

The African Union's 20th anniversary: a celebration with plenty of work ahead

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Photography: "At my peril", by [Derrick Ofori Boateng](#)

In her now-famous speech in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, in 2014, former African Union (AU) Commission Chairperson Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma set out her vision for Africa's renewal. In what she dubbed '[an email from the future](#)', dated 24 January 2063, she writes to former Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah outlining what the AU had achieved five decades into the future.

The email describes an integrated, prosperous and peaceful continent by 2063, where all citizens have access to quality education and health services and where campaigns have been launched to eradicate major diseases. Africa is an industrialised continent and the AU is transformed into a fully-fledged supra-national organisation.

The vision described in the email and the various steps the AU needs to take to obtain this goal, are set out in the AU Commission's Agenda 2063. This remains the AU's blueprint for

what it wants to achieve. However, as is often the case in such institutions, the political buy-in for Agenda 2063 has somewhat waned after Dlamini-Zuma stepped down at the end of 2016.

Besides the change of leadership at the helm of the AU, the change of focus in the past few years towards a greater emphasis on short-term gains in terms of security and stability, also touches on a wider debate about what the AU is and should be doing. This is an issue that the institution and its 55 member states have had to grapple with since 2002.

As the AU celebrates its first twenty years of existence next year, many Africans lament the lack of progress and meagre gains in terms of economic development, regional integration and the ending of conflicts.

Africa is far from being a peaceful continent. Its development and prosperity is stifled by conflict and corruption, political strife and lack of leadership. The Covid-19 pandemic has also caused the continent to regress on many fronts.

Figures show that GDP per capita on the continent has dropped dramatically and is likely to recover to 2019 levels only by 2024, at best. Compared to earlier forecasts, 14 million more Africans will be poor by 2030 and this will further constrain African countries from attaining the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals [1].

Amidst the many priorities for the AU going forward, the question is, what would be the best approach for the continental body to take? Should it focus on long-term developmental issues, or put the emphasis on consolidating democracy and good governance? Or rather ensure peace, security and stability as a first step?

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The AU Commission in Addis Ababa, with its 3000-odd employees is not sufficiently funded or structured to be up to the task of carrying out all the ambitious plans its member states might have for the continent. Besides, it is not a truly supra-national organisation and none of its member states have ceded sovereignty to the AU. At best, it can suggest, cajole and convene. The AU also cannot be all things to all people. Choices have to be made.

The African Union's convening power

Since early 2020, however, the AU has managed to convince some of its detractors that it actually does serve a purpose through its responses to the Covid-19 pandemic.

There was, indeed, wide praise for the inclusive and consultative way the AU responded to the pandemic [2]. The Africa Centres for Disease Control (Africa CDC) and its head dr. John

Nkengasong has been exceptionally pro-active, given the constraints of his organisation and of the AU as a whole.

Former African Union chairperson Cyril Ramaphosa convened the first meeting of the AU bureau –comprising Ramaphosa, Egypt’s Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Mali’s Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, Kenya’s Uhuru Kenyatta, and the DRC’s Felix Tshisekedi- in March 2020. In the coming months, several of these virtual meetings included the chairs of the eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) recognized by the AU [3].

During these meetings the bureau appointed five special envoys with vast experience in finance [4]. Zimbabwean cellphone magnate Strive Masiyiwa was also appointed as AU special envoy to create a continent-wide Covid-19 supplies platform.

A continental strategy [5] was drawn up to ‘promote evidence-based public health practice for surveillance, prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and control of COVID-19’ and a Covid-19 fund was created to help countries with their responses and to build capacity within the Africa CDC.

The AU further engaged with partners, the G20, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and others to plead for debt relief and for a vaccine against Covid-19 to be considered a ‘global public good’ accessible to all African countries.

The fact that a choice was made to include all members of the AU bureau, representing the continent’s 5 regions, is significant in terms of the institutional structures of the AU. It is a marked break from the recent past where previous chairs such as Idriss Deby from Chad (2016), Alpha Condé of Guinea (2017), Kagame (2018) and el-Sisi (2019) chose to use a so-called troika mechanism that included only the previous, current and upcoming chair of the AU for crucial decisionmaking.

Through these initiatives, the AU was able to show the practical benefits of the institutional and how a collective stance can be beneficial to the organisation’s member states.

Regional representivity and inclusiveness was key. For example, initially, the group of four special envoys didn’t include North Africa, but it was quickly rectified with the inclusion of Benkhalfa Abderrahmane, former finance minister of Algeria.

Through a series of initiatives to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, the African Union has been able to show the practical benefits of the institutional and how a collective stance can be beneficial to the organisation’s member states

Strong cooperation between the AU and the World Health Organisation, led by former Ethiopian minister Tedros Ghebreyesus, strengthened the evidence-based health response

of the AU.

As vaccines started to become available at the end of 2020, the AU was also instrumental in pooling resources to make this more accessible to ordinary citizens, notably through the Covax initiative.

It has to be said, however, that there remains scepticism among member states, including from the continent's leaders, as to the efficacy of the AU in combating Covid-19. The continent remains far behind when it comes to vaccine distribution compared to the rest of the world.

