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1. Introduction

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According to African Economic Outlook (AEO), although front pages of print media and TV breaking news on Africa, continue to be about i) state capture and corruption; ii) endemic poverty and rising unemployment of despondent youth; iii) bad governance and election malpractices; iv) the rise of rebellions and the proliferation of small arms; and v) massive deaths resulting from terrorism and violent extremism; in 2017 Africa maintained steady advances in trade and regional integration.¹

Today the continent's trading partners are also more geographically diverse, and regional co-operation is building momentum because African states and continental institutions have adopted more open policies, invested in infrastructure and continued to pursue regional integration. These achievements ease business by reducing the costs and time required to move goods and services within countries and across borders; and increase the continent's appeal as a partner in global trade. This outlook presents hope in what has been achieved, and fears in terms of the challenges that lie ahead.

In 2017, turmoil and fears of civil war in Burundi, uncertainties about peaceful elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Kenya and Liberia; rising levels of political intolerance in South Africa; military mutinies in Côte d'Ivoire, youth uprisings in Togo, protests in Cameroon and Togo, and most recently, the unseating of Mugabe in Zimbabwe gave an impression of a continent beyond hope. Furthermore, prominent African CEOs who should be on the driving seat of wealth and job creation have noted *that social instability and unemployment remain key threats to Africa's prospects for growth.*²

This notwithstanding, the number of fatalities from political violence in Africa remained relatively lower in 2017 than seen at any time since the end of the Cold War. Consequently, a State of Africa Report would be inconclusive if it fails to capture the trends, institutional dynamics and Africa's relationship with the rest of the world.

2. African Trends and Institutional Responses

At the July 2017 Summit, the African Union Commission (AUC) Chairperson, Moussa Faki Mahamat, opined that, following the adoption of Agenda 2063, the commitment to Silence Guns by 2020, the adoption of Kagame's Recommendations for the Institutional Reform of the African Union (AU) and the report on Securing Predictable and Sustainable Financing for Peace in Africa, African Union (AU) member states agreed that the AU needs to be reformed to bolster its efficiency. This expression of hope prompts the need to reflect on areas of progress, the unresolved challenges and emerging threats. Three sub-categories will be discussed in this section, namely Peace and Security, Socio-Economic Development and Political Governance and Management.

2.1 Peace and Security: With 2017 now edging out, though the continent is yet to find a breakthrough in South Sudan, Somalia and Libya where conflicts continue to defy all attempts at resolution, there is reason to be hopeful because the continent's Regional Economic Communities (RECs) are demonstrating that they are fit for purpose. Examples of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) success in managing post-election instability in Gabon, ECOWAS' installation of Barrow as the new President of the Gambia after the incumbent's attempt to resist his ousting, the EAC's facilitation of an end to rising political tensions in Burundi; IGAD's continuous mediation which has now led to a decline of violence in Juba, and SADC's handling of the Lesotho crises are indicators that RECs are at work and mostly succeeding in their peace and security mandates.

While the challenges posed by Boko Haram and Al Shabaab persist, the AU-led AMISOM and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) have increasingly weakened their reign of terror. The MNJTF has demobilised and dislodged Boko Haram from the Sambisa forest in Eastern Nigeria,³ while AMISOM has destroyed the coordination capacity of Al Shabaab by over 80%.⁴

2.2 Socio-Economic Development: Both Afrobarometer and Pew Research Centre confirm that unemployment remains the most pressing issue for African citizens. In 2017, Africa experienced growing demands for better socio-economic opportunities and more accountability with respect to public policies. In Cameroon, for instance, the clamour for legal

and educational reforms to empower citizens from former British trustee territory of west Cameroon is growing into a civil war; while the impact of corruption on governance and politics is well documented in South Africa, and the traction it has gained invariably syncs with the UN Convention on Corruption which considers corruption as a threat “...to the stability and security of societies, undermining the institutions of democracy, ethical values and justice and jeopardizing sustainable development and the rule of law.” These developments point to the need to watch the political space in South Africa, especially in a year where in the build-up to the ruling African National Congress’ (ANC) elective congress in December, political killings have multiplied and factionalism capable of being fed by conflict enthusiasts has deepened. As if this is not enough, the spectre of popular uprisings that emerged in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region seem to be trickling down to sub-Saharan Africa with youth in Togo currently resisting any constitutional reform which they view as the ruling elites masquerading their intention to abolish away presidential term limits.

Similarly, the youth in South Africa view the State’s apprehension over free education as breaking promises made on the eve of the current democratic dispensation. With the youth having successfully ousted longstanding regimes such as Mubarak in Egypt (2011), Gaddafi in Libya (2011), and Compaore in Burkina Faso (2014); the AU’s dedication of 2017 as the year for “Harnessing the Demographic Dividend through investments in Youth” was no coincidence; but a recognition that youth are a critical resource that can be exploited for economic prosperity and tackling deep rooted instability. Often states have hidden behind inadequate resources to justify poor performance, but Rwanda, a landlocked African country has dramatically transformed since the 1994 genocide. The country is emerging as a regional high-tech hub and boasts one of Africa’s fastest GDP growth rates. It is one of the continent’s most competitive economies and a top reformer in improving the business environment. This remarkable progress showcases the country’s rapid evolution as a knowledge economy, powered by smart policies and investments. Rwanda stands as a model for Africa, especially as it seeks to turn the tides from a conflict-prone to a development-centred continent beyond 2017.

