ACRL–RfP Policy Brief and Recommendations to East African Community (EAC): Strengthening the role of Religious Leaders and Institutions in the Realization of the Community’s Regional Aspirations

1.0 Background

Discussion for the African unity started in the late 1950s and continued in the 1960s as many countries in the continent gained their political independence. This debate and quest for common frontier actions within the atmosphere for the radical political and economic freedom became a cornerstone for political conversations for several decades. Several conferences, summits and technical dialogues were held some of which gave birth to the Organization of the African Union (OAU), now the African Union, (AU) with the primary purpose to promote unity and cooperation among African states, uphold self-government and respect for territorial boundaries, and eradicate all forms of colonialism.

Given the changes in the political landscape, now that the vestiges of colonialism were no longer an issue in the continent, there was a need to shift focus. It is on this that the decision to build a robust Pan-African organization, away from the fight for decolonization and ridding the continent of apartheid, which had been the focus of the OAU, was made in July 2002 in Durban, South Africa. At this occasion, when the African Union (AU) was established with a vision of “an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the global arena”. Notable objectives of the AU include to promote peace, security, and stability on the continent; promote democratic principles and institutions, popular participation and good governance; promote sustainable development at the economic, social and cultural levels. Additionally, the AU seeks to promote cooperation in all fields of human activity to raise the living standards of African peoples, achieve greater unity and solidarity between African countries and the people and accelerate the political and socio-economic integration of the continent.

Localization of the key AU (then OAU) objectives has led to the establishment, strengthening and aligning operations of the Regional Communities (RECs) blocks. Key RECs include the East African Community (EAC); the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS); the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD); and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The establishment of these RECs was (and still remains) a significant part of Africa’s development strategy. Across the aspirations of the AU and the named RECs is the need to put the African communities and citizens at the center of their operations. This implies ensuring that all policies, programmes and interventions focus on providing for and safeguarding their needs including security, services and environment of unfettered interactions. This has, however, been hindered by several factors including inadequate spaces for participation and contribution to the affairs of the institutions.
From the above, this Policy Brief forms part of the ACRL—R/P, and its partners, to pursue collective conversation with the EAC with the purpose of strengthening policies and systems to enable increased participation toward realization of social cohesion and regional integration. This is done by outlining the current problems and challenges emerging from the lack of effective community participation, providing rationale for such participation especially through the role of coordinated religious leaders actions. Further, the Brief also brings out the need for involving religious youth, women and People Living with Disabilities (PLWDs). In addition, the Brief seeks to identify and discuss policy options and generates policy recommendations the could contribute to addressing the existing challenges and gaps.

2.0 Introduction

The African Council for Religious Leaders—Religions for Peace (ACRL—R/P) is a continental coalition of different faith organizations, faith communities and religious leaders in the continent whose work is to advance peace, sustainable development and shared well-being. Established in 2002 in Nairobi, Kenya and inaugurated in Abuja, Nigeria in 2003, the Council consists of and realizes its mandate of championing the sustainable peace and development through its 26 National Inter-Religious Councils (NIRCs) and four sub-regional platforms. The Council mobilizes, engages with and accompanies religious leaders, communities and institutions across the continent through strategic and innovative means of seeking peaceful changes in areas that are grappling with conflicts and social turbulence. As has been observed, ‘Africa’s regionalization processes are closely intertwined with its changing patterns of global insertion’ thus making approaches toward strengthening RECs more strategic. Among other means applied toward this include development, implementation and influencing policies and programmes through advocacy. In this, the ACRL—R/P engages and works with various institutions (including state and interstate organs as duty bearers) and CSOs and other community stakeholders (as right holders) to build spaces for conversations and creation and implementation of people-centric policies and systems. It is on this basis that the ACRL—R/P continues to engage the RECs and the AU through respective relevant organs. For the purpose of this Policy Paper, the ACRL—R/P is seeking to continue its engagement with the EAC in advancing a creative and sustainable policy approach that would enable religious leaders and communities including youth, women and PLWDs contribute to and participate in the Community’s aspirations for the region. The Council believes that if the religious leaders are given a space and empowered to understand their role in the Community’s regional agenda, they can use their convening and influential power to build ownership and momentum among their communities toward a socially cohesive region.

ACRL—R/P has noted that the Community, in its establishment, acknowledges that, among other things, it requires strong political will, strong participation of private sector and civil society. To this, ACRL—R/P views that mobilization and engagement of religious leaders, institutions and communities is also a potential parameter
in enhancing a wholistic realization of the Community’s aspirations. This argument is premised on the question around religious leaders’ power of influence among their congregations and can also promote alternative mechanisms through which contentious issues can be addressed. The existing opportunities at the EAC which could be utilized for engagement include various Protocols (especially the Peace and Security), sectors, committees, etc. The sectors that can be engaged include:

a) **Gender, Community Development and Civil Society** - Adopting common approaches towards the disadvantaged and marginalized groups, including women, children, the youth, the elderly and persons with disabilities aimed at employment creation, poverty alleviation and improving working conditions;

b) **Environment & Natural Resources** - Managing and sustaining the eco-systems and natural resources of the Community by preventing, arresting and reversing the effects of environmental degradation as well as management and the sustainable utilization of natural resources;

c) **Agriculture & Food Security** - Enhancing food security and rational agricultural and livestock within the Community through harmonization of agricultural policies as well as joint programmes for efficient and effective production; and

d) **Peace and Security** - Fostering and maintaining a conducive atmosphere that is a pre-requisite to social and economic development through co-operation and consultations on issues pertaining to peace and security of the Partner States.

