

# From rhetoric to action

## Delivering for young women in Africa

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### Key points

**1** There can be no democratic governance and transformative development in Africa without the full and meaningful inclusion and participation of young women, who constitute a large size of the women and youth population in Africa.

**2** The legal frameworks and norms that exist, while necessary, are insufficient to protect young women's rights and must be complemented by a change in attitude, cultural and institutional reforms, and greater political commitment towards the plight of young women in Africa.

**3** Young Women often fall through the cracks of women and youth movements as well as programs meant to safeguard the rights of both groups. The proposed African Governance Architecture (AGA) Women's Engagement and the Youth in Peacebuilding programmes present an opportunity for the AU to move beyond paying lip service to the agenda for young women on the continent.

### Summary

In a world that is highly patriarchal and ageist, young African women between the ages of 15 and 35 find themselves in a conundrum, frequently facing a double burden brought about by their gender and age, and falling through the cracks of government programmes. While the need to empower young women is often couched in an argument of numbers, this policy brief argues that through enhanced action and deliberate policy choices to promote their development and equality, young women will be better placed to make meaningful contributions to Africa's aspirations as laid out in Agenda 2063 and the Global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE increasingly become the focus of various programmes and policies because of their growing numbers and their energy, creativity and innovation. They constitute a valuable and untapped resource that could become a formidable driving force in the continent's political, social, cultural and economic transformation.<sup>1</sup> While much is said about the strength of their numbers and the need to harness this 'demographic dividend' for economic growth and poverty reduction,<sup>2</sup> too little is done to meaningfully engage young people in their own right as citizens and as a critical group in decision-making processes.

### Why focus on young women?

Furthermore, the discourse, policies, programmes and practices that concern the youth tend to portray them negatively as threats to stability,<sup>3</sup> maintaining that they are either radicalised or are potential recruits for violent extremist groups. This is a narrow perspective on the diversity, potential and reality

of youth that precludes their positive attributes. Young women in particular represent a sizeable constituency that has fallen through the gaps that exist between the body of norms, policies and programmatic responses on children's rights, youth rights and women's rights. Much of the discourse on youth has been male-oriented, while that on women's rights has tended to focus on older women and the girl-child. Specific attention should now be given to the needs, realities and aspirations of young women.

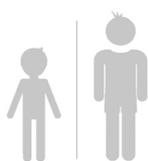
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Patriarchal structures and attitudes that translate into gender inequality; gender-biased education; discrimination, marginalisation or outright exclusion from socio-economic and political institutions; the denial of rights; unequal access to or limitations on the control or ownership of resources; and harmful customs and practices are some of the factors that continue to undermine progress with regard to improved human development outcomes in the continent.<sup>4</sup>

In Africa and, indeed, in large parts of the world, young women experience multiple layers of discrimination in their daily lives. Not only are they discriminated against on the basis of socially constructed gender roles, but also on the grounds of age, which compounds their marginalisation. Typically, they are relegated to the bottom of power structures within the family, the community and society. This limits their ability to influence decisions that affect their lives and make them especially vulnerable to violence and abuse.<sup>5</sup>

With global and continental calls for sustainable development that ensures inclusivity and a narrowing of inequalities, it has become a moral obligation for African leaders to reaffirm their commitment to upholding the rights of young women. The AU made significant progress in promoting gender empowerment and equality by declaring 2015 as the Year of Women's Empowerment and Development towards Africa's Agenda 2063. This was taken further with 2016 being declared the African Year of Human Rights with Particular Focus on the Rights of Women. By dedicating these two years to women, Africa's leadership began taking concrete steps to prioritise gender equality and women's empowerment.

Building on these commitments, the 2016 AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government held in Kigali, Rwanda, urged members to adopt a human rights-based approach to gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment.<sup>6</sup> The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights added impetus by launching a critical campaign to decriminalise abortion in Africa in support of the implementation of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol).<sup>7</sup>



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DISCUSSIONS ON WOMEN'S  
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Complementing the pursuit of human rights and women's rights in 2015 and 2016, the AU leadership decided to focus the spotlight on young people. Thus the AU theme for 2017 was identified as 'Harnessing the demographic dividend through investments in youth'. This theme presents an opportunity to consolidate the efforts made over the last few years, particularly if a human rights-based rather than an instrumental approach is adopted. As women's rights activists assert; '[Young] women should not only be valued for their usefulness in enhancing economic growth and productivity. Instead of contributing to gender equality, women's empowerment and women's human rights, instrumentalisation actually diminishes it. Achieving the full realisation of women's human rights and gender equality must be an end in itself.'<sup>8</sup> The challenge remains to ensure that young women feature prominently in discourse, programmes and policies that may emerge within the realm of both women's rights and youth empowerment.

