



Organization of African Unity

**STATEMENT BY
DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM,
SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE OAU,
AT THE OPENING OF THE
OAU-CIVIL SOCIETY CONFERENCE**

ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

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**Distinguished UN Under-Secretary-General and
Executive Secretary of the ECA, Mr. K.Y. Amoako
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It gives me much pleasure to welcome you all to Addis Ababa on the occasion of the convening of the OAU-Civil Society Conference devoted towards Building a Partnership for Promoting Peace and Development in Africa. I also wish, in particular, to welcome the representatives of Civil Society Organizations, other distinguished African personalities and media representatives who undertook the long journey to Addis Ababa, in order to participate in this first-ever OAU-Civil Society Conference, convened by the OAU in partnership with the UN-ECA and the Inter-Africa Group. I wish also to give a special welcome to the women participants since in preparing for this Conference, we have insisted that there should be at least one woman representative in each of the country delegations represented at this meeting.

The convening of this Conference at this juncture in the history of our Organization is a significant moment marking the culmination of a process of transformation which our Continent and its people have gone through in their long march towards socio-economic development and progress. The fact that the convening of this Conference coincides with the entry into force of the Constitutive Act of the African Union is an added dimension to this event. Indeed, it should be stressed that the Constitutive Act of the African Union recognizes the need to build a partnership between governments and all segments of Civil Society, in particular, women, youths and the private sector in order to strengthen the solidarity and cohesion among the African people as well as to create conditions for the participation in the activities of the Union.

In providing for an enhanced role of the African people and their organizations in the activities of the African Union, the Constitutive Act has in effect built on the provision of the 1991 Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community, which called for the involvement of the African peoples in the process of economic integration and for the setting up of a mechanism for consultations with non-governmental organizations.

In doing so, the Constitutive Act of the African Union has formalized the position which had developed over the past years within the various policy organs of the OAU on the need for a greater involvement of the Civil society organizations in the work of the Organization. The most recent policy document adopted by the Assembly of Heads of State and Government in Lome last year is the solemn Declaration on the Conference on Security, Stability, Development and Cooperation in Africa (CSSDCA), which provided for the views of the Civil Society to be conveyed to the CSSDCA Standing Conference, scheduled to meet every two years during the annual OAU Summits.

In recognizing the need for the effective involvement of the Civil Society in the activities of the Union, the African leaders took cognizance of the tremendous contribution and sacrifices that had been made over the years by the grassroots and civil society organizations in the struggle of our Continent and its people for political and economic emancipation. They were also aware of the need to release and channel the immense resources, energies and talents of the civil society organizations in order to complement the efforts deployed by governments. Above all, the African leaders duly acknowledged the crucial role that the African people, through their grassroots and civil society organizations, should play in building a partnership for peace and the development of the Continent, which is the very theme of this first-ever OAU-Civil Society Conference. I am gratified that we have been able at last to convene this long-overdue Conference. Indeed, as Chief Executive of this Organization, I have, over the past years, traveled extensively around our Continent and met with African Leaders as well as with ordinary people from all walks of life. I have always been inspired and galvanized by the determination of our people to overcome the many difficulties that have confronted them and to fight for a better future. I have, in the same vein, admired the resilience of the grassroots people and their self-confidence in the face of all kinds of difficulties, tribulations and uncertainties besetting them. I have always been impressed by the determination of our peoples and their organizations to assume their share of responsibility in the pursuit of peace and development on the Continent. Despite the many constraints they have been facing, grassroots and civil society organizations have been playing an increasingly important role in promoting socio-economic development, dialogue and understanding in our communities. It is, therefore, no surprise that today, civil society organizations have continued to grow.

The limitless talents, creativity, resourcefulness and ingenuity of African civil society and grassroots organizations constitute enormous untapped assets. The mainstreaming of these organizations in the economic, social and political processes affecting African countries, would add a new and critical dimension to development policies towards the creation of a renascent Africa in which economic and social justice, good governance, democracy and accountability would give the main thrust to our efforts aimed at putting the Continent on the path of sustained socio-economic development. A full harnessing of these assets, however, would necessarily call for the creation of favourable conditions which would enable civil society organizations to fully apply their energy, skills and creativity to the advancement of peace and socio-economic progress.

Civil society and grassroots organizations, because of their relatively manageable size, essential commitment to the poor and the marginalized segments of African populations, can constitute real bulwark against exclusion and discrimination, two breeding grounds for social unrest and political instability. They constitute, in this respect, effective instruments for peace, security and development. They play a vital role in conflict situations and post-conflict reconstruction in the provision of social safety



nets and valued services. But social development is more than survival, relief and a safety net. It also entails realizing certain social and economic rights and self-sustenance, equitable access to power and resources, which can be achieved only when the mobilization and full involvement of these active agents of change in the social, political and economic processes of African countries are rendered fully effective.

The universally-shared concepts of human rights and popular participation in political and social processes, and the increasing urbanization and political awareness have created new areas of social mobilization around demands for economic rights and citizen participation, and broader concerns about health care, education, cost of living, employment and general work conditions. These popular demands are conveyed through grassroots organizations thereby creating realities on the ground that cannot be ignored. In addition to the role of states in assuming their social responsibilities, grassroots and civil society organizations can now find space for effective collective action on the ground.

