

## THE AU AS A PEACEBUILDER IN THE GAMBIA

// Why pragmatic peacebuilding is good, but not enough

The African Union's (AU) peacebuilding efforts in The Gambia reflect the organization's growing responsibility in this field. From 2018 to 2020, the AU deployed the African Union Technical Support Team to The Gambia (AUTSTG). Drawing on interviews and document and media analyses in 2020/2021, this PRIF Spotlight examines this novel mode of engagement and points out an emerging dilemma: The AUTSTG was successful as a technical and pragmatic intervention. However, this only came at the expense of supporting long-term political processes and thus undermined the AU's holistic peacebuilding policy.



Three ballot drums in a polling station in Serrekunda, Gambia, Nov. 30, 2016, on the eve of the presidential elections. Photo: © picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS | Jerome Delay.

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In December 2016, presidential elections in The Gambia had an unexpected result with opposition candidate Adama Barrow winning against incumbent President Yahya Jammeh, who had ruled the country for 22 years. After having initially accepted his electoral defeat, a week later, Yahya Jammeh announced he would never accept the election results. The outcome was a severe post-election crisis that could only be defused by concerted multilateral diplomatic efforts by the United Nations (UN), African Union (AU), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Eventually, these efforts were backed by ECOWAS threaten-

ing to use force and preparing a military intervention, the ECOWAS Mission to The Gambia (ECOMIG), at the border that then entered Gambian territory. Ultimately, an agreement was reached, paving the way for a democratic transition of power.

After Jammeh had left the country and Barrow had been sworn in as his successor, the country embarked on a long-term reform journey rooted in the National Development Plan and geared toward overcoming the legacy of 20 years of autocratic rule. This process was supported, among others, by the African Union Technical Support Team to The Gambia (AUTSTG) that the AU mandated to support the Gambian reform process from 2018 until 2020. On the one hand, the AUTSTG has been praised for being a "pragmatic initiative"<sup>1</sup> and "a success story"<sup>2</sup> in the implementation of regional peacebuilding policies. On the other, The Gambia has seen its draft constitution rejected and other reform processes delayed. How can these two perspectives be reconciled?

Taking an evaluative perspective, I examine the characteristics of the AU as a peacebuilder in the case of The Gambia. In so doing, I show that the added value of the AU's intervention in The Gambia, namely being shaped by African experiences, tailored to and embedded in the Gambian context, is simultaneously one of its greatest challenges: a technical and pragmatic intervention neglects the wider political process that actually constitutes the essence of peacebuilding.

### The AU as a Peacebuilder

Since the creation of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) in 2002, the continental orga-

### The PCR Policy<sup>4</sup>...

// ... offers a **holistic** understanding of peacebuilding: “while its activities are integrated, and many must be pursued simultaneously, they are envisaged in the emergency (short-term), transition (medium-term) and development (long-term) phases. The scope of these activities encompasses six indicative elements, namely: security; humanitarian/emergency assistance; political governance and transition; socioeconomic reconstruction and development; human rights, justice and reconciliation; and women and gender.” (4f.)

// ... aims at **tailor-made** solutions: “flexible template that can be adapted” (1)

// ... reflects the AU’s aim of being **people centered** with human security at its heart “[...] that is a multi-dimensional notion of security that goes beyond the traditional notion of state security” (5) and is understood as “the reconstitution and social, political, economic and physical transformation of the affected state and society” (3)

// ... is rooted in “the **experience** gained [...] on the continent” (vii) and “draws on lessons learned from past African reconstruction efforts.” (4)

nization has had an ever-growing toolbox to respond to conflict situations in Africa at its disposal. With the APSA, the AU is able to cover the full conflict cycle, including instruments for prevention, mediation, (robust) conflict management, and post-conflict peacebuilding. For the latter, in 2006, the AU adopted the Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development (PCR) Policy.<sup>3</sup> This policy contains not only the traditional military security components, but also refers to other key pillars, such as governance, transitional justice, and human rights. Lauded for its comprehensive approach, the policy was only further operationalized after its ten-year anniversary with the development of a Results-Based Framework. Overall, there is still a lack of knowledge as to how the PCR Policy is implemented in practice.