African Continental Free Trade Area successes and challenges

Meanwhile, arguably the single biggest achievement by the AU so far has been the creation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) that entered into force after the requisite number of ratifications in 2019. Trading started on 1 January 2021.

The World Bank estimates that the AfCFTA is 'a major opportunity to boost growth, reduce poverty and promote economic inclusion' [6]. It estimates that it could add \$450 Billion to the continent's income and lift 30 million people out of poverty.

Institute for Security Studies' (ISS) expert dr. Jakkie Cilliers [7], also believes that of all the factors that can contribute to Africa's growth in the next few decades, including more productive agriculture, improving services such as education and health, as well as better infrastructure, the AfCFTA could be the most important in the years to come. Economies that have been locked for centuries in colonial trading routes, shipping raw materials out of the continent, can now see transformation and value-add happening at home since trading will happen with neighbours and fellow African countries. Africa will, through the AfCFTA, become part of global value chains where this is not the case currently.

To get almost all AU member states to sign the AfCFTA agreement and to achieve 36 ratifications by February 2021, just 3 years after heads of state initially adopted a resolution in this regard in March 2018, is speedy progress for the AU. Often, agreements and ratifications take many more years to be implemented.

One of the reasons for the quick ratification was the strong drive by major economies such as South Africa behind the AfCFTA. Nigeria, Africa's biggest economy, was initially reluctant to sign on to the agreement -notably out of fear that export goods from South Africa would inundate its markets tariff-free- but it has since come on board and could be one of the biggest beneficiaries of the AfCFTA.

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Indeed, it is the big African economies that export goods to the rest of the continent that will ultimately benefit the most. Care should be taken to ensure that nascent industries and export commodities of smaller countries are also catered for in the rush to open markets and increase intra-African trade.

Ensuring peace

At the same time, as it tackles economic development, the AU's core business is still to ensure peace and security on the continent. On that score, the result of the past twenty years is, at best, a mixed bag.

Early successes in making peace through AU mediation efforts and the deployment of peacekeeping troops to stop conflicts were met with optimism. This was the case in places such as Burundi, where the first AU mission was deployed in 2003. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, a devastating war involving at least six neighbouring countries was ended through many peacemaking efforts and the deployment of United Nations (UN) troops.

The joint mission with the UN to stop the war in Darfur, Sudan, brought security to the plagued region where over 300 000 people died since the outbreak of conflict in the early 2000's. The UN-AU hybrid force for Darfur (UNAMID) is now being disbanded after almost ten years.

The AU's biggest and most longstanding undertaking in terms of troops and efforts that started in 2007 in Somalia, the African Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) has however yet to completely stabilise the country and rid it of the violent extremist group Al Shabaab.

In many cases, the AU and its regional economic communities have been at the forefront of reacting rapidly in dire crises, with huge losses of life, such as the AU missions in the Central African Republic and Mali, where the Economic Community of Central African States and the Economic Community of West African States tried to step in to quell conflicts. In most cases, lack of funding and resources have obliged the AU to turn to 'rehatting' by the UN.

While the AU has indeed contributed to getting parties to agree to ceasefires and for the immediate threat to civilian lives to be contained, it has been the growing spread of terrorism, as well as internal political strife due to bad governance and undemocratic leadership that is proving to be the biggest challenge for the AU.

The spectre of terrorism and violent extremism has haunted the continent for a very long time: ever since the first terror attack in Nairobi in the late 1990's, but it has since morphed into a wildfire that is ravaging through large parts of the Sahel, the Lake Chad

Basin, Somalia, as mentioned, and now in northern Mozambique in Southern Africa.

The AU and RECs have made strong efforts to contain this spread, but with very little success. Its instruments and responses are simply not up to the task. The AU clearly has to develop new tools and structures to deal with these crises.

The growing spread of terrorism, as well as internal political strife due to bad governance and undemocratic leadership, are the biggest challenges for the African Union nowadays

Besides, increasingly, it realises that the solution lies in tackling the deep-rooted causes of conflict. Economic decline, marginalisation, ethnic strife and bad governance are factors that drive desperate citizens to join extremist groups or enter into conflicts.

Ultimately, as well, the AU is faced with the issues of sovereignty and struggles to intervene in the affairs of member states when governments simply close the door to AU involvement.

Dealing with governance challenges

In the past two decades, conflict and political instability linked to contested elections, coup d'états and unconstitutional changes of government have been among of the major challenges faced by the African continent and the AU. In this regards the AU's tools such as election observation and mediation have also produced mixed results.

The continental body's decision on unconstitutional changes of governance, the so-called Lomé declaration of 2000, that outlaws coup d'états on the continent, has led to numerous suspensions of countries from the AU in the past two decades. It has hypothetically discouraged some coup-plotters from following through with their plans, but has in several instances contributed to a return to constitutional order after an unconstitutional change of government. This was the case in Burkina Faso in 2014 and Sudan in 2019, where intervention by the AU contributed largely to the return of civilian rule.

