Africa in International Negotiations: A Critique of African Common Positions

Siphamandla Zondi

Abstract
It has become common for 53 member states of the African Union who constitute about 28% of the UN membership to harmonize their individual negotiating positions on major international issues in order to turn their numbers into real political clout in international negotiations. While the African Group has existed in UN processes since the 1960s, in the last two decades it has gained prominence for pro-active approach in some cases and for advancing nuanced and distinct positions in key international negotiations. The idea of a discernable common African agenda is also gaining currency in all global multilateral forums. The strengthening of continental and regional integration has given further impetus to this notion of concerted diplomacy by Africa. Using evidence on the application of common positions on the UN Reform and Climate Change negotiations, this think piece suggests that increasingly the common African positions are derived from an enlightened view of Africa’s common interests than the interests of dominant African states. Yet, this positive trend in African diplomacy is undermined by a number of weaknesses including weak leadership, weak AU-RECs interface and the exclusion of civil society.

Introduction

Africa’s participation in international and multilateral diplomacy has grown significantly and become more complex. This has placed great demands on Africa’s capacity to negotiate and implement deals to its advantage. Given its

1 Siphamandla Zondi heads the Institute for Global Dialogue, a foreign policy/international diplomacy think tank based in Pretoria, South Africa (www.igd.org.za). The draft paper was presented at BIAS/CHATHAM HOUSE Seminar in London on 1 February 2011.
longstanding challenges with a high incidence of poverty, disease and conflict
and its marginalization in international affairs especially during the Cold War,
Africa has come to the realization that with growing multilateralism in the post-
Cold War era it needs to use its numbers better by advancing common positions
in international negotiations. The power of having large numbers of states would
be of no value in multilateral diplomacy unless Africa took coherent and
concerted negotiating positions during increasingly complex international
negotiations on global challenges that tend to have Africa as their epicentre.
Consequently, the number of common positions and platforms by African
countries in international diplomatic forums has increased since the mid-1990s.
This has enable the African Group in the United Nations and other platforms to
play a much more distinct role in international diplomacy than in the past.

But whether this idea of an African Group and its common negotiating positions
will affect Africa’s relations with global power and globalization depends on how
they have enhanced Africa’s position in multilateral diplomacy and led to a clear
definition of Africa’s collective or common interests. It is also inextricably linked
to the idea of neutralizing the dominant neo-liberal agenda and the divisive
influence of external powers on intra-African affairs. Ultimately, the measure by
which the efficacy of Africa’s role in international diplomacy should be the extent
to which it represents a form of distinctness and ingenuity by Africa in an
increasingly complex international environment.

Using Africa’s positions on the UN Reform and Climate Change as case studies,
this think piece unpacks the key dynamics that undergird the idea of common
positions in Africa’s role in multilateral diplomacy and its effect on Africa’s
relations with global power through international negotiations.

**Terms and concepts**

A discussion of this relatively new theme in African studies must begin with a
definition of key concepts and terms employed. By multilateral diplomacy, we
denote the interaction amongst states over issues that concern them in platforms
where more than two states participate. This often takes the form of negotiations
or discussions towards some consensus position on issues at hand. Multilateral interactions take place at regional, continental and global levels.¹

African common positions distinguish Africa’s participation in international diplomacy as a bloc through the African Union or the African Group from the activities of individual African countries in international forums including those conducted in the interest of Africa. These positions are often declared as official common policy approaches to especially contentious international challenges.

Common interests relate to points of agreement produced through a process of intra-African negotiations at the African Union and regional organizations with a view to promote joint approaches for the common good. These constitute shared concerns and interests in regard to a matter on the negotiations table. Common interests denote dimensions of issues on which interests of different states and regions converge. This think piece seeks to understand whether African countries have learned to look beyond narrow national and regional interests in pursuit of effect in international negotiations. This will be called a pragmatic approach to Africa’s international relations.

Common positions are decisions that Africa takes after a protracted negotiation processes within the AU processes to constitute a common stance on a matter. They are outcomes of lengthy consensus decision-making, the usual manner in which Africa takes critical decisions. These take the form of AU resolutions, declarations and common positions that serve as concrete negotiation mandates for African negotiators on specific issues. The central concern for this think piece is to analyze the extent to which these positions and how they are carried out constitute a common good.

