



# POLICY BRIEF

## Silencing the guns can reduce forced displacement

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Armed conflict is the major driver of forced displacement in Africa and the problem is becoming more severe. How can the African Union's Silencing the Guns initiative help deal with the forced displacement crisis on the continent? This policy brief argues that the focus should be on two interventions: strengthening early warning and promoting preventive diplomacy; and addressing structural root causes.

## Key findings

- ▶ Armed conflict is the major driver of forced displacement in Africa.
- ▶ Africa is not yet close to attaining its goal of silencing the guns. Since the 2013 adoption of the Silencing the Guns in Africa by 2020 agenda, new conflicts (and consequent displacement) have emerged in Burkina Faso, Burundi-Rwanda, The Gambia, Cameroon, Ethiopia and Mozambique.
- ▶ The number of people forcibly displaced in Africa more than doubled from 2013 to 2019, from 11 million to 25.7 million.
- ▶ Addressing the structural causes of conflict, particularly those related to governance, is crucial to silencing the guns and reducing forced displacement.
- ▶ Human rights violations and corruption are also key roadblocks to preventing and mitigating forced displacement.
- ▶ The African Union (AU) has mechanisms that can be used to prevent the emergence or escalation of conflicts.

## Recommendations

For the AU and member states:

- ▶ The AU and its relevant organs should reinforce their existing early warning structures such as the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) and Panel of the Wise with early action mechanisms to propel its silencing the guns agenda.
- ▶ Member states should take the lead in demonstrating their commitment including through allocating the necessary resources, provision of information, and prompt use of conflict early warning information provided by the CEWS. Such preventive actions could proactively curb further displacement and help with post-conflict reconstruction and development.
- ▶ Efforts to silence the guns should be better coordinated between AU departments and between the AU and its regional economic communities (RECs). An interdepartmental coordination platform between the AU's structure that works on silencing of guns in the Peace and Security Department should bring on board departments in the AU that work on migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons. These include the departments of Social Affairs and Political Affairs. This would ensure more harmonised and complementary efforts to mitigate forced displacement. As building blocks of the AU and part of the AU's overall security architecture, efforts by the RECs also need to be aligned.

## Introduction

Silencing the Guns in Africa by 2020 has been high on the agenda of the African Union (AU) since 2013 when it was adopted as one of the 14 flagship projects of Agenda 2063. It was one of the landmark adoptions linked to the commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). Heads of state adopted a Solemn Declaration in which pledges were made to end conflicts and wars in Africa.

The adoption of Agenda 2063 and the silencing the guns initiative affirmed African leaders' commitment to address the root causes of conflicts and wars on the continent and promote conflict prevention, peace-making and reconciliation.<sup>1</sup> The AU Master Roadmap of Practical Steps to Silence the Guns in Africa by Year 2020 (also known as the 2016 Lusaka Master Roadmap) translated the continent's aspiration into practical time bound steps in three key areas: political, economic and social.<sup>2</sup>

The roadmap also earmarks goals to reduce forced displacement through preventive diplomacy and addressing governance-related root causes of displacement. More precisely, among others, the Lusaka roadmap focuses on 'addressing the plight of forced displacement and its root causes.'<sup>3</sup>

The number of people forcibly displaced on the continent more than doubled from 2013 to 2019 – from 11 million to 25.7 million. The current number of forcibly displaced people in Africa comprises an estimated 7.8 million refugees and asylum seekers, and 18.9 million internally displaced people.<sup>4</sup>

In 2019, the AU's theme focused on forced displacement. For 2020, the AU theme has been 'Silencing the guns: creating conducive conditions for Africa's development'. This provided a good opportunity to revisit the progress made, challenges faced and way forward, including on addressing forced displacement.

In 2019 important AU instruments, such as the Kampala Convention, were ratified by five more countries. African countries and the AU also added their support to global frameworks including the Global Compact on Refugees. The year also saw the

enhanced participation of refugees and displaced people in key AU processes.

