OUTSOURCING IMAGINATION:
THE POTENTIAL OF INFORMAL ENGAGEMENT NETWORKS IN AFRICA

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The Problem

State-on-state conflict has declined dramatically in Africa in recent years, leading to a significant advancement in state security and stability. Yet, Africans across the continent have not seen similarly dramatic improvements to their sense of human security—freedom from want and freedom from fear. Internal conflicts (ethnic and religious disputes, political power struggles, insurgency, civil war, and resource management issues) continue to spread human suffering and undermine political stability and economic development.

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Drug and arms trafficking are an expanding force for instability in Africa. Religious extremism from both indigenous (the Lord's Resistance Army, al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, or the "Nigerian Taliban") and external (al-Qaeda and associated groups) sources has the potential to become a more dangerous and destructive force in the region. Africa's rapid economic growth and uneven distribution of the benefits thereof give rise to social and economic grievances. Rapid urbanization and associated crime, urban poverty, and increases in internally displaced and refugee populations—partially as a result of desertification and other effects of climate change—also constitute potential sources of violent instability in the future. Cities like Lagos and Nairobi are growing faster than the local governments' capacity to provide basic services, and the number of unemployed and underemployed youth is constantly growing, giving rise to massive slums that could become breeding grounds for instability.

Foreign assistance efforts in post-independence Africa have focused on reforming the political sector to reduce corruption and cultivate a cadre of democratic African leaders. Civil society, particularly the traditional, indigenous governance structures that pre-date modern African states and the colonial institutions from which they were forged, has not received similar attention. Political loyalty in Africa often exists on two not-always-integrated levels: traditional social and governance structures focused on ethnic groups or clans and the post-independence African state structures. Those traditional structures represent deep historical and cultural currents that rarely conform neatly to modern political boundaries and economic structures. Indigenous authorities—religious leaders, chiefs, elders—are important stakeholders in the effort to resolve conflict, counter religious extremism,

and provide "roots" for youth and displaced populations.

In the effort to preserve "state security," African governments have too often suppressed the space in which civil society and traditional governance operate. Autocratic regimes often see civil society and traditional leaders as potentially dangerous sources of opposition or even power competitors. While the situation is improving, particularly in southern Africa and some other notable cases, harassment of journalists is common and threats to the independent press are growing. Reporters Without Borders ranks the majority of African states in 2011 as having "noticeable problems," "difficult situations," or "very serious situations" regarding freedom and safety of the press. The growing influence of China, the prevalence of anti-sedition and criminal defamation laws (which are used to prevent criticism of governments and officials), and counterterrorism/security statutes have had a deleterious effect on the independent media and analysis in Africa. An independent press capable of holding governments accountable and forcing a healthy degree of transparency, along with a vibrant debate in civil society more generally, is vital to democratic reform and economic development in Africa. Developing robust civil society institutions is a vital step toward enabling Africans to find and take ownership of the solutions to their problems and challenges, with or without the emergence of uncorrupt, transparent governance.

Africans remain wary of US expressions of increased strategic focus on Africa, despite official US outreach efforts and engagement with African partners. This stems in large part from the perception that recent US actions—particularly the creation of the US Africa Command (AFRICOM)—are part of a larger trend in US policy toward militarizing foreign policy and pursuing its own security concerns (especially countering terrorism, securing alternatives to Middle East oil, and containing the spread of China's influence) at the expense of African democratic reform. Such concerns reflect the legacies of imperialism and Cold War international relations. Africans fear being used as pawns in a political power play between the United States and China and, in the process, losing their non-aligned status—a cherished source of post-independence regional pride.

Outsourcing Imagination: Intellectual Engagement Networks

The Report of the 9/11 Commission identified four requirements for successfully countering surprise attacks that might be applied more broadly to anticipating and hedging against a wide range of unpleasant strategic surprises (9/11 Commission Report 2004, 346):

1. Think about how attacks might be launched,
2. Identify telltale indicators and warning signs connected to the most dangerous possibilities,
3. Collect intelligence on those indicators, and
4. Adopt defenses to deflect the most dangerous possibilities.

The Commission broke down the failures leading up to the 2001 terror attacks into four broad categories—failure of imagination, policy failures, failed capabilities, and failed management—and identified a need to find ways to institutionalize imagination. At first blush, the phrase "institutionalizing imagination" sounds like an oxymoron. As the 9/11 report points out, "Imagination is not a gift usually associated with bureaucracies" (p. 344). It is, however, an asset in abundant supply in the private, academic, and civil society sectors. And thanks to modern information and communication tools, it is an asset available to be mined to beneficial effect. So, instead of searching for ways to formalize and "institutionalize" imagination, perhaps we should be looking to outsource it.