The concept of negotiations might seem straightforward, but on closer analysis it means various things depending on what track or mode of diplomacy it is used for. Negotiations are essentially about participants finding points of convergence in the competing national/regional interests that they put on the table in order to find agreement that is acceptance to all sides.² In bilateral diplomacy, the
process of finding 'common ground' is easier because there are normally two sets of interests and two sides to reconcile. But in multilateral diplomacy, there are more than two players and sets of interests on the table, making negotiations a lot more complex exercise. This think piece focuses on an even more complicated form of multilateral negotiation where Africa’s internal multilateral negotiations paves the way for international multilateral negotiations.

**Africa’s role in a changing multilateralism: the context**

The point is that with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, global power relations have changed from a bipolar situation to what Samuel Huntington describes as a sort of uni-multipolar hybrid environment. While after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US remained “the sole state with preeminence in every domain of power – economic, military, diplomatic, ideological, technological, and cultural – with the reach and capabilities to promote its interests in virtually every part of the world,” there has been an emergence of other significant powers and many smaller powers to create a hybrid of superpower and several major powers interdependent on each other in many respects. This esteemed position has at times encouraged the US to act unilaterally and thus undermine multilateralism.

With stronger multipolarity, multilateralism has also grown, manifesting itself in the proliferation of alliances and coalitions. While some alliances are based on ideological orientation of members, increasingly they are issue-based and aligned to geo-political divisions in the world. This has had a positive effect on Africa’s participation in global affairs because it has made the role of regions in the international system stronger. In the most recent past, what some called the multilateralism of small, exclusive clubs like the G20, BASIC and now BRICS has grown, creating new opportunities for developing countries to influence international decision-making. But this phenomenon also poses the danger of excluding poor countries and, more importantly, to frustrate the search for a new, inclusive, just and fair international system replacing the one built on the outcomes of the Second World War in which Africa, Asia and Latin America had a peripheral role.
Of course, there is still a debate on whether Africa is a form of a pragmatic alliance based on geo-political considerations or it is a sentimental solidarity united by the countries’ colonial and neo-colonial experiences. This think piece suggests that Africa exhibits both tendencies and that it is increasingly solidarity for rather than merely against something out there. The common positions Africa on international issues, which we will discuss below, demonstrate this gradual change in Africa’s multilateral diplomacy.

**Africa’s negotiation positions: case studies**

The case studies discussed below are meant to suggest that Africa is becoming increasingly conscious of the sheer power of numbers in multilateral diplomacy and is organizing itself a lot better as a group by taking positions predicated on common interests on major international issues. Because these positions are arrived at through a process of internal negotiation guided by the AU broad vision, they may be assumed to be weak being based on the lowest common denominator. But the case studies also show that some common positions are sufficiently strong to enable Africa to make a distinct input in international negotiations. The two major common positions discussed here are: the Ezulwini Consensus on the UN Reform of 2005 and the 2009 Common Position of the Committee of African Heads of State/Government on Climate Change.

**Ezulwini Consensus**

While the need to reform of the international system so it can better respond to the problems of the world is an old idea, it gained currency after the publication in 2005 by Kofi Anan, the then UN Secretary-General, of a report entitled: *In Larger Freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all.* It recommended reforms of the UN Security Council, among other proposals, as a response to transnational global challenges including changing nature of conflict, terrorism, transnational crime, poverty, and disease epidemics. This led various groups of countries to develop their positions on the nature of reforms needed, especially in regard to the UN Security Council. The debate that would ensue
would revolve around permanent seats and veto rights in the Council, with a majority of states calling for the expansion of the Council.

In 2005, the 53 African countries (constituting 28% of UN membership) met at Ezulwini in Swaziland on the UN Reform and produced a negotiating position on Africa’s entitlement to permanent and non-permanent seats in a reformed Security Council as well as the reform of several other organs of the UN. The Ezulwini Consensus as the common position is called was a culmination of a protracted and difficult process of bargaining among major African states.

This negotiating position was based on a consensus that that can be traced back to the Tunisia Summit of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1994, where Africa declared its intention to push for the democratization of the UN Security Council to make it more representative by expanding its composition on the basis of the principles of equitable regional representation and collective responsibility for maintaining world peace.  

In 1997, the Open-ended Working Group established by the UN General Assembly in 1992 to consider and submit proposals on the expansion of the UN Security Council produced a set of proposals commonly known as the Razali Plan (named after the Malaysian Ambassador, the then president of the Assembly who guided the process at the time). The plan, which was replicated in the UN Panel Report of 2004, proposed the enlargement of the Council by nine seats and offered two alternative models for doing so. The first model provided for six new permanent and three new non-permanent seats, all without veto power. The second proposed a new category of eight four-year renewable-term seats (as opposed to current practice of non-renewal non-permanent seats), which would rotate among medium-sized states selected according to agreed criteria.  