On the economic front, the RECs have witnessed limited activity because Cameroon is a power house in the ECCAS region as is South Africa in the SADC and Togo’ President is currently Chairperson of the ECOWAS heads of states. However, the AU Continental Early Warning Unit has earmarked these as well as Zambia as trouble spots to watch.

2.3 Political Governance and Management: A recent survey conducted by Afrobarometer revealed that Africans distrusted national electoral commissions and the quality of their elections.⁵ Just over 40% of Africans in 36 countries believed that the last elections in their country were free and fair; 25% stated that they trusted their electoral commissions “a lot”, while many described elections where bribery was rampant; media bias persisted; and voters were often

threatened with violence at the polls. There is no doubt that these perceptions were rife in the presidential, legislative, and municipal elections held in 2017. Some still believe that it is for this reason that several incumbent presidents, including Uganda's Yoweri Museveni,

Zambia's Edgar Lungu, and Ali Bongo Ondimba of Gabon won re-elections despite protests from opposition members, violence, and internet shutdowns. Others infer that ECOWAS demonstrated the maturing of African regional mechanisms in its bloodless ousting of the Gambia's Yahya Jammeh, who once said he will rule for "one billion years" and conceded defeat live on television, only to reject the outcome of the elections a few days later. Later elections such as in Kenya and Liberia, where violence was anticipated are either inconclusive as with Liberia's case or have left the country fractured, tense and in need of national healing.

The above notwithstanding, there remains gaps needing critical intervention at the local and national levels to ensure that conflicts are managed through dialogue and mediation by local and national actors, and where this fails, to have a cadre of mediators who can intervene from outside.

3. Africa's relations with the rest of the world

Although ending on a relatively calm note, some analysts opine that from the global refugee crisis to the spread of terrorism, "our collective failure to resolve conflict is giving birth to new threats and emergencies."⁶ Consequently, the rise of nationalism, popular democracies and the election of Donald Trump in the US, suggests that even in peaceful societies, "the politics of fear is leading to dangerous polarization and demagoguery."⁷ And though much has been said about the unknowns of Trump's foreign-policy agenda, one thing we do know is that uncertainty itself can be profoundly destabilizing, especially when it involves the most powerful actor on the global stage. Already, in Europe, uncertainty over the new U.S. political posture is compounded by the messy aftermath of Brexit. Nationalist forces have gained strength, and the elections in France, Germany, and the Netherlands demonstrated that the social fabrics which glued nations together are flaking and falling off; and the potential unravelling of the European Union, which is one of Africa's major funders is one of the greatest challenges the continent faces today.

As a result, while Africa strives to deal with its own internal challenges, building and strengthening partnerships has remained an important objective of RECs and the AU. The AU-EU strategic partnership for instance has been working on the APSA Roadmap (2016-2020); and the migration crisis; while on the economic front, China and Japan have emerged as bilateral and multilateral partners for African states and supporting RECs. With the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) having taken place in Nairobi in

August 2017, there was a China-Africa Investment Forum from 27-28 November 2017; aimed at strengthening economic ties with Africa.

4. Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

In conclusion, the rise of nationalism in Europe and the US is a warning sign to Africa and its leaders to urgently invest in conflict prevention strategies and avoid the scourge of violence that undermines socio-economic development and destroys political institutions and infrastructure. Consequently, Africa's leaders need to pursue new approaches to ignite structural transformation, particularly in the face of rapid technological changes that have the potential to create new industries and reduce poverty, inequality and create jobs for the youth who at best are at risk of brain drain in favour of the Northern hemisphere; or at worst, vulnerable to joining violent extremist armed groups. Amongst the donors, whilst it has been recognised that global security challenges are undermining the ability of states to protect the human rights of their citizens; their varied baskets of resources can better equip states to prevent and combat terrorism, organised crime, piracy and cyber threats, and thus strengthen their ability to safeguard the human rights of their citizens.

Countries that are committed to the principles of the rule of law and have a well-functioning public administration underpinned by professional institutions and good governance are less vulnerable to conflict, better able to provide security for the population, and have a higher level of economic and social development than countries where the public administration and governance are weak. As a consequence, Norway gives high priority to supporting the establishment of institutions that can promote stability in countries in transition from conflict to sustainable development; while through the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), Sweden together with the UN Joint Programme on Local Governance (JPLG), works towards the promotion of peace by supporting civic engagement of various groups in new governing institutions that arise at the local level.

Endnotes

1. African Economic Outlook. 2017. Available at [http://www.africaneconomicoutlook.org/sites/default/files/2017-05/African Economic Outlook 2017.pdf](http://www.africaneconomicoutlook.org/sites/default/files/2017-05/African_Economic_Outlook_2017.pdf) Accessed on November 17, 2017
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