

How does the press view the AU?

The following is a critique of the AU as seen through the eyes of the press. The intention is to explore an outside view of this political entity in order to analyze the architecture of the OAU and the AU from the perspective of the onlooker and critic. At first glance these opinions appear more varied than that of the AU of itself. Overall the following broad categories of discussion have been identified:

- The comparison of the AU to the OAU
- The relevance of the AU
- The impact of the AU

Similar to our previous discussions we will look at themes within the writings of journalists and editors and the like. These will be discussed in terms of the broad categories identified.



Top: simplified images of the three broad categories of press discussion

Comparison of the AU to the OAU

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter the African union has replaced the Organization of African Unity (OAU), a 39-year-old 53-nation body created for the purposes of promoting African unity and eradication of all forms of colonialism on the continent. (Rubin 2001:63)

This discussion looks at the comparison made in the media between the OAU and the AU. Earnest Harsh (2002) writing for the journal African Recovery, asks the crucial question as asked by many :

“Will the union be any better than the old OAU in representing the interest of ordinary Africans, following the repeated failures of African governments and regional organizations to realize the early aspirations for unity, social progress and peoples participation?”

In our assessment of this, let us consider the character and traits of the OAU by referring to the writings of his fellow journalists. Robert I Rotberg of the Christian Science Monitor wrote an article entitled ‘Africa’s ambitions’, in which he reports:

“Africa certainly needed to replace the OAU, which African leaders have kept weak and woefully under funded since the 1960’s...The OAU never did more than posture rhetorically and hold meaningless conferences.”



Rotberg (2002) worries that if the AU perpetuates OAU behavior of consenting dictatorial regimes and perpetuating grand economic objectives, it will be nothing more than a renamed OAU. Other journalists have reported on the AU's differentiated approach. One of these reports is found in Pambazuka News, a internet based newsgroup that looks at progressive social change on the continent.
(www.pambazuka.org , cited 29 May 2007)

"There has been more formal and informal spaces opened up for engagement by different stakeholders in Africa, whether African or international NGOs and CSOs, business sector, think-tanks, etc. Gone are the days when the summit used to be dominated by largely special invitation, 'special guests chosen at the whims and caprices of the bureaucrats of the OAU, who were generally more disposed to welcoming all types of foreigners, but fearful of 'trouble makers' from Africa!" (Raheem, 2007)

The report goes on to inform us that:

"Almost anyone who wants to engage with the AU has some access and opportunity to do so...on the other hand the lack of engagements by broader social movements and popular forces is due to the continuing perception that the AU is essentially a leaders forum... since many of them have gripes against their national leaders they are suspicious of the PAN African credentials of these leaders." (Raheem, 2007)

However, the same reporter who held these positive views of the AU is found criticizing the AU's behavior in addressing issues of African unity, in an article written four months later:

"They are projecting this vision without the involvement of the broad masses of African peoples. They do not even involve their own parliaments yet alone ordinary citizens. It is only the presidency and foreign affairs ministers playing guessing games at this level

Raheem (2007b)

This reinforces Rotberg's concern over the perpetuation of OAU behavior. From our discussion, we realize the following:

- The OAU is viewed by the print media as a bureaucratic talk shop for despots
- The media is skeptical over whether the AU like the OAU can successfully solve Africa's problems.



- Although the AU is more open to interaction perception still exists that it is essentially a leaders forum

The relevance of the AU in the eyes of the press

The second category identified is the relevance of the AU. Raheem (2007) states:

"Since the AU was launched, there has been concerted efforts on the part of Africa's leaders to make it relevant despite many criticisms and doubts both by Africans and outsiders. One indication of this is the large number of leaders who attend these summits and the increasing openness even on the most controversial issues."

He states further that foreigners tend to better grasp the significance of African institutions such as the AU since African citizens are too consumed by alienation from their governments.

Harsh (2002) believes that the AU is relevant in terms of globalization. In the current and future competitive global environments, Africa's smaller poorer countries will find it hard to attract foreign investment. As such greater unity on a regional level could enhance competitive leverage on an international scale. He quotes Ethiopian Prime Minister Melez Zenawi saying that at best the AU can provide a more conducive

environment for the continental advancement of peace, democracy, human rights and sound economic policies. There should be no expectation on the AU to solve the problems of Africa's states.

