

# WHEN AFRICA UNITES

**Kumi Naidoo**

- *How a new pan-African civil society initiative aims to foster peace, justice, democracy and human rights* •

## ABSTRACT

*Following hundreds of years of oppression under colonial rule and decades as a pawn in a bipolar world, Africa has been left a damaged continent. Here Kumi Naidoo explains this historical context in which a new pan-African civil society initiative is developing, of which he is the start-up director. After examining various prior attempts to create civil society unity in Africa and suggesting why they have all failed, the author offers a glimpse at what the new Africa Civil Society Initiative might look like. Acknowledging that it is still in its infancy, Naidoo describes the consultation process that is being used to better understand what civil society means in Africa today and how consensus can be achieved in such a diverse environment. He concludes by outlining the kinds of activities that will be undertaken at the outset to implement the six cross cutting thematic areas that have so far been identified.*

## KEYWORDS

Africa | Civil society | Post colonialism | Shrinking civic space | Justice | Democracy | Human rights

## 1 • Introduction

Over the past few years the global media has repeatedly referred to the phenomenon of “Africa Rising” to describe the ongoing looting of natural resources and illicit financial outflows from the continent. This confirms that the earlier models of colonisation have not ended, but have merely been adjusted and refined and are now conducted and presented behind the veneer of liberation and democracy of African people.

Over the next few pages I set out some key historical facts about colonisation and what the current effects of colonisation are and why, in this context, a discussion arose to establish a new initiative - a broad based African civil society platform. During the many discussions in relation to this new initiative, some consensus points have emerged which are presented here. These are not meant to be understood as *fait accompli* of the new platform. Instead they are key starting points to show how we are going about establishing such an initiative, what makes the process and outcomes different from previous attempts at civil society unity and how we are going to build consensus around such an initiative that will seek justice, peace and sustainable development on and for the African continent.

## 2 • Context

The African continent draws its modern history from the Berlin Conference held between 1884 and 1885, which sought to legitimise control over the continent, its people and specifically its natural resources. No African was ever consulted in this process.<sup>1</sup> By 1900, European states claimed almost 90% of the land mass, ignoring and abolishing local autonomy and self-governance of the African people. The decolonisation period post World War II and then the Cold War, saw Africans being used as political and economic pawns by both sides of the ideological conflict.

The effects of having excluded Africans from decision making about their own countries and their continent are starkly manifested in an artificially divided continent, weak and often at war with itself. This was the prime impulse behind the idea of building a movement for a more united continent, starting with civil society as the vanguard of such a process.

Africans remain constrained by these major incidents of political and economic domination of the peoples (and resources) of Africa. Starkly summed up by the pan-Africanist Tajudeen Raheem (1961-2009), when he observed that “Africa is the richest continent underneath the ground and that is precisely why we are one of the poorest continents above the ground”, this resource curse<sup>2</sup> and its abhorrent effects remain the daily reality for the majority of Africans. Within this context (and unlike some of their South American and Asian counterparts) individual African countries are unable to stand firm on the global stage in terms of climate change or trade negotiations, despite having proxy representation through South Africa in platforms such as the G20. There is little evidence to show that South Africa has used this

proxy role for any substantial continental benefit. Instead, its political leadership has mostly just accepted the negative compromises of these platforms, including the G20, leaving the continent inadequately represented amongst the global economic and political forces.

The imperative to work more urgently and diligently towards a united civil society across the continent is ever greater now that civil protests are more widespread and a frequent feature of life in most parts of the world. The people of the African continent have an opportunity to integrate their struggles into the larger global movements against rising inequality and climate change impacts, standing shoulder to shoulder with their governments on these global stages, while simultaneously pressurising African governments to perform substantially better than they are doing currently.

Attempts at civil society unity on the continent are not new. Several initiatives have been spawned over the years, including the first Pan African Conference (ironically held outside the continent) as early as 1900, several civil society backed resolutions and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) process to establish more widespread cooperation between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) in 2003.<sup>3</sup>

Within these broader attempts of unity there have also been several attempts to build civil society networks across the continent. Some were thematically focused, such as the African Association for Literacy and Adult Education (AALAE), and others were more generic such as the Harare Caucus, that sought to bring together regional civil society networks across the continent. A cursory assessment of these initiatives highlights some of the reasons for their limited success:

- The impetus for setting them up was external to the continent and they were usually geared towards meeting short-term interests of particular (global civil society) organisations.
- There was a lack of adequate resourcing for the initiatives, from human and financial capital to ideological robustness – a long-term strategy is critical to movement building.
- Governance failings – the competing interests of individuals heading established and resourced NGOs sometimes goes against the needs of a continent wide movement. Those entrusted with leadership responsibilities of continental networks did not have the dedicated time to exercise proper governance of the management and secretariat.