Basing its analysis on the Lusaka roadmap, this policy brief argues that efforts to silence the guns can help prevent the continent's forced displacement challenges in two ways: early warning, early action and preventive diplomacy; and addressing the structural root causes of conflict and developing tangible solutions. The policy brief also draws from relevant AU policy documents and related literature.

Existing infrastructure of the AU's Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) and regional economic communities (RECs) can guide member states to take action before conflicts emerge or escalate. Data collection and analysis of potential conflicts conducted through the CEWS and its provision of early warning briefings to the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) are essential.

Addressing structural root causes of conflict, particularly those related to governance, is also crucial to silencing the guns. Most of Africa's armed conflicts are rooted in governance deficiencies, including weak state delivery and human rights safeguards, socio-economic challenges and corruption. Addressing these could contribute to preventing forced displacement.

## What is 'silencing the guns'?

Seven years have passed since African heads of state set 2020 as the target year to end all wars on the continent. While some progress has been achieved, independent assessments indicate that Africa is hardly close to attaining this ambitious goal. There are three key reasons for this: a lack of conceptual coherence on the issue of silencing the guns, the prevalence of conflicts, and poor governance.<sup>5</sup>

The lack of conceptual coherence on the silencing the guns initiative is a leading challenge since different organs of the AU have different interpretations on what it really means. 'The [Silencing the Guns] Unit interprets the initiative as a campaign, while [the AU Commission] departments are handling its implementation as a pool of projects, and Agenda 2063 approaches it as a programme.'<sup>6</sup>

This lack of consensus in the AU affects the implementation of the initiative, which is manifested for

example through the limited inclusion of important AU Commission actors who work on displacement.

The prevalence of conflicts is another major setback. New conflicts have emerged in Africa since the adoption of the silencing the guns agenda. These include Burkina Faso (intrastate conflict from 2014), Burundi-Rwanda (interstate conflict from 2016), The Gambia (intrastate conflict from 2016), Ethiopia (inter-communal rivalry from 2017), Rwanda-Uganda (from 2018), the Republic of Congo (intrastate from 2015) and Somalia (intrastate from 2014).<sup>7</sup> Other major conflicts include the South Sudan conflict (2013 to date) and the longstanding conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic.

### Africa hosted 6.8 million refugees and 18.9 million internally displaced people by the end of 2019

At the end of 2013, Africa hosted just over 11 million forcibly displaced people – that is, 3.37 million refugees and 7.69 million internally displaced persons.<sup>8</sup> By the end of 2019, this number had reached 25.7 million. This includes 6.8 million refugees and 18.9 million internally displaced people.<sup>9</sup>

A cross analysis reveals a direct correlation between conflict trends and forced displacement hot spots. For example, over 4.4 million people have fled conflict in South Sudan, with 2.4 million of them now refugees and two million of them internally displaced.

There are more than one million refugees out of Somalia and 2.6 million internally displaced people. By the end of 2019, there were three million internally displaced people in Ethiopia as well, despite the Ethiopian government's announcement of one million returnees.

Since the launch of the silencing the guns agenda, the continent's progress in terms of achieving meaningful and sustainable peace has been minimal. Examples include 'the Ethiopia-Eritrea peace accord, the institution of a transitional government in South Sudan, the Sudan peace deal, management of the 2016-2017 Gambia crisis, and mediation efforts in Madagascar and the [Central African Republic] CAR.'<sup>10</sup> Even so,

good governance will be central to the sustainability of these initiatives.<sup>11</sup>

Several reasons account for the persistence of conflicts in Africa. Increased imports of weapons is one of them. Between 2014 and 2018, weapon importation increased by 20%.<sup>12</sup> 'The greater percentage of imports to the continent were sourced from Russia (49%), the United States (15%), China (10%), France (7.8%) and Germany (7.7%).'<sup>13</sup> Also, 'four of the five top exporters to Africa were permanent members of the UN Security Council, with Germany being a major funder of the AU's STGIA2020 [silencing the guns agenda].'<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, some of these countries are leading providers of support to the forcibly displaced. The United States is the top donor of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), and Germany is the third following the European Union.<sup>15</sup> Until 2018, the United States was the top resettlement destination for refugees before being overtaken by Canada,<sup>16</sup> while Germany is 'the largest refugee hosting country in the European Union,'<sup>17</sup> receiving 1.1 million refugees in 2015 alone.

