The 7th Annual Africa Summit in Colorado

ENGAGING TOGETHER TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRATIC ROOTS IN AFRICA

Report Contents

Summary Overview

Africa Agenda's seventh annual African Summit in Colorado was held in Maglione Hall in Denver University's Josef Korbel School of International Studies on Friday, January 13, 2023. It brought together over 100 people for evening dinner, music, and discussions about what we can learn from and how we can promote democracy in Africa and at home.

Participants shared insights and lessons about how to develop personal relations, business, and community connections with the African continent that can be helpful in strengthening democratic practice. They also reflected on the challenges of building and maintaining democracy in the United States.

Some examples of themes and lessons that resonated across the diverse tables are:

↗ **Understanding history is essential to addressing the challenges to democracy.**

> Many tables stressed that it is impossible to strengthen democracy without **"knowing where you come from."**

> Furthermore, African countries may still be integrating the concept of democracy with traditions, cultural development, languages, and the authentic desires of the diverse African people. In an age where history—how it is taught and who decides what it is—is often contested, we need to fight efforts to conceal or hide the past.

↗ **Democracy requires strong democratic institutions.**

The necessity of strong democratic institutions—**robust legal and electoral systems**—was a key lesson that emerged in multiple tables. Courts and legal systems are both important protections and help to define the limits of the "freedom that is democracy" and thus the space for functioning civil society. The independence of these courts shapes a separate, non-political space and everywhere needs to be reinforced as well as celebrated. Participants found functioning courts as well as independent electoral systems to be best practices that have helped quash authoritarian decrees and protect human rights.

↗ **International engagement is essential to assist where conflict has emerged.**

Across the tables, participants felt that **international intervention** in conflicts that claim lives and lead to the breakdown of democratic institutions is necessary.

Intervention needs to go beyond national interests to protect "people's interests" such as the at-risk populations of Tigrayans in Ethiopia. The United Nations, it was felt, is a necessary player as well as a tool for positive support with programs such as Millennium Challenge grants that should prioritize support for countries that are strengthening their democratic systems. People-to-people support through innovative funding, solidarity and engagement in grassroots movements and organizations that work together on key impediments to democracy and human rights are another level of action that resonated across the tables.

Finally, concern about the **ongoing exploitation of divisions** was discussed in several ways. Tribalism, many felt was still a force, but it is often overshadowed by emerging or persistent regional and linguistic divisions that are being used to justify and perpetuate anti-democratic measures. Deepening education and making sure that women and youth are engaged at all levels to build more inclusive democratic institutions were felt to be critical elements moving forward.

About the Summit

An eight-person planning team worked for five months to organize the Summit, which was sponsored by the Africa Center at the Josef Korbel School at Denver University, the Kibera Girls Academy, the Global Greengrants Fund, Center for Cultural Dynamics, Africa Development Promise, and the Master of Development Practice program at Regis University.

Africa Agenda has hosted the Summit for the last seven years to connect those working with the continent with Colorado-based Africans, African Americans and others who seek to strengthen and improve the linkages with Africa. Africa Agenda also maintains Africa News Matters and holds periodic workshops and seminars to inform journalists, the academic community, non-profits and companies about the opportunities and challenges of working together in countries across the continent.

Africa Agenda recognizes and thanks the Colorado community for contributing expertise and time and enthusiastically embracing the evening's dialogue with respect for each other's opinions and a creative spirit!

The Program

Unusually warm weather for the season (about 55 degrees Fahrenheit) set the stage for over 100 participants to ponder, celebrate, and promote lessons in building and strengthening democracies in Africa. Volunteers, staff, and students from Aurora Central High School and Denver University's Students for Africa, prepared the environment by registering, seating guests, and making them comfortable.

The hospitality and friendship in the room was visible and plentiful. As participants cradled their drinks, savored their Senegalese dinners, the appetite for conversation was whetted for what lay ahead for the evening at the Korbel School of International Studies.

Welcoming Music and Food

The Tafadzwa Muchineripri band set the backdrop for the Summit with sweet Mbira rhythms from Zimbabwe. The multi-generational family band has lived in Colorado for decades.

The tempo and cadence of their music are distinctly celebratory and evocative of the resilience and energy with which African countries face the challenges of our time.

For dinner, participants enjoyed authentic savory flavors from Senegal—jollof rice, fried fish, and salad—from the Aurora, Colorado Pikine Grill. Pikine is one of over a dozen restaurants with African cuisine in the Denver metro area.

Opening Remarks

George Bamu, Africa Agenda's executive director, welcomed guests with a rhetorical challenge "can we sit down together, as a community, and as an organization, over food, to look at these issues, and join together in ending the conflicts taking place on the African continent?"

Helping development through wide-ranging participation

The conflicts Bamu referenced are the focus of the 2021 Norwegian Refugee Council report that pinpoints the world's ten

most neglected conflicts (Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Mali, Nigeria, South Sudan, Sudan) all occurring in Africa. Summit table discussions were organized to address as many of these conflicts as possible.

