed actively to peacebuilding efforts outside of this structure. The following selected case studies highlight civil society peacebuilding efforts in Africa.

Sudan: Africans for the Horn of Africa (Af4HA)

The conflict in Sudan, which erupted on April 15, 2023, has seen a significant mobilization of civil society despite the challenging operational environment. Among the key actors is Africans for the Horn of Africa (Af4HA) – a coalition of Pan-African CSOs that has been instrumental in both advocacy and grassroots support efforts. Af4HA has been actively urging the PSC to address the severe violation of human rights occurring in Sudan, with a particular focus on sexual and gender-based crimes. In a letter to the Co-Chair of the Africa Platform on Children Affected by Armed Conflict, The Permanent Representative of The Gambia to the AU, Af4HA highlighted the dire situation, noting that over 15,000 people had been killed, and 18 million were facing acute hunger. The letter underscored the necessity for immediate and resolute action by the regional and global community to alleviate the humanitarian crisis and restore civilian rule in Sudan.¹³ Af4HA has also extended its advocacy to the international stage. In September 2023, they organized an advocacy mission, which included a series of high-level meetings with key international actors, including members of the UN Security Council, the United States government, and various UN departments. These meetings were crucial in amplifying the voices of Sudanese civil society and pressing for international intervention to protect civilians and end the ongoing hostilities.¹⁴

¹¹ Communiqué of the 1161st Meeting of the Peace and Security Council at the 2nd Annual Consultative Meeting between the Peace and Security Council; Economic, Social & Cultural Council; and Representatives of Civil Society Organizations (06 July 2023).

¹² As above.

¹³ Africa Briefing, "African groups decry rights violations in Sudan conflict" (16 April 2024) Africa Briefing <<https://africabriefing.com/african-groups-decry-rights-violations-in-sudan-conflict/>> accessed 14 August 2023; Africans for the Horn of Africa, 'The African Union must act now to avoid further loss of life in Sudan' Af4HA <<https://africansforthehorn.org/the-african-union-must-act-now-to-avoid-further-loss-of-life-insudan/>> accessed 14 August 2023.

¹⁴ As above.

In addition, at the 5th Mid-Year Coordination Summit of the African Union, Regional Economic Communities and Regional Mechanisms in Nairobi, Kenya, Af4HA drew attention to the Sudan conflict. By facilitating meetings between citizens and Member States, they significantly raised awareness of the ongoing conflict and its dire consequences. This level of engagement by both Member States and civil society in addressing such a long-standing and deadly conflict is unprecedented and was primarily driven by the efforts of Africans for the Horn of Africa.¹⁵

Ethiopia: Pan African Lawyers Union

In the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia, particularly in the Tigray region, strategic litigation has emerged as a tool to hold parties accountable to prevent further atrocities. The Pan African Lawyers Union (PALU), in collaboration with Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) and, the law firm, Debevoise & Plimpton LLP (D&P), have been at the forefront of this approach, marking a significant evolution in how civil society responds to conflict. On 8 February 2022, they submitted a Communication against Ethiopia to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights on behalf of victims and survivors of the conflict in Tigray. The complaint detailed several violations of human rights, including extrajudicial killings, torture, sexual violence, and enforced disappearances, primarily targeting Tigrayan civilians.¹⁶ The conflict, which began in November 2020, has resulted in the displacement of thousands of people, and has created a humanitarian catastrophe in the region, exacerbated by a blockade that has led to famine conditions.¹⁷

In response to this Communication, the African Commission issued provisional measures urging the Ethiopian government to cease all violations and ensure humanitarian access to Tigray. This move was unprecedented in its timing as it had been issued while the conflict was ongoing. Strategic litigation has traditionally been pursued after conflicts have ended rather than during active hostilities. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of PALU emphasized the importance of this decision, stating:¹⁸

The Commission has taken a critical step towards promoting peace and security in Africa by agreeing to hear a case of such vital importance. Now, it must build on today's decision and deliver meaningful justice for the people of Tigray, and elsewhere in Ethiopia.

¹⁵ Interview with PALU Representative.

¹⁶ Legal Action Worldwide, 'African Commission order Provisional Measures against Ethiopia, in complaint filed by LAW and partners' (18 October 2022) LAW <<https://www.legalactionworldwide.org/accountability-rule-of-law/complaint-filed-by-law-on-behalf-of-tigrayan-victims/>> accessed 14 August 2024.