In looking at the operations of the different structures, it is encouraging to note that the current semi-autonomous institutions has helped the Community implement its mandate and continue to play critical role in advancing harmonization of specific policies. These continue to create environment of cooperation.

Arising from the above – the AU and EAC aspirations, the ACRL—R/P mandate; and the existing opportunities for action and collaboration - this Policy Brief seeks to identify key regional problems and policy options that can be pursued. It also generates strategic specific actions that EAC could consider in ensuring that the developed regional agenda for peace and development engage and promote communities’ participation and ownership.

### 3.0 Problem Statement

Advancing social cohesion across the region between and among communities is one key factor to a successful regional integration. However, this keeps facing various hurdles, among others, the concept of nationalism and protectionism. In addition to and strengthening this argument, it has been noted that, among the challenges for the cross-countries integration such as regional and continental unity is the question of the readiness of people in the different countries of the continent to embrace continental unity by shaking off the cobwebs of
nationalism in favor of supranational unity\textsuperscript{vi}. This could be attributed to lack of awareness among the citizenry and the opportunities that exist in such arrangements and from which they could draw immense benefits. This is a complete paradox in view that cross-regional and multi-ethnic mobilization and joint actions were strong instruments at the struggle for independence.

In the region, to some extent, some citizens continue viewing the regional integration agenda and institutions such as the EAC as parameters of disempowerment. This, and other perception, could be attributed to the lack of or inadequate spaces for advancing dialogue and empowerment toward changing their perception and enhancing their participation. This is irrespective of the understanding that the EAC can only be effective if, its development (and implementation) is people-driven and people-centered and that the peoples of East Africa should play an active role in determining the progress of the (new) Community.\textsuperscript{viii}

While the EAC various processes and protocols are designed to encourage and advance the role of private sector to fully participate and shape the processes of economic integration\textsuperscript{viii} the regional body still lacks a strong widely acceptable framework that would contribute to social mobilization and building of social infrastructure capable of ensuring that the principles of operations realize the people-centric approach. If the devised, the mechanism would champion mobilizing, engaging and equipping communities to advance realization of sectoral aspirations. These sectors include environment and natural resources; peace & security; and gender and community development. Participation of communities, both at the local, national and regional levels, is crucial in these sectors’ functions. However, due to lack of knowledge, capacity and structure of engagements, they have not been able to make tangible contribution. The EAC has also acknowledged this as a problem. For example, the EAC identifies various challenges facing the agriculture sector to include policy level (inadequate participation of local communities); Nature related factors (Degradation of natural resources); and cross cutting (inadequate social infrastructure).\textsuperscript{ix}

In its November 2020 Political Democratization discourse to the EAC, one of the pitfalls identified by the ACRL—R/P is the increasing gap between citizenry involvement in and transparent management of resources especially the extractives. This, the ACRL—R/P states that if not addressed and citizenry fail to feel involved, it is possible that the region may continue experiencing heightened local radicalization toward violent extremism\textsuperscript{x}.

For the EAC to meet its aspirations based on the theme \textit{One People One Destiny}, it is imperative that communities within the region not only become aware of the institution but are equipped and given spaces to contribute to its affairs. Religious leaders through the established institution, the Inter-Religious Council for East Africa (IRCEA), is poised to collaborate with the EAC and other stakeholders in defining and advancing both policies and practical actions to ensure effective structured communities’ involvement.
4.0 Rationale for Religious Leaders’ Engagement

Religious leaders and institutions are always present in the communities and their engagements in and response to various societal issues have proved vital. For example, it has been observed that building meaningful, trusted relationships with faith leaders have contributed in responses to HIV and AIDS, Ebola and Zika\textsuperscript{xii}. The ACRL—RfP believes that this is because of their power of influence and moral authority in the communities embedded in their vital social access and spiritual capital. Currently, religious leaders and communities, along with many other local actors, such as community health workers, are already at the forefront of the COVID-19 response, identifying and supporting the most vulnerable children and young people in their communities\textsuperscript{xii}.

Looking at the way they are organized, religious leaders already have infrastructures that could be put into use in mobilization and proactive engagement with and ensuring communities take actions on social issues. Bringing together religious leaders who can interpret their religion/faith in a way that brings people together can be effective in addressing and finding solution to the ‘impact of social issues’\textsuperscript{xiii}.

From the above, it is possible to indicate that when religious leaders and communities are mobilized and engaged through an institutional framework, it is possible to overcome social and other sectarian barriers facing the regional integration process. This could be achieved through sensitization and empowering of communities across the region. This need of scaling up efforts on awareness and sensitization of the citizens about the EAC integration\textsuperscript{xiv} has been reiterated at various platforms.