The challenge for African leaders is to move young women's rights beyond the sphere of empty promises

Despite lofty political pronouncements and the dedication of AU themes to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in Africa, young women continue to face a range of difficulties that prevent them from enjoying equal rights and opportunities. The challenge for African leaders and decision-makers is to move young women's rights beyond the sphere of empty promises. An enabling environment must be created by providing adequate resources and enforcement mechanisms.<sup>9</sup> The realisation of promises made in the normative frameworks will translate to real and transformative change in the lives of young women and girls, enabling them to achieve their dreams and take their rightful place in building a prosperous, peaceful and secure Africa.<sup>10</sup> It will also go a long way to realising Africa's Agenda 2063 and the Global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The choice to focus on young women for illustration is both strategic and deliberate as it is aligned to the focus of the African Union in 2015, 2016 and 2017 to promote the rights of women and youth in Africa. It also

demonstrates comparable and replicable opportunities, which if seized upon by Africa's leadership and AU Member States, could unleash the full potential of this critical constituency in shaping a prosperous, peaceful and secure future for the continent. Furthermore, it could pave the way for a paradigm shift from rhetoric to meaningful empowerment of women and youth.

## Breaking down barriers to participation by young women

### From norm setting to norm implementation

The AU has developed and adopted a very large and progressive body of legal instruments, norms, mechanisms and institutions to promote and protect human rights, gender equality and women's rights on the continent.<sup>11</sup> Among these, two of the most relevant normative frameworks affecting young women are the Maputo Protocol and the African Youth Charter. While the Maputo Protocol lays out provisions that comprehensively address the whole range of women's rights and fills in the gaps of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights,<sup>12</sup> the African Youth Charter outlines the rights of young people, rightly differentiating between young men and women and dedicating an article specifically to the rights of girls and young women.<sup>13</sup> While the Maputo Protocol does not contain a specific article pertaining to young women, even though the rights of elderly women, widows, women with disabilities and women in distress are covered by specific articles, there are numerous provisions within the Protocol that speak to the issues faced by young women.

The significance and potential of the Maputo Protocol lies in its attempt to reinvigorate the African Charter's commitment to women's equality by adding rights that were missing from the Charter and clarifying governmental obligations on women's rights. The Protocol reaffirms reproductive choice and autonomy as a key human right. It also addresses a number of globally accepted norms, such as a woman's right to abortion when pregnancy results from sexual assault, rape or incest; when continuation of the pregnancy endangers the life or health of the mother; and where grave foetal defects are life-threatening.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, it prohibits harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, which has ravaged the lives of countless young women and girls in Africa over the years.

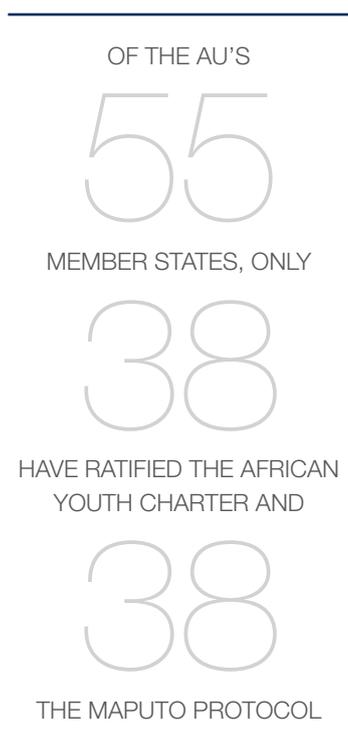
The realisation of the full potential of the African Youth Charter and the Maputo Protocol remains a challenge on the continent owing to the low levels of ratification; the limited capacity of State Parties to implement the provisions; the low levels of awareness among citizens; and the lack of interest in issues affecting young people generally and young women in particular.<sup>15</sup> Of the AU's 55 member states, only 38 have ratified the African Youth Charter and 38 the Maputo Protocol, even though member states committed themselves to achieving full ratification of the latter policy by 2015 and domestication by 2020.<sup>16</sup> Apart from this, member states have lodged a number of reservations.<sup>17</sup> Harmonisation of the provisions of the Protocol with domestic laws is also still to be achieved in several member states is yet to be achieved as a result of inadequate political will, among other obstacles.<sup>18</sup>