So far, there are two types of AU peacebuilding interventions. The first of these has been the prevalent mode of engagement: the operation of standing liaison offices in several post-conflict settings,<sup>5</sup> such as Madagascar or the Central African Republic, which, for example, implement small-scale quick impact projects. The second is a rather new mode of engagement that “is different from how the African Union has worked before”<sup>6</sup>: assessment missions identify the needs and priorities of post-conflict societies and in some cases, a mission team is subsequently deployed, comprising seconded staff from member states as well as hired consultants, both directly placed in national institutions. The inter-

vention in The Gambia was the first time this second type of AU peacebuilding was used.

### AU Peacebuilding in The Gambia:

#### The AUTSTG on the Ground

The mode of engagement the AU chose for the intervention in The Gambia was innovative and unique in the AU context. A year after the 2016 election, and following an assessment mission, the AU Peace and Security Council mandated the AUTSTG intervention based on the AU PCR Policy. The AUTSTG was a team of technical experts tasked to support the Gambian authorities in their reform processes working toward “stabilizing the country.”<sup>7</sup> From the initial ten mandated experts, only eight were eventually deployed. Of these eight experts, six were military staff seconded from AU member states (Nigeria, South Africa, Senegal, Ghana, Uganda, and Sierra Leone) and two were civilian staff from Uganda and Ghana recruited directly by the AU Commission. Together, this team of experts brought vast experience from other African post-conflict contexts.

The AUTSTG arrived in The Gambia with a packed but context-specific mandate that drew heavily on Gambian ownership. Requested by the new president Adama Barrow and aligned with the National Development Plan, the AUTSTG’s tasks contained three of the six PCR pillars, namely support in the fields of security, human rights/transitional justice, and rule of law. Although the close alignment of the mandate with national priorities seemed like business-as-usual, it is rare that an intervention is as tailor-made as in The Gambia.

Throughout the mission, the deployed experts were directly embedded in Gambian institutions, working from within government bodies such as the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Justice. Consequently, they were close to ongoing processes and easily accessible for advice and exchange. Simple solutions, such as sharing offices have the potential to facilitate cooperation and coordination on the ground.

Yet, despite the promising setup, the AUTSTG’s results only partly meet the objectives stated in its mandate and policy. In a nutshell, the expert team was forced to focus on providing technical advice on policy development in their specific areas of expertise to the detriment of more comprehensive peacebuilding activities, such as outreach to the wider Gambian community.

However, this approach of providing technical advice also had its positive effects. Specifically, it resulted in AU norms being translated into national policies in the most technical way imaginable, namely with AUTSTG experts actually writing AU norms into national draft policy documents onsite. When drafting the Gambian Transitional Justice Policy, for example, national stakeholders benefitted from such technical advice. Although the AU transitional justice expert was not deployed, one of

the two other civilian experts supported the process by commenting on early drafts of the policy and ensured AU norms entered into the final documents. While this incremental approach of engaging with policymaking in their member states, thereby diffusing regional norms is a new technique for the AU, it became obvious that this approach would ultimately not be able to ensure policy implementation.

#### **Looking Back: An Assessment of the AUTSTG**

Assessing the AUTSTG's work, interviewees repeatedly stated that the experts were welcomed and trusted and were perceived as legitimate actors due to their experience of post-conflict situations in their home countries in the past:

*"She [the human rights expert] has a lot of experience of the process and she was very open and also engaging"*

*"The difference is that people feel [that] these are people that understand our situation because maybe they come from countries that have had a similar experience [...]. I think that's one of their comparative advantages"<sup>8</sup>*

Despite this positive evaluation, due to limited human resources, the AUTSTG had to be selective rather than holistic in choosing their activities when implementing the mandate, coming at the detriment of people-centered activities. Focusing instead on policy formulation and development, the AUTSTG delivered a pared-down version of its comprehensive PCRDR Policy. Outreach activities and citizen engagement remained rare. One consequence of this was that the intervention predominantly focused on elites, particularly government ministries, instead of fulfilling the promise stated in the PCRDR Policy that it would be "people-centered".

