Introduction

In accordance with its mandate to advocate for international support for Africa’s priorities across the nexus of peace, security and development, the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (OSAA) is organizing an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on “Strengthening Subregional Conflict Prevention Capabilities in Africa”. The meeting, which will be organized in partnership with the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA), will take place from 7th to 9th November 2018, in Libreville, Gabon.

The meeting builds on two interrelated activities undertaken by OSAA this year. The first activity was a high-level meeting on “Enhancing the Effectiveness of Preventive Diplomacy and Mediation in Africa”, which was co-organized with the Mediation Support Unit (MSU) of the United Nations Department of Political Affairs and the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) on 12-13 July 2018 in Durban, South Africa. This meeting identified areas for enhancing cooperation and coordination between the United Nations, the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities and Regional Mechanisms (RECs/RMs) in undertaking early preventive action, supporting national and local mediators, increasing inclusivity in mediation processes, and mitigating and preventing resource-based conflicts. The second activity was an assessment study of the Conflict Prevention Capabilities of the RECs, conducted from 14 May to 8 August 2018, to map their existing institutional capacities on conflict prevention, covering both operational and structural dimensions.

Background and rationale

African regional and subregional organizations as well as African civil society organizations are increasingly working to prevent conflicts, address the root causes and sustain peace, including by developing their respective institutional capacities on conflict prevention. Furthermore, mindful of the fact that Member States have the primary and ultimate responsibility for conflict prevention, these actors are also bolstering their efforts to assist countries in preventing conflicts and sustaining peace, on the basis of subsidiarity, comparative advantage and complementarity.
In this context, there has also been increasing focus on the African RECs as key actors in conflict prevention, given their role as building blocks of the African Union and their proximity to Member States. With the support of various partners, the RECs have over the years invested in efforts that aim to build and strengthen their institutional capacity to prevent conflicts and provide support to their respective Member States in this regard. They have made tangible progress in developing and implementing key policies and tools for conflict prevention, such as early warning, preventive diplomacy, mediation and good offices. Likewise, they have equally been implementing a range of programmes to address structural causes of conflicts, such as on inclusive governance, rule of law, security sector reform, electoral assistance, gender equality, women and youth empowerment, climate change and resource management and capacity building for national institutions.

However, in spite of these efforts, the RECs still face several challenges. For instance, their conflict prevention efforts are still largely reactive rather than proactive, as these tend to focus more on existing conflicts or crises rather than potential conflicts. Besides, there are disparities among the RECs in terms of their institutional capacities to prevent conflicts or to provide support to Member States. This disparity is a direct result of the differences in their respective geopolitical context as well as institutional mandates and resources. Moreover, the disparity exists not only among RECs but also within each REC due to skewed allocation of resources amongst its internal organs, which undermines the REC’s overall institutional capacity to address root causes of conflict in a holistic manner.

The RECs are keen to address these challenges and enhance their institutional conflict prevention capabilities so as to advance their peace, security, development and regional integration mandates, in line with key recent global and continental frameworks, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Goal 16), the United Nations Secretary-General’s Vision on Prevention, the African Union’s Agenda 2063, the APSA Roadmap (2016-2020), the African Union Master Roadmap on Silencing the Guns by 2020 and the African Union Continental Structural Conflict Prevention Framework. They have themselves repeatedly highlighted the need to further strengthen their institutional conflict prevention capacity on several occasions, notably at the informal OSAA-RECs consultative meetings on the margins of the African Union Summits in Addis Ababa, and the annual RECs’ briefing that OSAA convenes on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly in New York.

In response, OSAA undertook an assessment study to map the existing institutional capacities of the RECs on conflict prevention, to provide a baseline for understanding their exact challenges, gaps and needs, as well as potential entry points and areas for support. The study was conducted from May to August 2018 in seven of the eight RECs**, in the context of implementation of the two joint UN-AU frameworks for Enhanced Partnership in Peace and Security and Implementation of Agenda 2063 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The RECs that participated in study were: the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), 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 study had the following four objectives: (i) to identify the structural causes of conflict in each region through a geopolitical review; (ii) to map existing institutional mandates, strategies, policies, partnerships and resources for conflict prevention; (iii)
to identify current institutional challenges and capacity gaps; and (iv) to identify entry points and opportunities for strengthening institutional capacities of the RECs on conflict prevention. The methodology of the study included one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions with key officials of the RECs at their respective headquarters, as well as a desk review of documents provided by both the RECs and other sources.

As an output, the study generated a report that is intended to both contribute to providing valuable information on the overall institutional capacity of the RECs on conflict prevention, and to serve as a useful reference or baseline document for various actors seeking to support the strengthening of the capacities of the RECs in this regard. The main expected outcome of the study is to facilitate the mobilization of concrete support for the RECs on conflict prevention.

Purpose and objectives of the EGM

As a follow-up, this EGM will serve as a validation meeting on the report of the aforementioned study. It will provide the RECs a space to discuss and validate its findings and recommendations, as well as identify key areas where support is required in the immediate, short to medium term. In addition, the meeting will bring together some potential partners, including from African regional organizations, civil society organizations, development partners and the United Nations system to exchange with the RECs on the findings and recommendations of the report, with a view to identifying possible areas where they can collaborate with, and support the RECs.

Specific objectives of the EGM

The specific objectives of the EGM are namely to:

I. Validate the findings and recommendations contained in the report on the conflict prevention capabilities of the RECs;

II. Identify priority areas for support in the immediate, short and medium term;

III. Promote cross-fertilization and institutional exchange, through the sharing of lessons learned and best practices with respect to capacity building of the RECs on conflict prevention; and

IV. Explore opportunities for mutual assistance and joint action in mobilizing support for the conflict prevention programmes and initiatives of the RECs.

Expected outcomes

The EGM has two expected outcomes: (i) a validated report of the study, and (ii) agreed priority areas for support that would later feed into the development of a project proposal to facilitate the mobilization of resources for the RECs. The EGM will also agree on the modalities for preparing the said project proposal.
Participants

The EGM will be held at the director level. In this respect, participants will include Directors and Heads of Conflict Prevention Departments, Divisions or Units in the RECs and other related areas such as Gender, Governance, Youth and Natural Resource Management. Representatives of regional organizations such as the African Union Commission, the African Capacity Building Foundation, the African Peer Review Mechanism and the African Development Bank, as well as civil society organizations and development partners will also be invited.

Structure of the EGM

The EGM will take place over three days. Day One is structured as a RECs-only meeting to review and validate the report of the study and agree on key areas for support. Days Two and Three will be open to all participants. The meeting will include presentations by the consultant and heads of delegations of the RECs, group exercises and interactive discussions.