Gender equality is featured as a critical component for deepening democratic governance and consolidating peace and development

The African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), which was adopted in 2007 and entered into force in 2012 after receiving the requisite 15<sup>th</sup> ratification, is an explicit commitment by AU member states to nurture and consolidate democratic and participatory governance in Africa. ACDEG is an important normative framework that defines universal suffrage as an inalienable right of the people. It reiterates the universality, interdependence and indivisibility of rights and freedoms, and calls for the elimination of all forms of discrimination. Gender equality is featured as a critical component for deepening democratic governance and consolidating peace and development in Africa.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, ACDEG recognises the crucial role of women in development and the strengthening of democracy, and promotes gender equality in both public and private institutions. It calls for conditions to be put in place to ensure gender parity and the full and active participation of women in decision-making at all levels.<sup>20</sup> But with only 28 having ratified ACDEG to date, there is an urgent need for accelerated ratification and domestication, as well as universal implementation and reporting to strengthen democratic governance on the continent.<sup>21</sup>

In Article 36, ACDEG exhorts AU member states to implement the Declaration on Democracy, Political and Corporate Governance of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), as well as the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), which together commit member states to critical and measurable standards, codes and programmes that have the intention of spurring women's and young women's equality on the continent.

The APRM, adopted in 2003, is an innovative monitoring mechanism in Africa that has the potential of making a positive impact on gender equality. It is a voluntary self-assessment mechanism that measures member states' progress with regard to development and governance. However, with the



exception of thematic areas on democracy and good political governance (Chapter 3) and broad-based sustainable and socio-economic development (Chapter 6), questions on gender equality and women's rights do not feature throughout the questionnaire.<sup>22</sup> However, gender should be a cross-cutting issue and feature in all thematic areas. Even in those areas where gender and women's rights feature, reference is only made to young persons (children and youth, women and girl-children). There is no specific mention of young women.

The APRM questionnaire would thus benefit greatly from the inclusion of gender equality and women's rights beyond the frame of legal instruments. It should address the structural factors that continue to keep women and particularly young women subjugated on the continent. This should include gender-based violence in all its forms and manifestations (beyond assault and sexual violence), as this is a telling indicator of the levels of empowerment or lack thereof. The result is that gender equality and women's rights have not received greater focus and scrutiny within the APRM.<sup>23</sup>

### Implementing promises to empower young women requires adequate resourcing, management and execution

Even though the APRM requires member states to adopt policies, standards and practices, and to share experience and best practice that could promote gender equality in Africa, there is little adherence to the two-to-four-year review timetable and poor implementation of the National Programme of Actions. This is attributed to a lack of political will, a lack of resources and failure by the APRM Secretariat to develop effective monitoring and evaluation tools.<sup>24</sup> The fact that only 34 AU member states have so far acceded to the APRM Memorandum of Understanding demonstrates the low political commitment to the APRM ideals.

Despite the existence of elaborate legal instruments, norms and mechanisms for the protection and promotion of the rights of African women and youth, and even though young women form a sizeable percentage of women as a whole and represent the majority of youth in Africa, they still face numerous barriers to the full

realisation of their rights. Among others, these include exclusion from economic and financial systems that perpetuate discrimination; obstruction to participation in political and public life; a lack of access to education; gender-biased education; poor retention in schools; sexual and gender-based violence; harmful traditional and cultural practices; and exclusion from conflict prevention, management and resolution, including mediation and peace-building processes.<sup>25</sup>

While the initiatives to establish human rights norms on the continent are commendable, the lack of political will and action to ensure their full implementation and realisation continues to undermine African people in general and young women in particular. Concrete efforts should be made to ensure that the human rights of young women do not stop at norm-setting, but become an everyday reality. The AU and its institutions and mechanisms will only be relevant to young people if the Union consults meaningfully with the youth. Greater responsiveness in this regard will require the AU to see itself as a union of all Africans, rather than just being an association of leaders. It needs to evolve into a continental forum for African citizens, both young and old. This will require the AU to ensure that Africa's people, including young women, are at the centre of everything it does, especially its pursuit of the noble goals of Agenda 2063.