Allafrica.com sees the relevance of the AU as being more than that embodied in political structures. It is of the opinion that the AU should open up the way for substantial investment on Africa's infrastructure, and facilitation of intra-African trade and investment. (www.allafrica.com , cited 21 May 2007)

The Star places this responsibility on the shoulders of African governments and not on the AU, stating that these governments should realize that this prime responsibility is their own. This includes the implementation of good economic policies, maintenance of fair systems of governance and encouraging investment. (www.thestar.co.za , cited 29 May 2007)

Despite this, the opinion of the AU's irrelevance widely exists amongst members of civil society. "Civil society has limited confidence in the willingness of Africa's Governments to live up to their commitments, as such the creation of the AU has generated widespread cynicism." Perhaps this is best embodied in the simple words of Mr. Thomas Tchumi, a Cameroonian youth organization administrator, "I don't believe in the African Union." Harsh (2002)



In conclusion, we see the existence of the following opinions:

- There is widespread cynicism over the creation of the AU.
- Africa's leaders understand the AU, as a platform for creating a more conducive environment for social, political and economic development
- Civil society expects the AU to move beyond the political sphere and into paving the way for concrete infrastructural and economic development.

The impact of the AU in the eyes of the press

The impact of the AU on Africa has been measured against a number of different criteria, as identified in the previous discussion. We see different ideas on the roles and responsibilities of the AU from civil society and governments respectively.

"The new African Union promises to be more than a sum of its parts...the union has been created specifically to promote democracy, to pressure autocratic regimes to reform, to end interstate conflicts and to foster economic progress. It also intends to create a military force capable of intervening with African countries to create peace" (Rotberg: 2002)

In the extract, Rotberg portrays the AU's role as being the promoter of political and economic reform, as well as possessing a military body capable of intervening in Africa's conflict zones.

However, this is not the only role documented in the media. The Mail & Guardian reported the agenda of the June 2007 AU heads of states conference, held in Ghana. The agenda had one item of discussion, namely, 'The United States of Africa'. The purpose of this meeting was to workshop ways of working toward economic and political integration of the continent, which has sparked an uproar from civil society. (AFP: 2007a)

If we look deeper into the issue of political and economic integration of the continent, we see that the criticism against the ideal of a 'United States of Africa' is primarily because of two reasons. Firstly the confusion over the precise role the AU is intends to play in Africa, and secondly the lack of consultation with civil society over issues of Africa's integration. (Zvomoya:2007)

The debate surrounding African integration is the primary source of internal division. In Raheem's article entitled , 'Don't let them shave our heads from behind' (2007b) he reports the extent of internal division within the AU, identifying three distinct factions:



- The first led by Libyan president Muammar Gaddafi, who are calling for an immediate declaration of a union under a single continental government.
- The second group who argue for eventual integration through strengthening existing regional bodies, having no clear leader.
- The third led by South African president Thabo Mbeki, who argue for consolidation under the existing AU and not a Pan-African government.

With such divisions within the AU and a lack of a coherent picture regarding the exact roles of the AU, it is understandable why journalist seem unclear over the projected impacts the AU is to have on the lives of ordinary Africans.

The following is a summary of this discussion:

- Due to either a lack of transparency or a single voice projecting from the AU, the potential impact of the AU is either misunderstood or measured according to different opinions of the purpose of the political body.
- Internal division within the AU over it's vision and purpose make it hard to read from a journalistic and civil society point of view.
- Various projected impacts of the AU have been reported



Top Left: President Qaddafi of Libya (www.africa-union.org, cited 12 April 2007)
 Top right: President of the OAU, President Obasanjo of Nigeria (www.africa-union.org, cited 12 April 2007)



How does the press view the AU?