Bamu said the Summit is an opportunity for individuals and local businesses to help bring development to the continent. The way to do this, he said, is through participation in the affairs of the continent.

Abigail Kabandula, PhD, Director of the Africa Center at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, a close partner in the 2023 Summit, commended Africa Agenda's work to expand knowledge and understanding about the most pressing issues impacting international relation and security in Africa.

Tapping our community for Africa

Kabandula said, "our partnership with Africa Agenda has helped us engage with people in Denver and beyond in terms of tapping into community voices in the conception of Africa from media resources." She said she hoped the summit would lead to a better understanding of the democratic landscape in Africa in 2023.

Dr. Simon Munzu, a senior policy official who has held various posts at UNHCR including Special Representative for Cote D'Ivoire from October 2014 to August 2016, gave the keynote address drawing from his decades of experience as a human rights activist working through diplomatic and United Nations channels.

Democracy does not come from one civilization, one culture, one source or one group of sources.

Munzu said, "the features of modern-day democracy, comprising the ingredients that have been poured over time into the democracy receptable, do not owe their origins to one civilization, one culture, one source, or one group of sources." He noted "of nearly half of the world's 34 countries classified as hybrid democracies, sixteen in all are in Africa." He said it is gratifying to see several African countries standing shoulder to shoulder with long-standing democracies in the West.

He shared his deep knowledge of where democracy is healthy across the continent and his recommendations about what each of us can do to advance democracy locally, regionally, and internationally.

Among his most important recommendations is the need to **engage people representing diverse sectors**: local non-governmental organizations, international non-governmental organizations, academics, and everyday community members. Those in the diaspora, including refugees, have a great deal to offer. "Bottom up," not "Top-down," works best. Various types of creative partnerships can emerge.

Munzu concluded by calling on everyone, both Africans and Americans, to remain vigilant and to not be complacent, because, as he stated, dictatorships exist in Africa and elsewhere, and would like to exploit our divisions to create an environment for chaos.

Table Discussions

Table discussions are the main event of each Summit. They bring together non-profit and corporate leaders, students, professors, and other interested participants in tables of ten to twelve to explore issues around the Summit's theme.

Volunteer table facilitators, who are experienced practitioners from many fields, set the questions for discussion. Facilitators were all actively engaged in the countries and issues participants discussed. The table on the right shows the wide scope of discussions that focused on more than ten countries and the cross-cutting issue of Democracy and Civil Society.

This year discussions made deep dives into the challenges and opportunities of democracy building. Each table raised many questions about democratic norms that participants tackled over the 90-minute discussions.

Each table addressed questions posed by the facilitators and agreed on best practices, lessons learned, and recommendations for solving conflicts and building on opportunities.

To this end, we have selected below some highlights and key points that came from the table discussions.

Table	Topic	Facilitator
1	Cameroon	Dr. Jude Fokwang Associate Professor of Anthropology and Development Practice, Regis University
2	Democracy & Civil Society	Susan Swern Philanthropic Partnerships Global Greengrants Fund
3	Ethiopia	Tsegaye Hailu USEPA
4	Ethiopia	Millete Birhamaskel Tigrayan Human Rights Activist and Business Owner
5	Great Lake States	Monica Labiche Brown Founder and Executive Director Africa Development Promise
6	Kenya	Charles Msilanga Founder & CEO Personal and Corporate Development Company
7	Mali	Fatou Doumbia Founder and Executive Director Agile International
8	Rwanda	Francoise Mbabane Founder and President My Skin Global
9	South Sudan	Micklina Kenyi Executive Director Girls with Books
10	Sudan	Ray Stranske Founder Hope Communities
11	Zimbabwe	Dr. Isaac Chinyoka Researcher University of Cape Town
12	Zambia	Dr. Singumbe Muyeba Assistant Professor Josef Korbel School, Denver University

Cameroon Table (1)

Participants grappled with how tension and conflict in Cameroon are fed by divisions along linguistic lines (Francophone and Anglophone regions).

They found that best practices such as initiation of dialogue between the regions, partnerships with the United Nations and friendly nations, emphasis on girls' education and better use of natural resources were among the most effective in strengthening democratic norms towards a resolution of conflicts. However, the table grappled with the lack of accountability in centralized systems of government. They recommended calling for **international pressure on governments to improve accountability and reform judicial systems** along with concerted efforts to get **more young people and women involved**.

Democracy & Civil Society Table (2)

Participants stressed that people are the heart of democracy. To enable a culture of democracy it is important for there to be sufficient support for grassroots and locally led community action. It is not just about the work of any one group, we must connect grassroots organizations together. Democracy requires "acting in freedom" and for this we need to make sure that we have strong legal systems and the political will to build this space.