After all, by virtue of its composition, the AUTSTG put military topics first, thus neglecting the holistic

approach that was in fact stipulated in the PCRDR Policy. The majority of AUTSTG experts were military officials seconded from AU member states. The AU relies on the member states' willingness and capacity to second staff at their own cost. However, the AU is also dependent on the decision of AU members as to whether to send military or civilian staff. The dominance of military staff and the non-deployment of the planned civilian experts on transitional justice and civil-military cooperation resulted in a focus on traditional security topics, such as rightsizing of the army or ammunition management. As a result, this meant a lack of addressing other key pillars of the PCRDR Policy, such as the constitutional review process and transitional justice.

In addition, a lack of political will on all levels made the effectiveness of the AU intervention highly dependent on the individual commitment of AUTSTG experts and chance collaborations with national stakeholders. Once the impasse had ended, declining political support on the regional level impeded the political process accompanying the military component of the African intervention. Further, unclear strategic direction on the side of the Gambian government meant that the experts had to rely on their own inner compass and motivation. Consequently, the outcome of the AUTSTG intervention was shaped less by long-term strategic foresight and more by implementation realities that only allowed for incremental progress.

#### **AU Peacebuilding: An Emerging Dilemma?**

Overall, the AU strengthened its role as a peacebuilder on the continent by providing a tailored peacebuilding solution to The Gambia. This African intervention was praised for its innovative character, not only due to the trust placed by Gambians in the AUTSTG but also



Banjul residents welcome the troops of the ECOWAS deployed all over the country, as part of efforts to bring security and allow President Barrow, who is currently in the Senegalese capital to return and take charge of the country, on January 23, 2017. Photo: ©picture alliance / Aliou Mbaye/MAXPPP/dpa | Aliou Mbaye.



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because of its pragmatic focus on policy formulation and the commitment of individual experts which characterized the specific successes of this intervention. At the same time, these are also the greatest challenges the AUTSTG faced. First, having operated predominantly on a technical level, the expert team was not backed by political support. Second, the AUTSTG delivered pragmatic, short-term results in contrast to the otherwise holistic PCRD Policy. As a result, the AU did not sustain the AUTSTG's achievements and lost sight of the long-term requirements of peacebuilding in The Gambia.

While the AU intervention in The Gambia cannot be translated into a blueprint for other contexts, the observations made about the Gambian case suggest that we might be seeing an emerging trend toward pragmatic peacebuilding<sup>9</sup> operating on a technical level. If so, this trend would favor an African peacebuilding practice that is based on leveraging African expertise from similar post-conflict settings. However, on the downside, pragmatic peacebuilding tends to build long-term structures without sustaining them. One example is the dominant focus on policy formulation to the detriment of ensuring policy implementation in the long term. A second is the tendency to neglect the needs of societies in post-conflict contexts for the sake of quick interventions that are popular and sellable among AU member states.

### 15 Years of AU Peacebuilding: Moving Forward

Against this empirical background, there seems to be a certain tension in AU peacebuilding between a pragmat-

ic and technical approach, on one hand, and comprehensive and politically backed peacebuilding efforts, on the other. Both aspects are part of the AU's PCRD Policy, and are not as mutually exclusive as it might at first appear. For the AU to play an even more enhanced role in peace and security on the continent, it will need to add the value of a pragmatic approach that is also sustained by political support for peacebuilding processes. A first step was undoubtedly the recent merger of the AU's political affairs and peace and security departments into one to create the Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS) department<sup>10</sup>. Together with the AU's first ever PCRD Awareness Week and the launch of the AU Centre for PCRD in Cairo, Egypt, in late 2021, the window of opportunity seems to have been reopened for strengthening political support from the side of the AU. The AU member states, in turn, might like to take this opportunity to verbalize their needs for support in post-conflict situations.

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