Poor governance is another key factor that contributes to increased conflict and displacement in Africa. Most conflicts on the continent have their roots in poor governance. This includes 'state mismanagement, misgovernance, high-level corruption, historical injustices and grievances, poor handling of electoral processes and social diversities, incumbents manipulating political processes or constitutional orders, and foreign interferences.'<sup>18</sup>

The experience of countries in East and the Horn of Africa and Great Lakes Region illustrates the inextricable link between poor governance, conflict and forced displacement. These countries 'face the severest governance challenges on the continent and are also the most fragile and engulfed in violent conflicts.'<sup>19</sup> Some of the active conflicts (in Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Ethiopia) and deadly terrorists such as al-Shabaab are located in the region.

The highest number of refugees and internally displaced persons in Africa originate from or live in the Horn, the East and Great Lakes Region, comprising Burundi, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda. There were 5.3 million

refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons in 2013 in the region, reaching 14 million by the end of 2019.<sup>20</sup>

## Opportunities for preventing forced displacement

Prevention of forced displacement refers to 'initiatives which have the effect of averting the occurrence and recurrence of those conditions which force people to leave their usual place of residence.'<sup>21</sup> It is important to emphasise that while efforts are there to prevent forced displacement, these should not obstruct threatened populations from fleeing and seeking refuge.<sup>22</sup> It should be better understood as efforts to prevent factors that cause people to flee, but not their right to seek protection.

Analysis of the practical steps under the Lusaka roadmap indicates that if properly implemented, the silencing the guns initiative can contribute to the prevention of forced displacement in two ways: early warning and preventive diplomacy and addressing structural root causes.

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## Early warning and preventive diplomacy

Early warning aims to achieve 'the prevention of any forms of violent conflict'<sup>23</sup> and serves as a key mechanism of preventive diplomacy.<sup>24</sup> Preventive diplomacy is a strategy to avoid conflicts from happening or prevent them from growing into uncontrollable violence. It includes political declarations, observer missions and mediated peace talks with conflict parties.<sup>25</sup>

The different ways early warning and preventive diplomacy measures should be applied to stop the emergence or escalation of conflict are discussed in the practical steps of the Lusaka roadmap. Practical step 1 under political aspects of the roadmap outlines 'establishing clear channels of communication on early warning reports to the PSC.'<sup>26</sup> These activities are critical in establishing a common understanding on the root causes of conflicts among various stakeholders.

Practical step 2 of the roadmap, on political aspects, also attempts to better link early warning information to early response, specifically through periodic PSC meetings, situation scanning and proper consultations to be conducted at least twice a year.<sup>27</sup> This goes along the lines of the mandate of PSC members, which includes preventing disputes and conflicts and recommends intervention of the AU in situations of war, genocide and crimes against humanity.<sup>28</sup>

The PSC's primary mandate is to lead such interventions in consultation with other relevant AU organs such as the CEWS, the Panel of the Wise,

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and RECs/Regional Mechanisms for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution. The PSC is a key component of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)<sup>29</sup> that provides leadership on peace and security issues on the continent<sup>30</sup> as a standing decision making organ for conflict prevention, management and resolution.<sup>31</sup> Regular meetings and briefings are the main mechanisms to address conflict and crisis.<sup>32</sup> The PSC also steers field assessments and missions.