Civil society organizations can also play a significant role in conflict prevention, management and resolution. Because of their proximity to where conflicts and their collateral damages occur, civil society organizations are able to effectively bear on the solutions to such conflicts. In this specific function, civil society organizations can prove to be effective instruments of peace by creating the conditions for a diversity of views and ideas in the process of conflict prevention and resolution, and by encouraging dialogue as a tool in peace-making.

The world today is an integrated global village, where news and messages travel fast. This highlights the important role of the media in promoting dialogue, mobilizing social forces for conflict resolution and peace-building, influencing opinion and perspectives and creating awareness among the people.

This Conference is a culmination of previous efforts, which have enabled us to bring together representatives of civil society organizations from QAU Member States to reflect together and pool ideas on the various challenges facing our Continent. But, this Conference also marks the beginning of a new era towards building a solid partnership for peace and development on the Continent. I do not think that this is the right time for me to elaborate on the various challenges confronting our Continent. Suffice it to state that during the next few days, you will have the opportunity of examining some of these issues, which are of primary concern to our governments and peoples.

One of the most daunting challenges which has been confronting us is that of peace, security and stability. The fight against the scourge of conflicts that are afflicting our Continent, dividing our people, throwing apart our societies and undermining our chances for socio-economic progress, should be our common agenda. These require the mobilization of all: there is an important role for governments to play; but there is also the contribution of



elders, communities, organizations and the people in general. We must put an end to this bleeding, mayhem and destruction in our societies. In this struggle for an end to the senseless conflicts and warfare and for peace and security, I wish in particular to underscore and pay tribute to the role that African women are playing.

Clearly, in addition to the challenge of restoring and promoting peace and stability in our Continent, there are many other awesome challenges confronting us. I need not adumbrate them all, but let me just stress that they include the challenge against poverty which is overbearing and which, in many ways, is contributive to many of the crises that face our people. One significant way of dealing with this issue of poverty is to unity our efforts and, thus, the important challenge of economic cooperation and integration of our Continent which requires the mobilization of all the energies of our people.

There is also the yearning of our people for democracy, good governance and full respect of human rights for which they fought for and sacrificed so much. We need also to deal with the mounting humanitarian crises, whether taking the form of floods, drought or serious accidents. Experience has demonstrated that we lack a sufficient indigenous response to these humanitarian emergencies. We have tended to rely sometimes almost exclusively on international disaster relief. While we appreciate such assistance, it is a fact that external relief is often provided very late in the evolution of an emergence when the security situation has dramatically deteriorated. For us in the OAU, developing and/or strengthening an African indigenous humanitarian response capacity is critical because it will enable us to structure an early response and thereby help to ensure that lives are saved. In this respect, there is a need to look into relationship between African governments and the few existing African humanitarian groups/agencies to enable them take initiatives and actions to suffering populations.

Above all there is the immediate and devastating challenge of HIV/AIDS and other killer diseases which are undermining the very survival of our people and which calls for a global mobilization in which civil society organizations have a crucial role to play.

Although this Conference had taken a long time to plan and finally to have it materialized, it could not have come at a more opportune moment. It comes at a time when our Continental Organization is actively preparing and equipping itself to deal more decisively with the challenges that I have heretofore elucidated. For example, less than two months ago, we had an African Special Summit on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Other Related Infectious Diseases where far-reaching decisions and commitments were made. At the end of last month, we had an OAU-UNICEF Pan-African Forum on the Future of Children where also important commitments and the way forward were charted. We need to translate these commitments and declarations of intention into concrete action. This Conference which

includes representatives of civil society who deal with these problems on a daily basis provides us with opportunities to reflect on the way forward.

Perhaps more crucially, is the fact that this Conference is taking place when the proposed African Union has become a legal and political reality and at a time when we are actively preparing for the operationalization of the Union. The input of your deliberations therefore will be of great value to us as we march towards the realization, however gradual, of Africa's long-standing aspiration for greater cohesion, unity and solidarity.

Before concluding, let me share with you a personal reflection. During my term of office as Secretary-General of the Organization of African Unity, I have had to deal with many crises. I have also had the opportunity of experiencing moments of satisfaction and moments of frustration. The one perpetual frustrating experience that I have had to deal with is the fact that there has been a hiatus between what the OAU has been trying to do and the understanding and comprehension of ordinary Africans of the Continental Organization. Put succinctly, the bulk of our people do not know much about our activities. As we prepare ourselves for a new era of the African Union, this gap must be closed or, at the very least, minimized. I do sincerely hope that through your deliberations and frank discussions you will help us to achieve this objective.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am confident that this Conference will be a landmark in our efforts to mobilize the African Civil Society in global partnership for peace and development on the Continent, a partnership in which governments are expected to continue to play a pivotal role complemented by an equally-important contribution by Civil society organizations.

I wish you success in your deliberations, and I thank you for your attention.