### Resourcing and accountability

Implementation of the promises to empower young women on the continent often lag behind due to inadequate resources and accountability measures. These could be solved through adequate resourcing, gender-responsive budget allocations, and planning, management and execution. Where necessary, this should include budgetary shifts across various ministries in member states to achieve a greater impact. This will require the continent to embrace a coherent and coordinated approach, especially across ministries and sectors in member states, to deliver not only for women and youth generally, but for young women in particular. 'Joined-up government recognises that many complex public policy issues are cross-cutting in nature and do not fit neatly into departmental boundaries or portfolios.'<sup>26</sup> For example, in the case of education, its quality at the primary level determines outcomes at secondary and tertiary levels. Furthermore, the ability to guarantee

retention and completion beyond enrolment requires the collaboration of various ministries. The joined-up approach ensures a harmonised and coordinated response that breaks the silos and promotes a holistic rather than simplistic approach to upholding the rights of young women.

Beyond the joined-up approach, deliberate measures must be put in place by member states to create an enabling environment that promotes entrepreneurship and private-sector activity that is not only gender-responsive but also pays particular attention to the needs and aspirations of young women. The focus should be on scaling up poverty eradication measures and expanding young women's capabilities and choices through social and economic protection policies and programmes. These would include introducing cash transfer programmes targeted at young women, thereby helping them to obtain skills, financing, credit facilities and productive assets for development. Overall, member states should endeavour to shift socio-economic protection measures targeted at young women from being perceived as expenses to cost-effective investments in human development.<sup>27</sup>

The joined-up approach ensures a harmonised and coordinated response that breaks the silos and promotes a holistic approach to upholding rights

Beyond financing, a robust monitoring and reporting framework that uses participatory approaches and involves young women in the process is critical for tracking progress, ensuring that gaps are identified and filled, and targets are met. The Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA) makes provision for reporting to member states. Both Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030 present a golden opportunity for harmonised reporting and assessment of progress with regard to the implementation of the various instruments and frameworks that make provisions for the rights of young women. A streamlined reporting and assessment system could ease the burden on member states, who often complain of the numerous instruments and mechanisms that require extensive reporting within short timeframes.

In 2015, the AU introduced the African Gender Scorecard to measure national progress towards gender equality indicators in social, economic and political dimensions.<sup>28</sup> While this scorecard is useful in providing gender-specific and synthesised information on key issues aligned to the theme of the year, it could be strengthened by the provision of quality data disaggregated not only by gender but also by age. This would enable specific gaps faced by women of varying ages to be identified and make it possible to influence programming or budgeting accordingly. Rather than do this as one off practice to accommodate the theme of 2017, the African Gender Scorecard and the requirement for age-disaggregated data should remain an annual constant, irrespective of the focus of the year in question. This would ensure that the specific needs, conditions and realities of young women who constitute a



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critical community within the umbrella of women, are not disregarded.

### **(Re) forming shared values**

The AU has embraced, at least in principle, Shared Values as a means of catalysing Africa's integration agenda through values and principles that give rise to and lay the foundations for the numerous legal instruments, norms, decisions and declarations that have been adopted by the Union. While the normative frameworks espouse the Shared Values of equality, justice, dignity and fairness, many of the attitudes and practices across the continent are quite disparate to these values. Retrogressive attitudes continue to undermine the realisation of Africa's progressive Shared Values. This begs the question of whether these values are in fact shared.

Over the years it has become clear that although legal frameworks and norms are necessary, on their own they are insufficient to protect and fulfil young women's rights. It has also become apparent that the standards will only be adhered to if changes in attitude fall together with cultural and institutional reforms, and greater political commitments to addressing the plight of young women in Africa. The cultural practices that contribute to human rights violations need to be unlearned and reshaped.