The CEWS is one of the five pillars of the APSA and is responsible for data collection and analysis on potential conflicts and other peace and security threats to Africa,<sup>33</sup> providing relevant information to the AU Commission chairperson.<sup>34</sup> It also informs the PSC through daily or weekly briefs, and flash reports for more urgent developments,<sup>35</sup> and advises the PSC on potential conflicts or peace and security threats and on preventive measures to be taken. It collaborates with regional and international stakeholders, among others, joint AU/REC/UN preventive missions, such as in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>36</sup>

### AU Peace and Security Council interventions helped prevent mass forced displacement in conflicts in northern Cameroon

The Panel of the Wise is another important organ that supports the AU Commission's chairperson and the PSC on matters relating to preventive diplomacy<sup>37</sup> through informing the PSC about emerging issues related to conflict and conflict prevention.<sup>38</sup> The panel also involves women (such as through the Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation (FemWise)) and youth groups in their work.

The need for strengthening preventive diplomacy to be able to effectively prevent crises and conflicts is also discussed under practical step 4 of the road map.

Publication of reports is one of the major mechanisms used by the Panel of the Wise. The panel has so far published thematic reports including on democratisation and governance, election-related violence and women and children.<sup>39</sup> The Panel of the Wise obtains information from the CEWS and by independent fact-finding missions.<sup>40</sup> However, instead of forecasting potential problems that could emerge, its publications have been released in response to existing crises.<sup>41</sup>

The RECs and RMs are also important actors in the prevention of conflicts, being the building blocks of the AU and part of the AU's overall security architecture.<sup>42</sup> RECs and RMs are responsible for setting up a permanent planning mechanism, training centres, standby force, and military logistics, among others.<sup>43</sup>

The prevention of conflicts linked to extractive industries is another important issue discussed in the roadmap.<sup>44</sup> It is highly relevant to preventing forced



EAST, NORTH AND WEST AFRICA HAVE THE MOST FIREARMS IN AFRICA AND HIGH MIGRATION AND DISPLACEMENT

displacement, considering the prevalence of natural resources-driven conflicts on the continent. More specifically, the second practical step of economic aspects of the roadmap outlines the need for the member states and companies operating in the extractive sector to safeguard local communities from being deprived of benefits arising from extraction of resources.

To this end, project and country-specific reporting requirements by the extractive sector become imperative. Member states are the primary responsible bodies to ensure this. Such measures can help to prevent extractive industry-linked conflicts and displacement.

The oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria provides a good example. The Niger Delta conflict has been going since 1967. 'Conflicts between oil companies and local communities in the Niger Delta have basically revolved around land ownership and compensation for land appropriation as well as compensation for environmental damages due to oil operations.'<sup>45</sup> This conflict has forced thousands of people out of their homes.

Generally speaking, an assessment of the roadmap indicates that the much-needed infrastructure to prevent the emergence or escalation of conflict is in place by the AU. This provides a good opportunity for member states and concerned stakeholders to prevent the emergence or escalation of conflicts, which has strong relevance to the prevention of forced displacement.

### Africa's conflict trends reveal a direct correlation with forced displacement trends

As mentioned, Africa's conflict trends reveal a direct correlation with forced displacement trends. The role of the CEWS and its pillars in transmitting the needed information to decision makers is important in order to prevent further displacements.

Although the PSC has been perceived as stalling in taking effective and timely action to prevent or resolve potential and actual conflicts,<sup>46</sup> it still has the opportunity and mandate to move from early warning to early response. PSC intervention has helped prevent mass forced displacement in conflicts in northern

Cameroon, and in extremist attacks in northern Mozambique.<sup>47</sup>

The protracted nature of Africa's conflicts underscores the fact that conflict prevention is the best option. In light of this, addressing the structural causes of conflicts – including those linked to good governance – is central.

### Tackling governance-related drivers of forced displacement

Poor governance underlies most of the conflicts that have erupted in Africa. This is often linked to a lack of political freedom and inhibitions on freedom of expression. Connected to this are human rights violations, particularly against specific groups based on their race, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality and membership of a particular social or political group, that force people to flee and seek asylum.