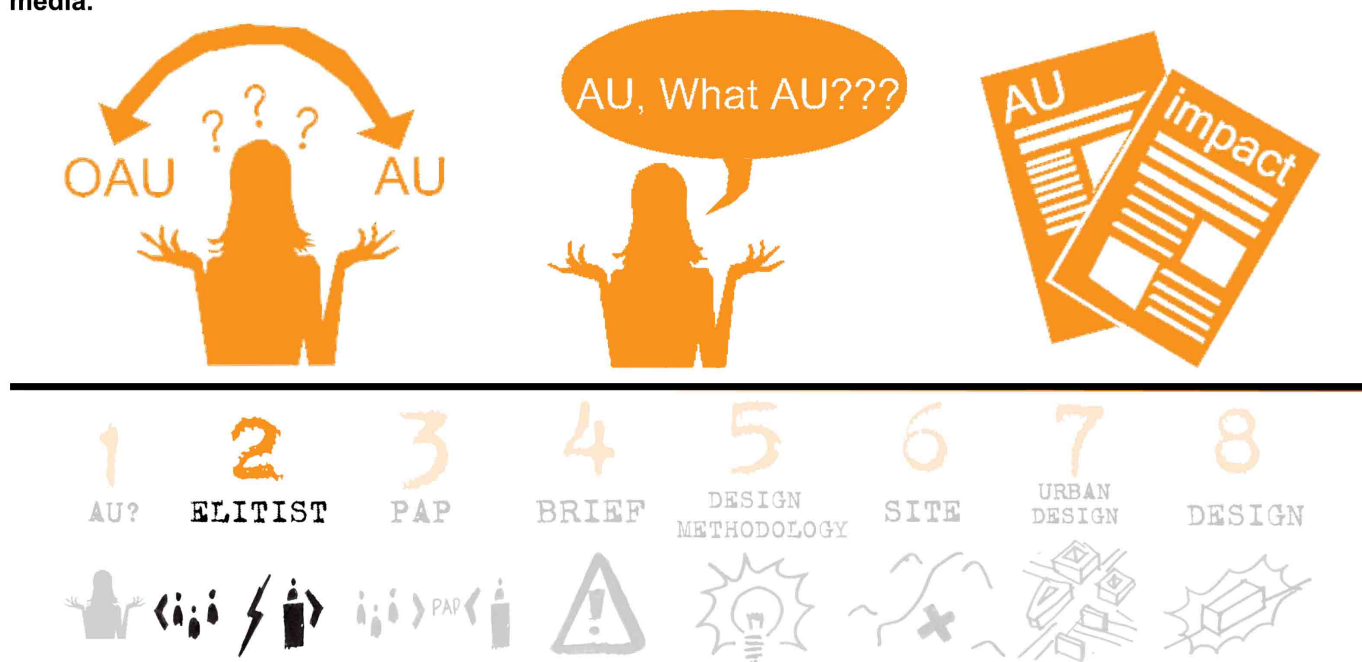
The following three categories of press opinion have been discussed:

- Comparison of the AU to the OAU
- Relevance of the AU in the eyes of the press
- Impact of the AU in the eyes of the press

In considering the conclusions of each of these categories:

We realize that the overall perspective of the AU is of cynicism. This is primarily due to the difficulty of understanding the role and purposes of the AU, due to either lack of transparency or ineffectiveness of the body in effectively communicating this to the public in a coherent way. AU internal divisions and civil society having different expectations to that of governments of the AU, complicate matters further.

As such, we conclude that the AU is viewed as a top-down institution from the perspective of the print media.



How do ordinary people view the AU?

The third perspective that is to be explored is the AU as seen through the eyes of ordinary people. The intention behind exploring this is to gain an understanding of the organization from an outside perspective, which will assist in analyzing the buildings of the OAU & AU from the perspective of an onlooker.