The ACRL—RfP has fully-established national structures of NIRCs in all the seven member states of the EAC. These then become platforms for local and national community engagements for deeper understanding, appreciation and participation in matters of EAC. Galvanizing these national community issues and aspirations, then the ACRL—RfP would engage religious leaders through the regional body EAIRC in engagement with the EAC through respective offices, programmes or teams. In this, it is anticipated that the policies and programmes that will emanate from these discourse will be reflective of and contribute to the well-being of the people in the region.

5.0 Policy Options and Analysis

Based on the outlined rationale for the establishment of the EAC against the existing hurdles and challenges enumerated, this Brief focuses on identifying policy options for the EAC secretariat and related agencies and institutions. These policy options include:

a) Consideration of undertaking comprehensive mapping of how religious leaders and their communities can contribute to the realization of EAC integration aspirations. These could provide data and evidence for a structured engagement with the religious leaders and communities;
b) Development of agenda in ensuring that issues of social relations and actions take center stage in the programming and policies at the EAC. This could be viewed as a measure in enhancing citizenry participation and contribution to the affairs of the Community both at the regional and local levels. From the discussion above, it is visibly clear that while the EAC has achieved great milestones in other sectors, it is yet to achieve people’s full acceptance and contribution;

c) Adjustment/review of protocols to reflect the centrality and importance of community mobilization and engagements. For example, while the Peace and Security Protocol acknowledges the importance of peace and social aspects to be critical in the realization of regional stability, it does not have any component on how the citizens, through their social infrastructures could be engaged as critical component toward realization of ‘people-centric’ agenda;

d) As part of its agenda on conflict prevention, management and resolution, the Peace and Security Protocol stands to benefit in integrating and defining the place of religious leaders and communities. Based on the already highlighted power of influence and moral authority, religious leaders are strongly positioned to offer alternative spaces for prevention and management of conflicts and hence provide mechanisms through which political engagements for peaceful settlements of disputes can be pursued; and

e) Strengthening areas of communities’ engagement in different sectors, committees and processes through existing institutions. It is worthy to note that the EAC secretariat has diverse sectors through which it pursues realization of its objectives. Further, it is of great understanding that these sectors have contributed immeasurably in the lives of communities across the region. In this policy option, it is advisable that mechanisms be developed to facilitate structured issues-based participation of communities in the lives of these sectors.

6.0 Policy Recommendations

The following are key recommendations from the ACRL—RfP based on the analysis above:

6.1 For EAC

a) Consider developing a protocol on working with the religious leaders and institutions to anchor in and advance processes and objectives of community mobilization toward realization of social cohesion and peace in the region; or

b) Consider reviewing the Peace and Security Protocol to integrate social cohesion and peacebuilding and identify and affirm the role of religious leaders and communities;
c) Develop an instrument that defines the engagement and participation of religious leaders and communities in the affairs of different sectors and programmes;

d) Identify and consider the EAIRC as an instrument for consultation to advise on various policy issues and engagement of different agenda toward the Community aspirations; and

e) Consider having EAIRC as a platform to facilitate conflict prevention, transformation or management and a platform through which post-conflict reconstruction agenda can be advanced

6.2 The EAIRC and NIRC}s

a) Design mechanisms for increasing awareness and sensitization of citizens on the issues, objectives and their potential roles and benefits from the EAC and its integration agenda;

b) Create platforms for engaging with and obtaining ideas from communities/citizens for the onward submission to the EAC Secretariat; and

c) Provide links to, convene and/or facilitate sessions with other sectors and approaches such as the CSOs and business and private sectors at the national levels to build synergies and common agenda

7.0 Conclusions

It is with a desire to contribute to an environment of peace, social cohesion and responsible communities’ participation that the ACRL—R/P views the proposed agenda of structured engagement with religious leaders and communities in the affairs of the regional integration. Through this, it is envisaged that continuous collaboration based on policy framework would advance sustainable actions that are poised to prevent and mitigate challenges and gaps that still face the Community
Endnotes


ii Preamble of the Treaty for The Establishment of the East African Community (As amended on 14th December, 2006 and 20th August, 2007)


iv Preamble of the Treaty for The Establishment of the East African Community (As amended on 14th December, 2006 and 20th August, 2007)

v the Civil Aviation Safety and Security Oversight Agency (CASSOA); the East African Competition Authority (EACA); the East African Development Bank (EADB); the East African Health Research Commission (EAHRC); the East African Kiswahili Commission (EACK); the East African Science and Technology Commission (EASTECO); the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA); the Lake Victoria Basin Commission (LVBC); and the Lake Victoria Fisheries Organization (LVFO).


viii Ibid. pg 5

ix East African Community, *Constraints and challenges of the EAC Agriculture sector*, found in <https://www.eac.int/agriculture/constraints-and-challenges> retrieved on 12 June 2021

x African Council of Religious Leaders – Religions for Peace (ACRL—RfP), *Political Democratization of East Africa: Progress and Pitfalls (1990-2020)*, done courtesy of the Regional Peace Program, East African Community Secretariat Mission [the presentation of this paper to the EAC was not possible due to eruption of COVID-19 and restrictions that followed]