Nowhere is the need to outsource imagination more urgent than in Africa. The United States and other members of the international community have responded to Africa's security threats by raising the level of professionalism in African militaries, law enforcement and intelligence agencies, and bureaucracies. Such traditional security-sector reform is essential and important for state security, but there is also a growing need to develop a vibrant and diversified civil society capacity to address human security issues in a way that reflects the realities on the ground, especially the inherently transnational nature of the challenges and the appropriate responses. In many African nations, however, a fundamental lack of trust between governments and civil society undermines the ability to bring the civil talent base to bear in analyzing and forging effective, whole-of-society approaches for improving human security in Africa. US strategic communication, influence, and engagement efforts that focus on the government sector and "connected" civil society elites (high-profile academics, major non-governmental organizations (NGOs), state-approved/-sponsored media) may not benefit from the full range of expertise, insight, and commitment of smaller, less-connected individuals and groups in the private and civil society sectors.

One example of such multilateral engagement is the Council for Asian Transnational Threat Research (CATR), a consortium of researchers from 14 countries across the Asia-Pacific Region. CATR was established in 2005 "for the purpose of providing systematic ways for promoting and enhancing the capabilities of member institutions and countries in the Asia-Pacific region to counter terrorism, drawing on the unique perspectives of each member." It brings together representatives of counterterrorism centers, strategic analysis institutes, secular and religious universities, and academics and journalists from across the region to produce collaborative research products and discuss issues of mutual interest related to terrorism and other transnational threats. CATR's mission is to foster trust through sustained engagement with researchers in the region and encourage them to broaden their thinking about transnational threats, develop habits of analytical cooperation and coordination, and develop innovative approaches to responding to a broad range of non-traditional, transnational threats. (Ziemke and Droogan 2010, 4–5)

CATR's success in providing a venue for truly collaborative research

and analyses stems, in part, from its organizational culture. IDA has functioned as the facilitator for CATR, whose funding comes primarily from the US government. CATR member institutions, however, contribute materially to the organization's success by providing financial support for meetings and workshops as well as the expertise, of their researchers and experts, giving them "ownership" of the organization and its research products. IDA and its government sponsors see CATR as a "strategic listening" effort and, as such, take care to keep the US footprint small and ensure that all member institutions have equal opportunity to shape the group's research agenda. CATR's symposia and publications provide its members a chance to influence national and international policy approaches and provide policy makers in the United States, the Asia-Pacific region, and beyond a window into the underlying rationale of communities across the region as they struggle, individually and collectively, to respond to the emergence and evolution of a constantly shifting threat environment.

The establishment of sustained, informal engagement networks can go a long way toward building trust between African civil societies and the United States. It also has a great deal to offer

Front Row: (from left) Ousmane Sene, Kongdan Oh Hassig, Takyiwwa Manuh, Yaw Badu, Caroline Ziemke-Dickens, Mene Bodipo, Kakra Taylor-Hayford, Bernard Ngo-Nguty.

Second Row: (from left) Kwaku Sakyi Addo, Emmanuel Kuyole, Janette Yarwood, Manuel Araujo, Karen Buckley, Kwaku Osei-Hwedie, Adama Gaye, Herman Chinery-Hesse, Koryoe Anim-Wright, Stephane Ngwanza, Adamu Ahmed.

Photo Credit: The Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA)

in terms of improving the understanding of and imaginative international responses to emerging transnational threats and challenges by tapping into local expertise that may be unable or unwilling to participate in more formal, official engagements. Such engagement, carried out by NGOs and civil societies, serves a dual purpose by providing deeper insight into how local communities define and understand threats to both human and state security and by creating research and analytical synergies.

There is a need for a sustained dialog with African civil societies on a range of issues of mutual interest. The creation of informal networks as a sustained, neutral venue for frank, informal discussions without the overlay of US or other Western policy perspectives is a novel and appropriate way for the United States to engage African civil society. In the long run, such sustained engagement—"strategic listening" aimed first at understanding African perspectives and second at finding mutually beneficial mechanisms for cooperation with ordinary Africans—can cast security cooperation with the United States in a new light, break down suspicions of the US/AFRICOM agenda, and provide US policy makers and Combatant Commands valuable situational awareness.

These are just a few of the many ways that informal networks can contribute to building a true sense of partnership and common interest between the United States and Africa. Such efforts can make valuable contributions to raising international awareness of shared interests and emerging threats and creating regional buy-in and political will for national and international responses within African civil society. The networks also help provide an understanding of the historical and cultural currents that shape instability and violence in the region and that are crucial in forging effective solutions, building trust between government and non-government stakeholders, identifying and assessing vulnerabilities of states and civil society, and enabling the emergence of a workable, compatible shared vision as the foundation for collective action within Africa and between Africans and policy makers in the United States.

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