There is a need to cultivate a sense of collective responsibility to address continental and global challenges

Academic regulations, curricula and learning materials from primary to tertiary levels should be revised to ensure that they are rights-based, promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, remove gender stereotypes and biases, and inculcate a culture of respect, equity, fairness and justice regardless of gender and identity. Educators must work alongside parents, communities and religious leaders to ensure that these values resonate in the various spaces and spheres of influence. At the same time, there should be cross-cultural exchanges among young people and their organisations so that values of respect and tolerance for diversity are promoted. Gender studies should be encouraged in tertiary institutions

to deepen understanding and permit the analysis of gender inequality and the structural factors that perpetuate injustices.<sup>29</sup>

It is imperative to reframe the existing Shared Values to cultivate broad understanding and consensus-building in Africa on the nature of the values and the need for their implementation.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, since the Shared Values espoused are more than a set of normative goals, but an embodiment of commitments to certain practices, procedures and institutional relationships between and within member states, there is a need to cultivate a sense of collective responsibility to address contemporary continental and global challenges, including those being faced by young women. It is also important for member states to take positive measures to mainstream beneficial African cultural practices into national, regional and continental frameworks. This will promote respect for human rights and shared values, and bring about synergies between custodians of culture and proponents of human rights norms and values.

### **Connecting the dots**

In addition to the barriers that hinder the full realisation of young women's economic, social and political rights, emerging political and policy challenges compound the marginalisation of young women. Violent extremism and radicalisation are increasingly becoming serious concerns in relation to the stability of the continent. While this development has long been viewed as a problem that concerns men only, emerging data indicates that young women are increasingly being recruited into radical groups.<sup>31</sup> Bombings in Nigeria in recent years, and as recently as December 2016, have featured female suicide bombers.<sup>32</sup> There is no doubt that the discourse on radicalisation, the countering of violent extremism and counter-terrorism affects practice. However, the discourse on and the adoption of programmes to counter violent extremism and radicalisation are yet to take on board the role of young women. The apparent disconnect has been aptly posited by Sureya Roble:

The misconception that women are not involved in extremism or radicalisation has often shaped counter-terrorism strategies, excluding women from decision-making process and their significant under-representation among law

enforcement officers and security meetings ... [however] women have frequently been victims of both terrorist attacks and counter-terrorism measures.<sup>33</sup>

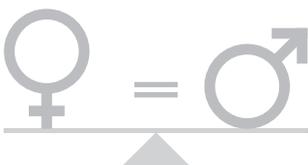
The proposed Women Engagement Programme emerging from the AU's African Governance Architecture (AGA), as well as the Youth in Peacebuilding Initiative that brings together the AUC Youth Division, the Peace and Security Division, and is led by the Department of Political Affairs both present numerous possibilities for significantly enhancing the role of young women in governance and peace processes. To avoid the pitfalls that were discussed earlier, both programmes must consciously reach out to and involve young women, rather than assuming that this constituency will be covered by the other, thereby leaving them out inadvertently. This will ensure that there is a holistic, integrated and comprehensive approach to issues and that the results achieved will be long-lasting and sustainable.

## Conclusion

Young women are in a difficult position in that they are faced by the double burden of age and gender, often being marginalised or excluded on both fronts. Their social, economic and political situations are intertwined. To achieve women's empowerment in Africa, recognition must be given to the needs and aspirations of today's young women. The AU must place a high premium on the agenda that affects them and give the matter top priority. It is time that the AU displays the leadership required to promote gender equality and protect the rights of young women. It must translate the existing normative frameworks, platforms and commitments into real tangible gains and create spaces and opportunities to enable young women to fulfil their true potential on the continent.