¹⁷ TGHAT 'Allegations of massive human rights violations in Tigray submitted in landmark case against Ethiopia' (14 December 2022) TGHAT <<https://tghat.com/2022/12/14/allegations-of-massive-human-rights-violations-in-tigray-submitted-in-landmark-case-against-ethiopia/>> accessed 15 August 2024.

¹⁸ PALU and others, 'Press release: Tigrayan victims secure provisional measures relief in landmark human rights case against Ethiopia' (17 October 2022).

Niger: AMANI Africa

AMANI Africa has established itself as a key partner of the PSC, providing in-depth analysis, technical support, and strategic advice on a range of security issues. A recent successful engagement with the PSC is its participation in the Council's response to the political crisis in Niger.

In July 2023, Niger experienced a coup d'état that led to the ousting of President Mohamed Bazoum and the subsequent establishment of a military junta. As a result, the PSC was tasked with responding swiftly and effectively to restore constitutional order in Niger. AMANI Africa provided a timely and insightful analysis that informed the PSC's deliberations. Based on its expertise in African peace and security issues, AMANI Africa produced policy briefs and reports highlighting the potential risks and implications of various response options.¹⁹ These policy briefs were instrumental in helping the PSC navigate the complex political and security landscape in Niger, ultimately leading to a more measured and strategic response by the council.²⁰

Democratic Republic of Congo: International Crisis Group

Crisis Group has contributed to peacebuilding efforts in the DRC by providing independent research and policy advice focused on conflict de-escalation. Through its Crisis Watch initiative, it closely monitors the situation in the DRC, producing monthly updates that assess the conflict, identify key challenges, and offer actionable recommendations for advancing peace efforts²¹. The Crisis Group uses a sound and methodical research approach that not only ensures the accuracy and relevance of its findings, but also enhances the credibility of its recommendations. Using research as a tool in peacebuilding allows for a deeper understanding of the underlying conflict dynamics, enabling more targeted and effective interventions.

Civil Society Impact

Af4HA has had a significant impact through its multi-faceted approach to the conflict in Sudan. By mobilising both regional and international support, advocating for human rights and providing direct assistance to those affected, Af4HA has had an impact on the ongoing crisis. Its efforts have not only highlighted the urgent needs on the ground, but also amplified the voices of Sudanese civil society on the global stage. This has raised international awareness of

¹⁹ AMANI Africa, *The Peace and Security Council in 2023: The Year in Review* (2024); SA Dersso, 'The most pressing dilemma for the AU on Niger is to help find a path for a non-military resolution of the crisis' (13 August 2023) AMANI Africa <<https://amaniafrica-et.org/the-most-pressing-dilemma-for-the-au-on-niger-is-to-help-find-a-path-for-a-non-military-resolution-of-the-crisis/>> accessed 09 August 2024.

²⁰ Communiqué of the 1168th Meeting of the Peace and Security Council on the Situation in the Republic of Niger (14 August 2023) AU Doc PSC/PR/COMM.1168 (2023) <https://papsrepository.africa-union.org/bitstream/handle/123456789/1920/1168.comm_en.pdf?sequence=20&isAllowed=y> accessed 10 August 2024.

²¹ Interview with International Crisis Group Representative.

the crisis and increased pressure for action, leading to a growing number of regional and international calls for intervention. At the grassroots level, Af4HA has worked with the neighbourhood resistance committees which have been at the forefront of the pro-democracy movement in Sudan since 2019 and have mobilised to provide essential services such as food, medicine, and hygiene kits to internally displaced persons.²² These committees have made innovative efforts to maintain social cohesion and prevent the escalation of violence. For instance, they have negotiated with local armed groups to establish peace markets, conflict-free zones, and community kitchens that provide safe spaces for civilians to access essential goods and services. Additionally, their use of social media platforms to co-ordinate relief efforts and disseminate information has been instrumental in ensuring that vulnerable populations receive timely assistance.²³

Through strategic litigation before regional human rights bodies during conflict, civil society is not only seeking post-conflict justice, but is also attempting to influence the course of the conflict itself. By seeking redress during ongoing hostilities, it sets an important precedent for the use of regional human rights mechanisms to address and potentially mitigate the impact of ongoing conflict and atrocities. The African Commission's positive response to PALU's efforts highlights the importance of using legal mechanisms to intervene in ongoing conflicts.