Taking its cue from the NAM positions on UN reform adopted at its Jakarta and New Delhi Summits in 1992 and 1997 respectively, the OAU Summit held in Zimbabwe in June 1997 in the same year adopted a firm African position on the UN reform in broad. The Harare Declaration spelt out this as follows:
• The size of the Security Council should be expanded to reflect increased UN membership by increasing the number of seats from 15 to 26 and that this expansion should include both permanent and non-permanent membership;
• In the expanded Council, Africa should be allocated, at least, two permanent seats chosen according to the OAU’s system of rotation;
• Africa should be allocated no less than five non-permanent positions in the expanded Council;
• The new members should enjoy the same privileges and powers as current ones;
• Ultimately, all members of the Council should be nominated by their regions and supported by vote in the General Assembly;
• The strengthening of the Council transparency and interaction with non-Council members;
• The decisions on Council reform should be subject to general agreement by all regions;
• The reform negotiations should deal with both the improvement of its working methods and its composition; and
• The right of veto should be gradually curtailed until it is completely removed.

The Summit then directed that the African Group in the UN should prepare a concrete proposal for the open-ended Working Group on the restructuring of the UN Security Council, ensuring that the general agreement takes in account Africa’s common interests as expressed in the Harare Declaration. It also mandated all Africa representatives to the UN to elaborate this position in detail and do their best to defend Africa’s common interests regarding the UN reform agenda. It also directed African ministers of foreign affairs to remained seized with the matter until its logical conclusion, giving guidance to UN representatives.

Then in 2005, following the release of the report of the UN High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, the AU establish a process of dialogue among
amongst member states and regional blocs in order to firm up an African Common Position on the proposals contained in the report. It established a Committee of 15 AU Members to lead this process and proposal such a common position. The Committee Report put together at Ezulwini in Swaziland and adopted as an official African position at the AU Extraordinary Summit in Addis Ababa in March 2005 commonly known as the ‘Ezulwini Consensus.’ The report described Africa’s response to each of the major issues raised by the UN report including disease epidemics, poverty, debt, trade imbalance, environmental degradation, conflict, terrorism, and crime.

It also proposed African inputs on responses recommended by the report including the idea of responsibility to protect, legality of force, peace-keeping, post-conflict reconstruction and the reform of UN organs like the Security Council. The general point made on all issues that is that action should bolster multilateralism, promote the role of regional institutions, understand Africa’s systemic vulnerabilities and be consistent with previous AU declarations and resolutions on each issue.9

On the reform of the UN system, the common position decried the failure to realize the pivotal importance of the General Assembly as the most representative and, therefore, more democratic of the UN organs. It called for improved efficiency and interface between the UNGA and UNSC. It also echoed the idea of improving the institutional efficiency of the Secretariat and called for appointment of Africans in middle and senior management positions. The common position also recommended the strengthening of the Human Rights Commission and the establishment of the Peace-building Commission to assist countries coming out of devastative conflicts.

However, it is the common position of the reform of the UN Security Council that attracted most attention. It stated the demand by Africa to be represented in decision-making structures of the international system and that such representation should at the minimum take the form of two permanent seats and five non-permanent seats on a reformed Council. While Africa has historically
been opposed to the idea of veto rights, it recommended that if given permanent seats it would expect the same privileges as the five permanent seat holders or the P5 (US, China, Russia, UK and France).

The first challenge for this position was the idea of regional representation when the current system is about putting countries on the Council on the basis of their individual pedigree. The African Group argued consistently that regional representation was actually the crux of their proposal in the hope that such a route would lead to better representativity on the Council. The second was the fact that no other region made the same proposal; instead alliances of like-minded and similar-sized countries including the G4 (Germany, Brazil, India and Japan) produced alternative proposals. The third challenge was that the number of seats Africa proposed suggested a radical change in the Council composition and possibly its power distribution, a route the existing permanent five did not contemplate.

However, the main criticism of the Ezulwini Consensus inside and outside Africa is that it was an inflexible negotiating position, making it a non-starter or position doomed to fail from the onset. Some questioned the unity of purpose and the strength of agreement among African states, given deep divisions on the selection criteria and which states would qualify to represent the continent. The collapse of discussions between the AU and the G4 to find common ground was blamed on Africa’s intransigence driven by a few states whose position on the common position was ‘all or nothing.’