### 3 • Civil society under attack

Africa's historical resistance to slavery, economic imperialism and political colonisation finds focus in the current struggles by African people for democratic governance, justice, equality and a voice in the international policy arena.

Today we are told that Africa is rising. Yet, when we look closer, it seems that this is based solely on aggregated assessments of national Gross Domestic Product. In these rising African countries the few are becoming fantastically wealthy while the majority remain socially marginalised and economically excluded. In truth, the majority of Africans are not rising and continue to struggle with poverty and the denial of their most basic rights.

Underlying this state-of-affairs is the phenomenon of shrinking political and civic space. We have seen a drastic curtailment of the freedom of association, assembly and expression in far too many countries across the continent.<sup>4</sup> This has been accompanied by heightened levels of corruption and growing levels of inequality.<sup>5</sup> These rights violations have been met by new forms of social organisation and leadership leading to partial victories and new forms of popular actions and movements. Civil society in Africa is under assault on many fronts. We are experiencing many restrictions on political space, the erosion of women's rights, increasing inequality and climate change that is already having significant negative human impacts across the continent.

## 4 • Africans rising

The current initiative to establish a continent wide social justice platform for civil society actions, solidarity, protection and advancement came about as a confluence of factors at a similar time and operating within the context set out above.

For some years now, Action Aid Denmark has been running the well-regarded Training Centre for Development Cooperation (TCDC) in Arusha, Tanzania. In 2015 Action Aid Denmark handed over the TCDC facility to an African institution in order to further establish the facility as a base of operations for a new Africa wide centre for civil society.

In February 2016, I agreed to serve as the start-up director of the new initiative. Upon accepting the role I immediately set about engaging in dialogue with civil society across the continent to gain further insight into perspectives on a move to build greater unity within civil society on the continent. The process included numerous formal and informal consultations with civil society activists, regional and local networks, NGOs, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), trade unions and faith-based groups across the continent.

This process of bottom-up consultations (which is ongoing) has shown that almost everyone who has participated agreed that African unity - reflected by greater social, political and economic integration - is critical for Africa and its peoples. Individual nation states are far too weak to fight for what they need; be it in negotiations about trade, climate or a host of other pertinent issues.

Secondly, most activists feel we are fighting on two fronts. On the one hand, we are fighting a global system that is unjust, inequitable and is leading us to climate catastrophe

that fundamentally threatens our very ability to survive as a species. A system that serves the top 1% has to be vigorously opposed. On the other hand, we are facing national governments that have witnessed “state capture” by local and global elites and are often acting against the interests of their own citizens. This leads us to a situation where we need to both defend human rights and democracy at home and also ensure our governments are taking on the obscene injustices that prevail at the global level.

Thirdly, many on the continent feel that we need to have a fundamental rethink as to what constitutes civil society. There is a growing recognition that there is too much dependency on and too much influence of INGOs but also greater acceptance that even local and national NGOs are disconnected from the poorest and most marginalised. While there are, of course, inspirational exceptions to this, there is increasing agreement that the engine of resistance to injustice is not coming from formal and bureaucratised NGOs but is coming from looser, informal and social media driven activism. Some of the most inspiring challenges to power in Africa, and globally, in the last decade have not seen the more formal NGOs playing any decisive role.

Lastly, the consultations were unanimous in their focus on a wider initiative as opposed to a specific centre. Thus, while the Arusha TCDC facility is likely to be a key convening point for civil society (it already enjoys credibility and success as an NGO management training facility), for the purposes of building the vision of the potential future initiative we want it to be driven by a bottom-up process of consultation that is not focused on a single centre but on a range of such convening spaces.

These key discussions were affirmed at a recent strategy workshop organised by the African Civil Society Initiative. 30 activists, NGOs and networks aligned themselves with the inspirational Rustlers Valley Declaration (2014),<sup>6</sup> thus taking up the challenge for civil society generally and NGOs specifically “to be the change we want to see in the world”.

