



Organization of African Unity

Address by Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim
Secretary General of the Organization of African Unity
On Regional Integration in Africa: From the OAU to the African Union.
UNESCO Headquarters, Paris,
23rd October 2000

Mr. Chairman,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am pleased to be here this evening and to share with you my views on the subject of Regional Integration in Africa. I appreciate the initiative taken by the organizers to arrange for this forum and I also appreciate the interest demonstrated by your presence here. I am grateful for the invitation extended to me by the Director General of UNESCO and for the opportunity provided:

The subject I have been asked to address is among the priority agenda of African development, and it preoccupies the thinking of African leaders today. Certainly, it is an issue of central importance among the activities of the Organization of African Unity. It constitutes one of the overarching programmes that continue to be given a significant share of resources and attention by the Organization.

To some extent, the topical character of the subject renders it with a certain degree of complexity in terms of discussion, especially by the manner in which the organizers have formulated the rejoinder of the theme, which reads "...from the OAU to the African Union." This transformation,

as you know, has been evolving very rapidly in the last 13 months and, at present, attention is devoted to creating the political and juridical framework for the historic transformation. Apart from giving a narrative briefing of measures being taken and progress achieved, the incisive deductions that one may be expected to make, may remain preliminary at this point in time.

Any reflection about the aspirations, conception and progress of integration in Africa needs to be situated within the shared vision of the Continent's development as it has been articulated with remarkable consistency during different periods. Indeed, it is encouraging to note that during the past four decades, African countries have been led by a diverse range of leaders and governments. However, none of these - whether civilian or military, republican or monarchical, democratic or autocratic - has at any point expressed reservation or divergence on the principle of Continental cooperation and integration. All of them, without exception have demonstrated increased determination and vociferous public declarations on the issue of regional cooperation and integration even before the subject has gained currency in the global development discourse.

As many of you in this room may know, in their rigorous discussions on the path for Continental unity during the 1950s and early 60s, the Founding Fathers of the Organization of African Unity had a very clear position about the importance and necessity of cooperation, integration and unity among African countries. Indeed, the very creation of the OAU and the determination to maintain and consolidate its activities, is a clear demonstration of that resolve.

The concepts of cooperation and unity run throughout the OAU Charter of 1963 thus reflecting its importance in the mindset of our leaders as far back as that. The manner in which the desire for integration was articulated transcended, even at that time, the general expression of a political will, to the concrete delineation of the sectoral dimensions of such an endeavour. The commitment is clearly reiterated in Article II, of the OAU Charter, where the Purposes of the Organization are enunciated and whose central thrust is a determination to foster unity, solidarity and cooperation among the African peoples.

I am consciously and deliberately dwelling on this point of history simply to assert the fact that the quest for integration in Africa did not start at Sirte, Libya, in September 1999. Rather, the project of creating the conditions and structures for integration has a history of close to 40 years. Owing to our particular circumstances, during that period, we have been able to overcome the obtaining challenges, clarify the vision, and gain gradual and progressive steps in the attainment of our ultimate objective. Sirte, therefore was a critical point in galvanizing our collective effort and provided a significant catalyst towards this goal.

It is important to underscore that the notion of cooperation and unity for Africa, is not only the building of appropriate institutions, though these are critical. It also encompasses the sharing of purpose as well as a committed disposition to collective action. It is in this respect that the major focus of the first two decades of independence was to fight against colonialism and apartheid. Despite the general poverty and the underdeveloped nature of basic infrastructure in our countries, we were able

to deploy our unity and cooperation and to successfully free the whole continent. Mandela's liberation from prison and the subsequent emergence of a democratic, non-racial, united South Africa represents a successful culmination of these efforts.

It is pertinent to point out that while the struggle against colonialism and institutionalized racism was being intensified and gradually being won, the challenge for addressing the issue of Continental socio-economic transformation was becoming more urgent. This was reinforced by the economic decline experienced from the late 1970s and the realization of the non-viability of externally dependent strategies of development. It is within this context that African leaders enunciated the Lagos Plan of Action in 1980 that elaborated on a path for economic integration in the Continent by using Regional Economic Communities as the building blocs. This overall framework was subsequently embedded into the Abuja Treaty on the establishment of the African Economic Community that was signed in June 1991.

The Abuja Treaty provides for six stages of variable duration in which the African Economic Community is to be established. It provided for a transitional period of 40 years, from the entry into force of the Treaty - May 1994. The first phase of 5 years came to an end last year 1999. The focus of activities during that period was on the strengthening of Regional Economic Communities such as the Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Union of the Maghreb (UMA), the

Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD) and the other organizations such as the The Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) and the East African Community (EAC). Similarly, for each of the five subsequent stages, the Treaty provides for specific activities which are to be implemented at both the regional and Continental levels.

The modalities set out in the Treaty for Establishing the AEC are aimed at the co-ordination, harmonisation and integration of the activities and programmes of the RECs into the continental Community. Thus the programmes which are drawn up and implemented by the RECs at the regional level, are an integral part of the effort to promote continental integration through the establishment of the AEC.

African States have adopted the Abuja Treaty and the Treaties of the Regional Economic Communities, as blueprints for achieving sustainable and rapid development through regional integration. In doing so, we have come to realise that economic power of nations has become by far the most dominant factor in the relevance and importance of countries in the emerging global order. This is why even the major world powers are continuously striving to widen and strengthen the base of their economic strength, through a conscious effort to expand their economic space and market size.