In many countries in Africa (and around the world) we have seen civil society organizations lead the fight against authoritarian regimes and unbridled capitalism that have corrupted and complicated the pursuit of democratic freedoms. This has especially been the case with civil society organizations casting light on extractive industries that corrode democratic norms.

If we want to promote and sustain democracy, we need to **support democratic movements within civil society**. The table suggested that **millennium challenge grants should prioritize countries that are doing well democratically** and that we need to **raise funds and mentor (people-to-people) connections through grassroots organizations and movements**.

Ethiopia Tables (3 &4)

Participants considered how the Pretoria Agreement (2 Nov 2022) reached between Tigray and the Ethiopian government factions has not yet been effective. There is a lack of trust between the warring factions and Ethiopia is effectively suppressing the Tigray people in retaliation for their historic hold on power. Eritrea is holding on in Tigray because it controls the security systems.

Solutions must build on **increasing transparency**, the driver of democracy. The way to understand transparency is to pay close attention to the language your leader is speaking, to expose their intentions. In the short term, the international community must intervene to **protect the Tigray people** from potential genocide. This is an immediate crisis that the world has managed to ignore unconscionably. In the long run, Ethiopia needs to **build protections for religious freedom** and **come to terms with its complicated historical legacy** (the past) to plan for a more democratic future.

Great Lakes Region Table (5)

Participants noted that leaders in Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda are practicing a unique mix of multi-party democracy with single party rule. This seems to be a workable solution for the moment.

While democracy is a universal human pursuit, **democratic systems need to work within the reality of post-colonial history and cultural systems** that are already in place. The Great Lakes region had systems built around chiefs and kings representing a mix of authoritarian leadership and democratic decision making and implementation.

Mali Table (7)

Through a wide-ranging discussion, participants focused on the question, "Is the spirit of democracy in danger, and, if so, what aspects do we want to nourish?" They felt it is important to **celebrate the successes** so Malians can know what has been achieved and what is possible.

Despite the security problems and political marginalization in the country, people are finding creative ways to live normal and happy lives. The population tends to be ill-informed of governance issues and transparency is a problem because of language barriers (The table questioned why French is still the national language when most of the population speaks Bambara.) On the other hand, Mali counts on strong engagement of civil society and takes seriously **understanding where you come from – a driver of democracy**.

Rwanda Table (8)

Participants felt that there are diverse vibrant forms of African democracy that emerge from the African experience. These forms in Africa, participants felt, must be made by Africans for Africans. The ingredients must be tailored to the people of the country not "Africa" in general.

Paul Kagame (Rwanda's president) has built practical forms drawing from the shared history and trauma. Participants felt Kagame is holding on to his power to avoid falling back into the tragic events Rwanda experienced in 1994. Development and reconciliation were forced in Rwanda and forced to happen too quickly. Participants felt, it is safer to keep Kagame in power because people believe in him, know him, and trust him. He managed to unite and bring people together. The table made the following recommendations:

- Consider **restructuring Rwandan business models** to prioritize benefitting smaller communities and ensuring that they do not get left behind.
- Look for ways to **make democracy more inclusive**. Programs and businesses should empower people and their communities. Rwanda should consider promoting **micro-businesses**.
- Continue **investing in education**. Before the genocide, education wasn't mandatory. For democracy to work, people need access to education.
- Over the long term **we must understand the past** to move forward. We must think about what the future. A sustainable future must be the goal, and well-structured and sustainable reconciliation must be established so that the country does not end up back at square one or worse.

- Rwanda must also address the trauma of small communities and find a **sustainable solution to shared trauma**, otherwise the democracy could be hard to maintain.

Sudan & South Sudan Tables (9 & 10)

Participants stressed the importance of understanding different "tastes" for democracy and not to proscribe a "one-size-fits-all" approach. Democracy only has meaning in the specific context where it is being pursued. In South Sudan democratic governance and respect for human rights are weak. Flawed legislation gives too much power to the president further undermining the capacity for good governance in democratic institutions.

In the fight for democracy, critical issues were handled "under the table." Elected government officials often have little education and are handpicked by the executive office. Tribal divisions have not yet been addressed and there are new calls for separation, with the South Sudanese demanding a federation.

The most pressing need, participants felt, is to improve governance by strengthening the training and understanding of government officials. Solutions should work toward a more

inclusive governance in which all 64 tribes in South Sudan have a say in the democracy (right now two tribes are dominant), perhaps through a federal system.

Zambia Table (12)

Participants explored Zambia's successful and peaceful transitions of power through regular elections, creating structures for continuity and managing increasing demands for democratic freedoms. They felt that Africa is still experimenting with democracy since most countries have only had relatively recent independence. In the first stages liberation movements often turned into the same monsters they condemned since people had not developed the power and voice needed for democracy.

The table felt that Zambia should **ensure the democratic space is open and competitive** and that it should **protect the independence of the electoral commission** that leads to an empowerment of voters.