Electoral processes in Africa remain mired in concerns around electoral integrity and election-related disputes and violence. The Africa Governance Report published by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation indicates that since 2014, 'the capacity of election monitoring agencies has worsened and the space for political participation and opposition parties has shrunk' in Africa.<sup>48</sup> Further, 'measures related to civil rights and liberties, including the freedom of association and assembly and in particular the freedom of expression are declining and recorded their lowest scores in 2017.'<sup>49</sup> This leads to increased political tensions and violence.

In the absence of functional systems that meaningfully guarantee human rights during political processes, 'political violence can easily become an instrument for seeking redress of grievances.'<sup>50</sup> Practical steps 3 and 4 of the political aspects of the roadmap<sup>51</sup> discuss how to address governance-related challenges. In this respect the roadmap underscores the importance of promoting the smooth transfer of political power through conducting periodic, free, fair and credible elections to enhance peaceful political succession.

Inclusive participation of all relevant stakeholders is needed to uphold constitutionalism and enhance peace, security and stability at national level.<sup>52</sup> Together with member states, the PSC, AU Commission, regional human rights mechanisms, RECs and RMs are the key actors in the implementation of this step. Achieving this, however, faces multiple problems – corruption being one.

There are different types of corruption, but political corruption is worth highlighting. It refers to the ‘manipulation of policies, institutions and rules of procedure in the allocation of resources and financing by political decision makers, who abuse their position to sustain their power, status and wealth.’<sup>53</sup>

Overall African states’ efforts to effectively tackle corruption are lacking. The 2019/20 Corruption Perceptions Index<sup>54</sup> shows that sub-Saharan Africa was ranked the lowest in tackling corruption, with an average score of 32 out of 100, which is below the global average of 43.<sup>55</sup> The continent is also home to some of the countries with the highest levels of corruption.<sup>56</sup>

Five of the 10 most corrupt countries – out of 180 countries surveyed globally by Transparency International – are located in Africa.<sup>57</sup> These include Somalia, which is ranked 180<sup>th</sup> as the most corrupt country in the world, followed by South Sudan placed at number 179.<sup>58</sup>

Some of these countries are also major sources of refugees and migrants and face significant forced displacement. At the end of 2019, for example, South Sudan and Somalia were among the five top refugee-producing countries, being countries of origin of 2.2 million and 0.9 million refugees respectively.<sup>59</sup>

The need to address corruption is covered under the social aspect of the roadmap.<sup>60</sup> The impact of corruption on the illicit trade of weapons and trafficking of migrants and goods is also discussed in the roadmap.<sup>61</sup> This is relevant to the discussion around the prevention of forced displacement since ‘the prevalence of small arms and light weapons in Africa has been a key driver of violence.’<sup>62</sup>

The 2018 report of the Small Arms Survey shows that ‘more than 40 million firearms are currently in the hands of various civilian actors in Africa’ and only 15% of these are registered.<sup>63</sup> The Western Africa region is leading with 10.9 million civilian-held firearms, followed by Northern Africa (10.2 million civilian-held firearms) and Eastern Africa (7.8 million civilian-held firearms).<sup>64</sup> ‘The flow of uncontrolled arms plays a crucial role in the activities of organized crime networks across Africa; they are either the object of illicit trafficking and/or used to protect the infrastructures used for criminal activities.’<sup>65</sup>

This also contributes to the continuation and expansion of the trafficking of both migrants and refugees. In a context where legal migration pathways and

opportunities for resettlement are diminishing, the expansion of the trafficking industry to fill the gap in the demand to move isn’t surprising. The three regions with the highest numbers of firearms (Western, Northern and Eastern Africa), for example, have a lot of migrant and refugee movement.

## Some of Africa’s most corrupt countries are also major sources of forced displacement

Analysis of the Lusaka roadmap shows that the silencing the guns initiative can help address governance-related root causes of conflict, corruption and the illicit trade of weapons. This can greatly support the Africa Governance Structure which aims to improve the state of good governance in Africa. The silencing the guns agenda can help prevent further forced displacement through addressing conflicts and protecting those who are forced to flee, thus disrupting the trafficking industry.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The AU has put in place infrastructure to prevent the escalation of conflicts. This includes the CEWS, the Panel of the Wise, and RECs and RMs. To effect the necessary change in preventing and addressing conflicts, these structures need to move to full implementation. Member states can play a significant role in achieving this.