The key consensus points developed in the African Civil Society Initiative process to date represent some significant departures from previous attempts at civil society unity in Africa. Firstly, there is an acceptance that NGOs and INGOs cannot be the sole drivers of the process. The initiative must be much broader than any previous attempts and will make a special effort to be inclusive of social movements, NGOs, peoples and popular social justice movements, intellectuals, artists, sports people, cultural activists and others, across the continent and the African Diaspora. Secondly, a phased approach must continue to be employed, ensuring consensus at each step – no one must be left behind. Thirdly, the eventual organisational structure of the initiative must reflect the lean and agile nature of the initiative itself.

Based on the current feedback from the consultation process, it is likely that the initiative will focus on six key cross-cutting areas that have substantial significance and have gained general consensus, specifically:

- Exposing corruption and opposing impunity;
- Fighting for full gender equality;
- Defending and deepening democratic space generally and civic space specifically;
- Working for poverty eradication;
- Opposing inequality; and
- Assertively addressing the challenge of climate change.

These consensus points will most likely be implemented by the nascent initiative in the following ways:

- Sparking a major conversation across the continent about the establishment of the initiative – what such an intervention would look like, who would participate, what participants’ expectations are and what the objectives of such a platform would be?
- Establishing internal and external communications functionality, making as much use of social media platforms to ensure widespread engagement of all who are interested in civil society;
- Inviting people to express interest in the initiative<sup>7</sup> - we can only succeed if we have broad based membership across civil society;
- Organising a Validation Conference<sup>8</sup> in Arusha, Tanzania - the final steps to establish the initiative must have broad public endorsement with people and organisations ready to stand up and be counted in the fight for justice. The conference will deliberate on how the initiative should be established and operate. Should the conference demonstrate the requisite level of support the initiative’s operations will commence promptly thereafter;
- And lastly, all of this work requires that most basic of needs, the resources to succeed and the current team is busy preparing for the Validation Conference, staff and other related costs.

It is time we speak together and decide what change we wish to see in our countries, across Africa and what we want Africa to be when we celebrate Africa Day in the future. For a long time now, others have been writing our story. Now is the time for us to take a brave step, a giant step for us and start writing (and telling) our own story – a story of a united Africa, at peace with prosperous and healthy people.

We need your voice, ideas, thoughts, and action to keep working together to build this initiative. It is not complicated to do your part, tweet to us @helloacsi, write on our Facebook wall or send an email to acsihello@gmail.com.

Together for Africa, for justice, peace and sustainable development.

## NOTES

- 1 • Elizabeth Heath, "Berlin Conference of 1884-1885," *Oxford Reference*, accessed June 8, 2016, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195337709.001.0001/acref-9780195337709-e-0467>.
- 2 • Andrew Rosser, "The Political Economy of the Resource Curse: A Literature Survey," *IDS Working Paper 268*, Institute of Development Studies, April 2006, accessed June 8, 2016, <http://www2.ids.ac.uk/futurestate/pdfs/wp268.pdf>.
- 3 • Organization of African Unity (OAU), *Draft Code of Ethics and Conduct for African Civil Society Organizations*, June 2003, accessed June 8, 2016, [http://www.sarpn.org/documents/d0000352/P340\\_AU\\_SACSO\\_Code\\_Ethics\\_Conduct.pdf](http://www.sarpn.org/documents/d0000352/P340_AU_SACSO_Code_Ethics_Conduct.pdf).
- 4 • OHCHR, "Hate is being mainstreamed," press release, June 13, 2016, accessed June 27, 2016, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/media.aspx?IsMediaPage=true>.
- 5 • See, for example, <https://www.worldwealthreport.com/>.
- 6 • "An open letter to our fellow activists across the globe: Building from below and beyond borders," *Civicus Blog*, August 6, 2014, accessed June 8, 2016, <http://blogs.civicus.org/civicus/2014/08/06/an-open-letter-to-our-fellow-activists-across-the-globe-building-from-below-and-beyond-borders/>.
- 7 • See <http://africacsi.org/>.
- 8 • See <http://africacsi.org/signup>.



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Born in South Africa in 1965, Kumi Naidoo was executive director of Greenpeace from 2009 – 2015 and was the Secretary General and CEO of Civicus, the world alliance for citizen participation, from 1998 - 2008. He fought against apartheid in his home country and has led various global initiatives, including the Global Call to Action Against Poverty and the Global Call for Climate Action. He is now the start-up director for the Africa Civil Society Initiative.

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