## Policy recommendations

1. AU member states should ratify, domesticate and implement all existing regional human rights instruments and harmonise them with national laws as required. Particular attention should be given to ratifying the African Youth Charter and the Maputo Protocol, and to removing all the reservations and other inhibiting factors. Member states should in addition harmonise existing dual legal systems to ensure that parallel customary and statutory laws do not conflict to the detriment of young women's rights.
2. The African Union's (AU's) commitment to gender equality, women and youth empowerment is expressed in shared-values instruments, which nonetheless lack in policy coherence and programmatic interventions. It is therefore imperative to foster policy harmonisation and institutional synergy that respond specifically to the needs and aspirations of young women.
3. The AU, RECs, member states and civil society organisations (CSOs) should develop participatory accountability mechanisms for countries to ensure compliance with normative frameworks that uphold the rights of young women on the continent. The mechanisms should ensure coherence



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among the various norms. Initiatives such as the African Gender Scorecard should be embraced as a constant practice and sharpened to include standing indicators on young women, with data disaggregated by gender and age. National statistical offices should have shared frameworks and tools for monitoring and reporting on the various instruments that relating to young women. The emphasis should be put on obtaining quality and disaggregated data that will permit informed and evidence-based interventions.

### Now is the time for concrete actions by African leaders and decision-makers

4. The AU, RECs, member states and CSOs should strengthen their resolve to effectively implement innovative normative frameworks and mechanisms such as ACDEG and APRM. Concerted campaigns led by transformative, visionary and adaptive leadership are required at continental, regional and national levels to accelerate the ratification, domestication and implementation of and reporting on ACDEG and member-state accession to APRM. In addition, there is a requirement for greater commitment by member states and APRM Secretariat to ensure effective APRM reviews and implementation of National Programmes of Actions. The development and effective implementation of monitoring and evaluation tools and sharpening of the APRM questionnaire will be required to ensure that gender objectives and indicators feature prominently in each of the questionnaire's thematic areas, thus highlighting the significance of gender equality and youth empowerment in all spheres of governance and development.
5. AU organs, RECs and member states should support the proposed Women Engagement Programme, as well as the Youth in Peacebuilding Initiative that include mentorship, shadowing and exchanges. The AU must ensure that both programmes purposely pay attention to young women, and comprehensively and meaningfully involve them in various programmes relating to democratic governance and peace processes.
6. Young women have a central role to play in activating youth and women movements on the continent. It is therefore critical that barriers and prejudices that hinder the participation of young women in youth and women-led initiatives and interventions and hinder them from unleashing their full potential are systematically removed.
7. Member states are encouraged to adopt affirmative action through laws and administrative action to ensure gender parity in public and private spaces. Members of judiciaries should be trained in young women's rights and the enforcement mechanisms available to them. Judicial dialogue and activism to foster progressive jurisprudence with regard to the rights of young women should be encouraged.
8. The AU, RECs, member states and CSOs should consistently sensitise leading decision-makers such as parliamentarians, judges and traditional and religious leaders on the rights of women as they are enshrined in the AU human rights instruments. The aim should be to align laws and to challenge traditions and cultures that are hurdles to realising young women's rights.
9. Removing barriers to the full realisation of the rights and potential of young women will require the full engagement of the affected group. Young women should be at the centre of all initiatives in this regard to ensure ownership and meaningful participation. Space for the contribution of young women must be created at all levels.
10. It is critical to cultivate a sense of collective responsibility and the (re) shaping of our value systems to ensure the full respect of the human rights of women, young and old.
11. A robust reporting framework that employs participatory approaches and complemented by a stringent monitoring process will ensure the implementation of existing progressive instruments.
12. Patriarchal and ageist structures, systems and attitudes are barriers that prevent young women from reaching their full potential. Now is the time for concrete actions by African leaders and decision-makers to remove these barriers.

## Notes

The authors would like to specially thank the Director of the AUC Department of Political Affairs, Dr Khabele Matlosa; Dr George Mukundi and Semihah Abdulmelik for their edits and valuable contributions on this publication.

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AGA is the framework for dialogue between the various stakeholders and has a mandate to promote democratic and participatory governance in Africa. The institutional framework of AGA is the African Governance Platform that comprises RECs and all AU organs and institutions that have a formal mandate for the promotion and sustenance of democracy, governance and human rights in Africa. The principle objective of AGA is to harmonise AU shared-value instruments and coordinate initiatives that promote and consolidate democratic governance. The Secretariat of AGA is based in the Department of Political Affairs at the African Union Commission.

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## Acknowledgements

This policy brief has been made possible by support from the governments of Denmark and Finland. The ISS is also grateful for support from other members of the ISS Partnership Forum, namely the Hanns Seidel Foundation and the governments of Australia, Canada, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the USA.

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