Two sources have been used in compilation of this perspective. The first being a comparative study conducted by the Center for International & Comparative Politics, which explored the perspectives of the African elite in relation to the AU and NEPAD, across seven African countries. The second source is a citation of an online opinion poll conducted by BBC News on the eve of the AU's inception



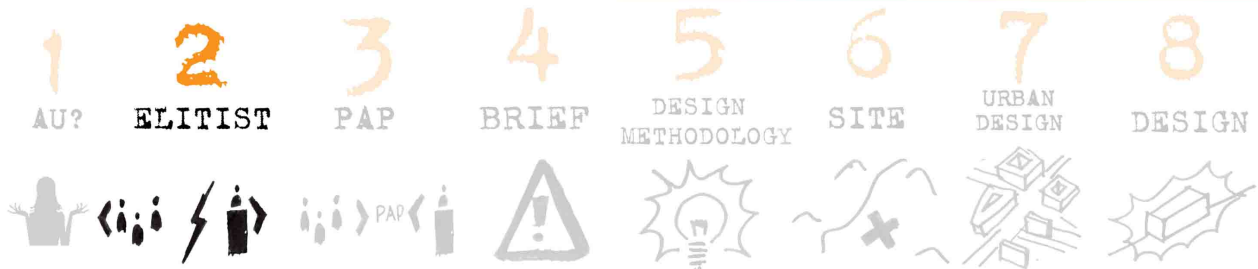
The comparative study

Although the primary interest of this discussion is the viewpoint of the AU as seen through the eyes of ordinary people, preliminary fieldwork found that not many people were aware of the AU, and as such have difficulty in forming opinions on the organization. This study confirms the above citing two other sources:

- A survey conducted by Makinor in April/May 2002 in South Africa. This survey found an extremely low awareness of NEPAD, a policy initiative of the AU, with 80% of respondents possessing no knowledge of the strategy.
- A study conducted by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa in which half of the respondents had not heard of or did not know enough to form an opinion on the AU (Koetze & Steyn:43)

This study suggested that the elite are likely to be more informed about the AU and NEPAD, and as such this study was based on this demographic and conducted across seven African nations.

The following graphs show a fairly high familiarity with the AU and an above average knowledge of the AU across the seven nations. Although the elite are a minority, it is important to contextualize their role within Africa where they play an important role. Page & Shapiro (1983) note



that when the elite uphold a clear picture on what needs to be done, the public tend to see events from that point of view, with the most politically attentive members of civil society more likely to adopt the elite position.

Figure 12: Familiarity with the AU

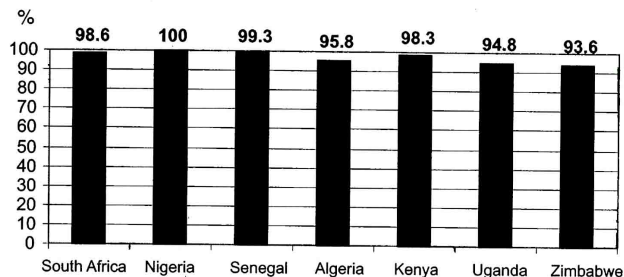
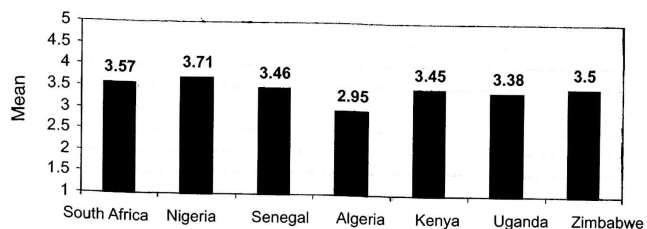


Figure 14: Knowledge of the AU (means – 5-point scale)



Above: Graphs showing awareness and knowledge of AU amongst Africa's elite (Koetze & Steyn: 44,45) .

From this, for the purposes of our discussion we conclude the following:

- At a grassroots level ,ordinary citizens have either not heard or don't possess enough knowledge to form an opinion on the AU
- Amongst the elite there is a high awareness and an above average knowledge of the AU
- Although authors suggest a linkage between elite positions and subsequent views of ordinary citizens ,the two surveys cited suggest that this link may either not be valid ,or not be valid currently.

BBC News online opinion poll

The second source that has been considered in this discussion is a citation of an online opinion poll conducted by BBC News, which allowed people to post comments in response to the title: "African Union: can it do better than the OAU?"