AMANI Africa produced policy briefs examining the consequences of the military intervention in Niger, the importance of diplomatic engagement, and the need for a comprehensive approach addressing both the immediate political crisis and the underlying socio-economic challenges facing Niger.²⁴ Additionally, AMANI Africa also engaged with key stakeholders, ECOWAS in particular, by facilitating dialogue and information-sharing to build a broader consensus around the PSC's approach to the crisis, strengthening the Council's ability to implement its decisions. Through its expert analysis, policy recommendations and dialogue with key actors, Amani Africa has strengthened the PSC's ability to deal with complex conflicts, a politically sensitive situation.

The International Crisis Group's impact on peacebuilding in the DRC is characterised by its rigorous research, strategic recommendations, and ability to raise awareness of the conflict. Through initiatives such as Crisis Watch and its platform for academic work, ICG improves understanding of the conflict and supports targeted, effective interventions to promote peace and stability in the region.

²² Mat Nashed, 'Sudan 'resistance' activists mobilise as crisis escalates' (22 April 2023) Al Jazeera <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-65344673.amp>> accessed 14 August 2024; Mohanad Hashim and Lucy Fleming, 'Sudan fighting: The unsung heroes keeping Khartoum residents alive' (21 April 2023) BBC News <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-65344673>> accessed 14 August 2024.

²³ Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 'Open letter: Civil Society Sounds Alarm: Take Immediate Action on Sudan or Be Complicit in Future Atrocities' (15 November 2023) Global R2P <<https://www.globalr2p.org/publications/civil-society-sounds-alarm-take-immediate-action-on-sudan-or-be-complicit-in-future-atrocities/>> accessed 15 August 2024.

²⁴ Dersso (n 20).

Recommendations

Civil society has demonstrated its capacity to act effectively in conflict situations - whether through strategic litigation, grassroots mobilisation, or policy advocacy - as illustrated in the case studies above. It is important to note that civil society in Africa faces significant operational challenges that limit its engagement with the PSC. The lack of transparent processes for involving civil society in decision-making, particularly in frameworks such as the African Union Peace and Security Council, marginalises their contributions. Some AU Member States often resist the inclusion of civil society in peace processes, arguing that such involvement could undermine state sovereignty or complicate negotiations. This resistance is multi-faceted, from outright refusal to allow civil society to participate in PSC sessions to more subtle forms of exclusion such as not providing the necessary security clearances or travel permits for CSO representatives.²⁵ The AU and its member states must therefore fully recognise CSOs as key partners in peacebuilding. With this in mind, the following recommendations are made.

African Union should:

- Conduct a thorough review of existing institutional structures and processes to identify and address barriers to effective engagement with civil society and streamline bureaucratic procedures and inter-departmental coordination for more dynamic and responsive interactions.
- Prioritise transparency by making information more accessible to the public and stakeholders, as well as creating channels for open dialogue and feedback from civil society.
- Support the dissemination of research and strategic recommendations provided by civil society. Promote platforms for sharing their findings with AU member states and stakeholders to inform policy decisions and interventions.
- Promote innovative solutions for humanitarian aid and conflict resolution which are developed by local CSOs. This includes leveraging technology and social media for co-ordination and information dissemination.

Civil society should:

- Invest in both political and technical expertise to navigate delicate political waters, enhance credibility and build trust in its engagement with the PSC, especially given the scepticism of many African governments towards civil society.
- Leverage soft power and informal channels to engage with decision-makers within the PSC. Building personal relationships, establishing trust, and influencing through persuasion rather than confrontation can often yield better results in sensitive political environments.
- Establish regional peace innovation hubs across Africa that foster collaboration between civil society and

²⁵ Institute for Security Studies (n 4) 5-6.

academia specifically designed to contribute to early warning systems, address root causes of conflict and prevent conflict.

- Capitalise on geographical proximity: Civil society, especially those based in or with a presence in Addis Ababa, should leverage their proximity to AU headquarters and key actors to increase convening power.
- Step up efforts to engage directly with policymakers and institutional actors. This includes submitting policy briefs and participating in formal consultations to influence decision-making processes.

Member states should:

- Establish formal mechanisms for regular dialogue and co-operation between governments and CSOs. This may include advisory committees, working groups or formal consultations to integrate CSO perspectives into policymaking and implementation.
- Avoid duplication of similar efforts by co-ordinating with other states, international organisations and CSOs. This would ensure that interventions are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

END



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