When that happens, the AU infrastructure can prevent further displacement and help create the right environment for post-conflict reconstruction and development. This is a critical component to facilitate repatriation, the preferred durable solution to forced displacement.

Silencing the guns is an important aspect of the AU’s conflict prevention infrastructure. However, an assessment of its progress over the past seven years shows that the continent is far from silencing its guns. Key obstacles affecting its implementation should be addressed. The AU must clearly communicate its conceptual underpinnings and overall objective, and address issues of poor governance. This will help prevent both conflict and conflict-related displacements.



In addition to addressing the root causes of displacement and facilitating pathways for repatriation, implementation of the silencing the guns agenda will significantly decrease the vulnerabilities of forcibly displaced people in situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure better implementation of the silencing the guns initiative, the two points below should be considered.

### From early warning to early action

The AU should move its silencing the guns agenda forward. Member states should take the lead in demonstrating their commitment including through allocation of the necessary resources, provision of information, and using conflict early warning information to prevent emerging conflicts and de-escalate ongoing ones. This will also enhance the relevance of CEWS and its ownership by African states.

Mechanisms such as the AU's CEWS and the Panel of the Wise should also enhance their capacity to respond to the continent's complex peace and security challenges. The CEWS inclusion of forecasting briefings to PSC members could be one way to take the capacity of the CEWS to the next level. Because conflict has a direct bearing on forced displacement, the CEWS should also consider including forced displacement situations in its conflict early warning system. This could enhance its responses to forced displacement.

### Enhance coordination among key actors

Efforts to silence the guns should be better coordinated. Structures of the AU that work on forced displacement (Department of Political Affairs) and migrants (Social Affairs) should be included. This would ensure the inclusion of people on the move.

RECs should be included in the silencing the guns process as they are the building blocks of the AU and part of the AU's overall security architecture. Existing networks such as FemWise should also be included.

The aspect of preventive diplomacy should build on existing structures such as the AU Peace Fund, which raised US\$131 million<sup>66</sup> between 2017 and 2019 and will use part of the money for mediation and preventive diplomacy. Finally, the AU and its relevant organs should intensify efforts to enhance the promotion of good governance and democratisation to address the root causes of conflict.

## Notes

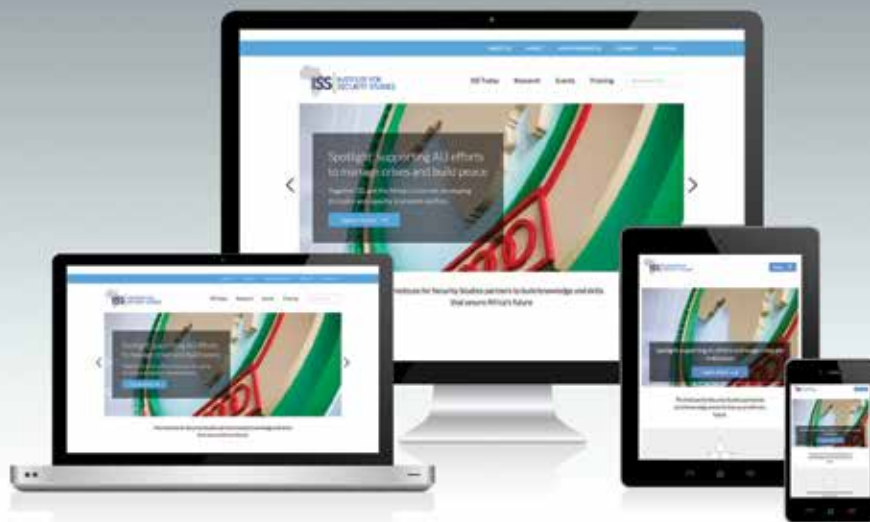
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