Critics generally questioned the manner in which the common position was advanced rather than the integrity of the position itself. After all, AU Summit in Libya in July 2005, just two months before the grand UN debate on reform, reaffirmed the Ezulwini Consensus, but made a provision for flexibility during the actual negotiations. Realizing that the Ezulwini demands may lead to stalemate, the AU set up a Follow-up Mechanism on the Reform of the United Nations comprising of 13 members, i.e. a core group of three member states plus two member states from each of the five AU regions to ensure flexibility on the part
of the African negotiating teams. It was mandated to “to negotiate with other
regions of the world and stakeholders and to take necessary measures that
would permit the attainment of Africa’s aspirations as enunciated in the Ezulwini
Consensus, bearing in mind the necessity for reciprocal support from other
interested groups and within the framework of achieving the provisions of the
Ezulwini Consensus and Sirte Declaration.”

The AU Assembly directed the Mechanism to consult with the AU chairperson
and chairperson of the AU Commission should there be a need for flexibility
during negotiations. It intimates its willingness to convene urgently in order to
certify major deviations from the consensus position on the basis of the
outcomes of negotiations with other regions and major powers on the matter.

The leading African countries failed to convince member states rigidly
committed to the position that it was practically impossible for Africa to get its
way without support from other players. This is where the challenge for this
particular common position was. Negotiators failed to strike a deal with other
reform-minded blocs with the result that the negotiations had to reconcile
reform proposals that were drastically different, on the one hand, and a P5 that
was increasingly resistant to consider expansion of the Council and dilute their
own power. However, this was not a failure to try, but a failure to reach
consensus on compromises negotiated with members of the G4 in London in
September/October 2005. The extra-ordinary AU summit in November 2005
was divided on the proposed compromises.

Part of the challenge is the African Position was, unlike the other two positions,
exclusively focused on Africa. By the time a draft proposal by the G4 was
submitted (with the express support of 30 other member states), it had taken
Africa’s position into consideration, the reason why it proposed two permanent
seats each for Africa and Asia, one each for Latin America and Western States,
and four non-permanent seats each for Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern
Europe. The difference was that the G4 wanted veto powers to be conferred
only 15 years after the amendment of the UN Charter, an idea that did not sit
down well with the African Group. Although Japan pulled out of the G4, its proposal still had the support of 30 other countries including several individual African countries, making it a potential dealmaker between Africa and the G4. An integrated proposal had the chance of getting the support of over 60% of UN members. But, there was a hardening of views rather than the flexibility that the AU had decided on. In the end, Africa was actually divided over the issue, thus weakening the common position.14

After the collapse of the grand debate in 2006, the Ezulwini consensus remains the official common position even though many African states are exploring alternatives being discussed in UNGA working groups including the idea of semi-permanent seats of ten-year terms. The influence of a few states opposed to gradualism and compromise has helped wreck African unity on the subject. In the process, the big contenders for permanent seats, South Africa and Nigeria, have continued to project themselves as leaders of the African agenda through their effective roles as non-permanent members in the UNSC. They both claim to be acting in the interest of the collective by using the Ezulwini consensus as the framework of their position on the UN reform. Thus the common position has move from the AU to African powers claiming benevolent credentials.

The Common Position on Climate Change

Early in 2009, African Heads of State and Government directed ministers concerned with environmental issues to work out a consensus position that African governments would use as a common position at the Conference of Parties under the auspices of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change to be held in Copenhagen in December of that year. Of course, ministers were expected to build on consensus that had developed on environmental governance over the years as well as general agreement on climate change cobbled together in preparation of the COP 12 held in Kenya in 2006. The fundamental point that Africans had long agreed on is that Africa bears the brunt of the worsening environmental challenges, some of which were known to be man-made. For this reason, the consensus was that Africa ought to be biggest
beneficiary of any international agreement on the mitigation of these challenges, so its say need to be given a fair hearing in international negotiations.

Specifically, the African Group Position towards COP 12 was consensus amongst African governments on the following points:

- The UNFCCC is the legitimate platform and the Kyoto Protocol the preferred legal framework for a negotiated global response to climate change, one that encompasses both mitigation and adaptation measures;
- Any future commitment must be based on substantial, concrete and observable reduction of carbon emissions by Annex 1 parties (industrialized countries);
- It underlined the need for building human, technological and systematic capacity of African countries to develop effective national responses and interventions in keeping with international agreements;
- It called for firm international agreement on climate change adaptation and to that end, it strongly supported the idea of an Adaptation Fund as meeting of parties under the auspices of the Convention and governed on the basis of one country one vote;
- It called for a speedy operationalization of the Special Climate Change Fund and the Least Developed Countries Fund as critical sources of much needed resources for climate change responses in Africa;
- It proposed a formula for the allocation of disbursement of the Global Energy Efficiency and Renewable Fund based on a vulnerability index;
- It called for an increase in Africa’s access to the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) projects by ensuring an enabling CDM investment environment and access to commercial credit and a flexible window of opportunity to claim credits under CDM;
- An agreement on the establishment of technological transfer funding mechanisms as critical for the achievement of MDGs;
- A strong focus on education, training and awareness creation programmes targeting citizens in vulnerable countries on the basis of the New Delhi work programme on the Convention.15
This common position helped Africa successfully influence the negotiations agenda and outcomes. The fact that Africa hosted the Conference and that the alignment of its consensus with positions of major developing countries helped give Africa influence at COP12. As a result, it won concessions on the prioritization of adaptation, increased funding for energy efficiency efforts, targeted capacity building initiatives and partnership between UNDP and UNEP to help Africa access CDM projects.\textsuperscript{16}

