

## The Experience of the OAU in Resolving Conflicts

It is important to understand the vision behind the creation of the OAU.

In the early 1960s, political vision amongst the leaders of the newly independent African countries was focused on three issues (i) continental political unity, and (ii) nation building, and © decolonisation of the remaining colonised countries and those under the apartheid rule.

Conflict was not seen as a phenomena which was of importance or will become important, except inter-state conflicts for which a Committee of Mediation, Conciliation and Arbitration was set up but it died immediately – was stillborn.

The vision of political unity of the continent came to be accepted as a long term objective and to work for it through the building blocks of creating sub-regional organisation; Nation-building was given priority, but its implementation was soon abandoned without abandoning its ideology. Decolonisation thus became a major focus of the OAU during the 60s and 70s.

Circumstances changed and the 70s was characterised by three trends (a) the intensification of the cold-war and their respective ideologies; the support of African governments by the respective cold-war warriors –USA and the Soviet Union – thus making it easier for African governments to renege from their mandates and promises of democracy and nation building; (b) cold war support of governments enabled them to become oppressive, to ethnicise politics and mismanage the economies by prioritising rent seeking form of accumulation; oppression and growing inequalities led to internal conflicts and a large number of military coups changing governments and bringing in instability; (c) the deterioration of the economies – partly because of world wide depression and partly because of mismanagement;

The still born Committee was dead, and the OAU did not concern itself with any of the conflicts – internal or the change of governments through military coups. This was because of the sovereignty issue and the espri d'corpse of the political leaders.

Circumstances changed even more dramatically in the 80s – with the interventions of the WB/IMF and their SAPs, the deepening deterioration of the economies, continued oppression, and inability of governments to handle the different interests emerging from the diversity of their population. Many small conflicts developed into anti-government or secessionist movements, inter-communal conflicts increased and challenges from the military increased Yet even as the decade of the 80s was turning out into a turbulent decade with deep economic crises, food riots and widespread internal conflicts challenging governments, the OAU did not consider internal conflicts as its major concern

The decade of the 1990s began with the OAU recognising that the increasing internal conflicts including the refugee and IDP problem, which it attributed to SAPs, were becoming a serious issue in the continent. The Heads of States in the AA Declaration of 1990 expressed this concern and stated that democracy should be the main response of governments to these conflicts. For the first time since 1963, the OAU, without changing its Charter, extended its scope of intervention in internal conflicts of countries. It was also in 1990 that the RPF invaded Rwanda from Uganda and thus the OAU began to be forced into involving itself

seriously into a developing internal conflict – which at the same time involved two states – Uganda and Rwanda.

The OAU recognised that it did not have the expertise, the capacity or the resources to handle these conflicts.

In 1993 it set up the Mechanism for preventing, managing and resolving conflicts – a Centre for Conflict Management and a Central Organ to deal with such conflicts. It became deeply involved in the deepening Rwanda conflict through the Arusha Process in which the international community was closely involved. The failure of the Arusha Process and the Rwanda genocide which followed in 1994 shook the OAU, shocked the continent and the whole world. The failure of the “international community” in what we have called “The Preventable Genocide” is now well known.

From this point the OAU was never to be the same. It began to strengthen its Conflict Mechanism, a Peace Fund was established and the donor community were now more forthcoming in providing some funding to the OAU for conflict issues. It began a badly needed process of consultation with CSOs and involving them in the restructuring process. It also began the long overdue consultation and the creation of an African military Rapid Deployment Force. At the same time consultations and serious thinking was taking place on various forms of restructuring including the metamorphosis of the OAU which culminated in the establishment of the AU and its Peace and Security Council. Under the AU the issue of conflict was also transformed and the dimension of maintaining peace – after a conflict was resolved – was added to its mandate and became an important area of focus and intervention.

**Summary of major points:-**

1. The OAU’s main concern since its foundation until the late 1980s were – political unity, sub-regional groupings, decolonisation, and towards the end of the 1980s, deteriorating economic situation and the issue of democracy.
2. Inter-state conflicts was envisaged by setting up a Committee which soon died since there were hardly any inter-state conflicts – except between Algeria and Morocco.
3. Between 1952 and 1996, there were 83 violent changes of governments but the OAU did not openly intervene in any of these changes. Sovereignty and non-interference was scrupulously upheld by the OAU.
4. It was only in 1990 that the OAU openly recognised the seriousness and widespread of internal conflicts and thus extended its scope of intervention into internal conflicts without changing its charter.
5. Its early experience in the Rwanda conflict (1990-1993 before the genocide) made it realise its limited expertise, capacity, lack of resources and the enormous task ahead. It thus began to undertake serious steps towards strengthening its capacity to deal with conflicts. In 1994 the international community including the UN was exposed as lacking serious interest in helping the OAU to deal with the increasing conflicts. Belated it began to help toward the end of the decade – the 90s.
6. OAU relations with the UN, the US and the EU became a subject of serious discussion on the issue of the kinds of relationship to be developed with regards to conflict resolution and peace keeping. The OAU’s preference was to establish strong relations with the UN on the principle

**of UN providing expertise and resources while the OAU (African Governments) providing military personnel and organisational infrastructure. This issue is still outstanding.**

- 7. Some of the sub-regional organisations (ECOWAS, SADC, EAC) began to extend their mandate to resolving conflicts beyond the mere formal diplomacy which had been the main form of past intervention.**
- 8. Toward the end of the 90s, the OAU, having learnt some important lessons from the Rwanda, Burundi and other conflicts, began to take serious measures to strengthen its Conflict Mechanism, and to bring about fundamental changes to cope with the growing crises in the continent. These changes included the initiation of a process which culminated in the replacement of the OAU by the AU.**
- 9. The AU started with a strong mandate, capacity and resources in its dealing with internal conflicts, as a result of the OAU experience and lessons learnt from the 1990s.**