In the case of Africa, a continent which has been marginalized for too long a time in the world economy, integration is no longer a matter of convenience, but an indispensable strategy for survival and development. The pace of globalization, coupled with the sweeping wave of economic

liberalization, and with the imbalances in the distribution of the benefits in favour of the strong economies, has increased the urgency for all our countries to join hands to expand, fortify, solidify and integrate their economic space, to serve as a platform for take off and effective integration into the global economy. Regional integration therefore at the very least constitutes Africa's response to globalization, and an instrument to reverse the trend towards marginalization of the continent.

Developments within the Regional Economic Communities and the progress achieved toward integration are quite encouraging. In a few days' time, I will be participating in Lusaka, Zambia in the launching of the Free Trade Area for the Eastern and Southern African countries within the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA).

As for the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), its Trade Protocol came into effect on 1 September 2000. This has paved the way for detailed negotiations on issues of tariff and non-tariff barriers, rules of origin, trade and customs documentation and procedures. In the SADC region, also programmes on sectoral co-ordination in the priority sectors are high on the implementation agenda.

In the West African region, some members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have launched a fast track implementation of the trade liberalization programme of that Community, and there is a decision to introduce a single ECOWAS currency in the year 2004. There are also the ECOWAS gas and the ECO-AIR projects involving several Member States and the private sector. So far, the

ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons remains the only such legal document in the continent, which enables the citizens visa-free entry into all the ECOWAS Member States. This is a very significant step forward in our quest for regional integration. It should be reinforced and as far as possible emulated by the other regions of our Continent. For, in the final analysis, integration is about people and not just goods and services

As part of our effort to ensure effective involvement and participation of the people in the integration process, we have mounted, in co-operation with URTNA, programmes on popularisation of the AEC. These programmes are geared to informing the people and increasing awareness of the objectives and strategies of regional integration.

The various Regional Economic Communities have also put in place programmes to support the integration process, such as trade and customs facilitation and related services.

It cannot be disputed that some advances have been made in the quest to foster closer integration in the Continent. However, as we approached the end of the 1990s, the obstacles confronting our endeavour were quite immense. Our Continent was being threatened increasingly into marginalization by its failure to cope with the demands of globalization. It was becoming evident that even stronger economies, with their advanced technological base, were finding it necessary to consolidate their level of economic integration as a means of gaining from the opportunities of this historic phenomenon.

Within the Continent, the people of Africa were confronted with multiple setbacks of incessant conflicts with the attendant consequence of deaths, disruption, security, instability, and considerable destruction; they were also suffering from the trauma of the HIV-AIDS pandemic and other killer diseases, and experiencing frequent natural disasters.

We have realized that the magnitude of the external and internal challenges could be handled only by consolidating our unity. The status quo and the nascent structures of integration could not sustain the impending threat. Thus, in September 1999, the 4th Extraordinary Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the OAU meeting was convened in Sirte, in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. The Sirte Declaration was proclaimed. Through this historic commitment, Africa's leaders agreed to establish an African Union, in conformity with the ultimate objectives of the Charter of the OAU and the provisions of the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community. In addition, the Heads of State and Government decided to accelerate the process of implementing the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community, through the shortening of the implementation periods, establishing of all the institutions provided for the Abuja Treaty, including the creation of the Pan-African Parliament.

In Lome, Togo, on 11th July, the OAU Assembly of Heads of State and Government adopted the Constitutive Act of the African Union. As of today, 30 Member States have signed the Act and by the end of December I expect several more to have also signed. The Lome Summit also took a decision on the convening of a Meeting of African Parliamentarians in order

9/10

to consider the Protocol on the establishment of the Pan-African Parliament. That meeting is scheduled for next month in Pretoria, South Africa.

The African Union, is first and foremost, an expression of a determination to elevate the framework of Continental integration. The agreement that was reached in Sirte and later Lome, after a frank and rigorous exchange of views among our leaders demonstrated a desire to come up with an even stronger instrument that can enable our people and Government overcome the challenges confronting them.

The African Union is structured to overcome the institutional limitation of the OAU as it has historically evolved with a stronger orientation to pursuing the political agenda, and the African Economic Community with a stronger disposition to the economic agenda. By fusing and streamlining the two institutions and in the process developing a coherently integrated agenda, the African Union becomes a stronger body.

The strength of the African Union is enhanced by its institutional structure which endows it with a number statutory bodies for policy making, consultations and operations that are built into it. In addition to the Assembly and Executive Council, it will have: a Pan-African Parliament; a Court of Justice; a Commission (replacing the Secretariat); a Permanent Representatives Committee; Specialized Technical Committees; an Economic, Social and Cultural Council; and Financial Institutions.

619
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It is important to mention also that the enhanced strength of the Union is expected to be derived from a closer involvement of the people, through the Pan-African Parliament and a strategic mobilization reminiscent of the liberation struggle.

The logic and relevance of closer economic cooperation, integration and the launching of the African Union is self evident. The trend all over the world is towards larger markets and larger entities. The experience right here in Europe testify to that . Yet, while the urgency of Africa achieving that goal is beyond controversy. It could be naïve to under-estimate the obstacles and enormous challenges that lie ahead.

For the immediate course in Africa, we need to ensure that the signing and ratification process of the Constituent Act is expedited. At the same time, while the goal of Pan-Africanism has always inspired millions of our people both within the Continent and in the diaspora, we have to sensitize them all generally on the implications and sacrifices entailed. We need also to ensure harmony of approach within our ranks, between those who believe that the Constitutive Act is too little and those who consider it to be too ambitious.

I remain confident that despite the daunting challenges and the various tasks that we have set for ourselves, we shall overcome. This is because our resolve remains firm and our determination to accomplish the tasks is strong.

I thank you all.