However, the recent acceptance of what is clearly also an unconstitutional change of government in Chad, following the death of longtime strongman Idriss Deby in May 2021, has been widely criticised. The AU is seen to be reneging on its commitment not to accept such moves as carried out by Deby's son, Mahamat, and his fellow military leaders [8]. The AU would have to seriously consider the implication of this decision that sets a dangerous precedent.

Meanwhile, it is not only this type of military take-over that has plagued the continent, but many leaders have also changed constitutions through fraudulent elections to prolong their mandates, leading what could also be seen as unconstitutional. From Chad and Togo,

through to Rwanda, the Republic of Congo and Burundi, this situation has led to major political instability on the continent.

The AU has developed tools such as the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, but its principles are very rarely applied. Again, the issue of sovereignty has blocked many of the AU decisions and proposed actions.

A reformed African Union

Institutional reforms of the AU, launched in 2016, brought a much-needed sense of realism to the AU member states. The large number of decisions and resolutions taken over the years that have not been implemented was, arguably, a wake-up call to the leaders of the AU Assembly, even if they didn't like being lectured to by the AU's 'champion' for reforms, Rwandan President Paul Kagame.

The reforms are destined to create a more streamlined AU, focusing on fewer priorities and with more efficiency. The reform agenda has suffered several setbacks, but there are some tangible results.

For example, AU member states have in the last couple of years increased their contributions to the institution, despite the fact that the call by Kagame for a new 0,2% levy on imports to finance the institution has largely ended in failure. While member states largely rejected this 'directive' from the AU, self-funding is slowly become a reality – a sign of continent buy-in to the aims and programmes of the AU-. While it is still heavily dependent on external funding for programmes and for peacekeeping, it has managed to finance its own running costs through member state contributions [9].

In addition, together with self-funding the institution, there is a marked improvement in financial efficiency and oversight by member states of the AU budget. Recruitment, such as was seen during the last elections of AU Commissioners in February 2020, has also seen greater transparency [10].

In terms of responding the continent's challenges, there is also hope that the merger between the departments of political affairs and of peace and security into one new Political Affairs, Peace and Security [11] will lead to more synergy between these two departments that ultimately deal with much the same issues. The AU and its member states have come to accept that peace and security challenges and political affairs are intimately linked and cannot be treated as two separate issues. But this is just the start of reforming the AU to respond to the fast-changing realities on the continent.

It is, for example, increasingly evident that the current RECs are not adequate in terms of being building blocs of greater regional integration and to respond to crises. The fact that many AU member states belong to more than one REC is indicative of this. Crises are also not confined to regions. Structures such as the Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram and the G5 Sahel to fight terrorism in the region are further examples of this since

they were created precisely because the conflicts go beyond the current configuration of the RECs.

The African Continental Free Trade Area will over time override the many regional economic blocs when it comes to continental integration and speed up an eventual political integration

The military intervention of Rwanda to assist Mozambique in battling violent extremism [12], while the Southern African Development Community already had plans in place for an intervention, is also indicative of the weakness of the current RECs structure.

Cooperation between the AU and RECs is also at times highly problematic. Clearly, the AfCFTA will over time override the many regional economic blocs when it comes to continental integration and speed up an eventual political integration as well.

Looking forward

Ultimately the AU must show member states and citizens that it serves their interests. The defunct Organisation of African Unity was built on the fight against colonialism and apartheid. The AU, as it was initially conceptualised, has a far wider mandate to ensure peace, security and economic development. The principle of non-intervention in crises was, theoretically, to be substituted by the principle of non-indifference. Yet, as shown above, many obstacles still need to be overcome to make this a reality.

The Covid-19 response and the drive to implement the AfCFTA have shown the relevance of the AU. The excitement over the AfCFTA will, however, be shortlived if it is only seen as a tool for richer, industrialised countries in Africa and their big companies, to make money. It would be prudent, going forward, to be realistic about what the AU can and should achieve.

Interestingly, Dlamini Zuma's email from the future wasn't nearly as grandiose and aspirational as many people would have liked to see. It is rather conservative. Dlamini Zuma noted, for example, that a Confederation of African States, presumably based on real integration where states would cede sovereignty to the central authority, was launched in 2051 - too far into the future for many of her detractors. The African Economic Community was created in 2034, while many believe the AfCFTA should be transformed into a single market far sooner than that. Dlamini Zuma predicted that intra-African trade was increased from 12% to 50% by 2045 - another fairly conservative estimate.

The former chairperson admits in her imaginary email that self-financing of the AU happened slowly: with 'sometimes one step back, two steps forward'. The last two decades have shown that it is too often the case of one step forward and two steps back. Those celebrating the AU's anniversary should proceed with determination to overcome the

obstacles plaguing the continental organisation, while also being realistic about the challenges ahead.

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- 4 — The five special envoys are: Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, former minister of finance of Nigeria, Donald Kaberuka, former African Development Bank head from Rwanda, Tidjane Thiam, well-known banker from Côte d’Ivoire, Trevor Manuel, former minister of finance of South Africa and Benkhalfa Abderrahmane former finance minister of Algeria.
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- 9 — The African Union budget for 2021, as approved by the Executive Council, was \$623 836. The operating costs \$172 089 will almost entirely be funded by member states.
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