Of the 39 comments posted by people from across the world, only 6 were positive in stating that the AU should be given a chance to pursue its mandate.85% of comments were negative stating that the AU and African countries were bound to fail.



If we analyze these comments certain themes are apparent. These are:

- Positive: - AU is the first step in addressing Africa's problems
- Negative: - The AU & OAU are the same in that they both detract from solving Africa's problems
 - The AU is bound to fail because it doesn't address issues on the ground.
 - African leadership is continuing to fail Africa's peoples



We will quote these opinions and thereafter draw conclusions from it.

Positive Opinions: African Union is the first step

"An 'organization', that is the OAU, does not connote an economic, political and defense union with strong legislative authority...United Africa will rise, divided it will fall further behind"

Nitin Gadia, USA

"Maybe I am just being hopeful, but Africa needs extraordinary things to happen. Until someone comes up with a better idea, I strongly believe all Africans should give this endeavor their full support"

Geo, USA

"We, Africans should stop dreaming and start working together as one nation. As we all know the continent is on the verge of devastation. We have no time to debate the Union, it is the only way forward and we need to get it started"

Shakur Gerassu, USA

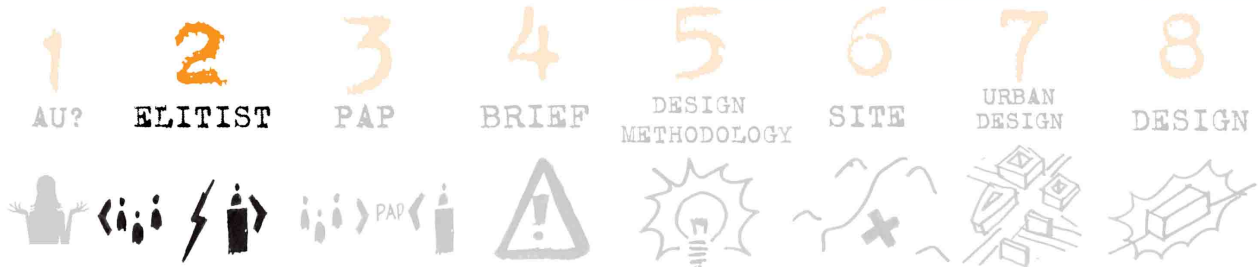
"It is disappointing to read a majority of comments from Africans in the Diaspora with negative impressions about the newly coined African Union, Lets give Salim Ahmed Salim and progressive Africans a chance to embark on this new development"

Hope, Canada

Negative Opinions: OAU & AU are the same

"I don't see much change here—the African Union is just a new name the 'toothless' Organization of African Unity"

Nathan y Mkamanga, Malawian in the USA



"The African Union is actually a new name for the OAU, the OAU has been a toothless dog and giving it a new name won't make it strong. What we need is a forum where problems affecting Africa are discussed and addressed. We don't need an African union to be united"

Lillian Kimeto, Kenya

"I think the union should be called Africa's Robbers Union, robbing from the poor to feed the corrupt few tin pot dictators who are killing the African dream"

Mr. W, Zambia

"I am personally not against changing the name but will that help African leaders from overstaying their time in office, or will it prevent them from enriching their pockets at the expense of the masses?"

Peter Emusa, Canada

"Isn't this typical of the 'leaders' of my continent. Simply rename a pathetic and purposeless institution and this equals to economic empowerment"

UG, Nigeria

Negative Opinions: The AU is bound to fail

"As long as the evils of corruption, power hunger, violence and other vices continue to bedevil many an African state, the African Union will remain a pure theoretical concept."

Joojo Namuuda, Zambian in the UK

"Just look at the suffering of all the African people and countries. Coups, famine, starvation etc.-the list is endless. What has the OAU done for them? Nothing. I wish the AU the very best although I can't really see it achieving anything!"

James Anoom, England

"Whatever the name, be it OAU, African Union, United States of Africa or United in hunger, underdevelopment & disease, cannot change the reality of our situation. Our real problems are: corruption, hunger and disease, underdevelopment, wars & rebellions, lack of education, lack of commitment, selfishness etc."

Anonymous