Towards COP 16, the African Committee of Heads of State and Government adopted a common position, which was consistent with the above-mentioned position, but placed emphasis on two overriding priorities: long-term cooperation to combat climate change based on the principle of common, but differentiated responsibilities and adaptation. The position spelt out elements of this as follows.

On common, but differentiated responsibility:

- Developed countries should make substantial and predictable funding, technologies and capacity building available to support adaptation efforts;
- They should take concrete steps to modify consumption and production patterns in order to substantially reduce carbon emissions;
- Developing countries’ commitment to adaptation measures was conditional upon support given by developed countries and the unperturbed pursuit of poverty eradication and own development;
- The removal of all barriers to access to resources and technologies for adaptation measures be evidenced by concrete measures;
- Africa called for a measurable global goal on emissions reduction along with subsidiary goals and targets on efforts to change consumption and production patterns, on transfer of financial resources and technology to developing countries, on meeting the full costs of the adverse effects of climate change, and on stabilizing greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere;
On adaptation

- It recommended adaptation measures that are urgent divided into immediate, short, medium and long-terms and designed for national, regional and international implementation;
- It called for an institutional framework under the Convention to enhanced and support adaptation through mobilization of resources and capacity building programmes;
- New and substantial public funding commitment (no less than 2.5% of developed country’s GDP) to support country adaptation programmes; and
- A new international mechanism to address both the risks and compensation incurred by developing countries as a result of climate change.

Once the common position had been agreed, various African leaders led by the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, engaged international actors to garner support for the idea of a binding outcome from the Conference of Parties in Copenhagen (COP 17) in December 2009. Inevitably, the African Group had to make concessions with major players in the hope that there would then be a suitable outcome from Copenhagen. The concessions with China and the EU on climate change funding or compensation in the run up to Copenhagen, while at the same time sounding like hardline on common, but differentiated responsibility should be understood as an attempt to mix flexibility and firmness in its negotiation strategy.¹⁷

When it looked like the Copenhagen Conference was going to collapse over divisions principally between China and the US, South Africa together with Brazil and India were invited into US and China talks on a compromise deal. The idea was that the emerging powers represented interests of developing countries needed to help heal the divisions between the US and China on climate change proposals on the table then. Realizing that a legally binding agreement could not be reached, South Africa used the small group (commonly known as the BASIC
discussion to find a political agreement on contentious issues in consultation with 28 other countries that South Africa consulted with in the process.

These talks resulted in a political agreement called the Copenhagen Accord, which covered the following contentious issues: how to record economy-wide binding emission reduction targets for developed countries; the creation of a mechanism to record emission actions by developing countries (including countries like Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, South Africa and South Korea that agreed to submit information); $10 billion per year until 2012 and $100 billion per year by 2020 towards the measurement, reporting and verification of emission reduction; and a technology development and transfer mechanism. So, principally the Accord was an agreement between developed and developing countries on contentious issues of “how to share and reflect responsibility, commitment and action among developed and developing countries” as well as “how to verify and ensure compliance with respective commitments” and linked to this, the question of “who pays”.

Was South Africa’s participation in the BASIC talks a betrayal of the African Group and its common position? This question has been hotly debated in the aftermath of Copenhagen with some suggesting that SA had abandoned the common position and thus betrayed Africa. But a careful analysis of the Copenhagen process and the SA’s participation in basic suggest a different situation altogether. The first point is that when the BASIC process started, the prospects of a legally binding agreement had all but diminished. So, the BASIC was for all intents and purposes a response to this failure, an attempt to salvage a political agreement to help sustain negotiations towards a legally binding agreement after Copenhagen. Such a political dialogue should not be seen as a replacement of the negotiations on the technical deal. BASIC, therefore, was a platform for political leaders rather than diplomats and negotiators. It was about creating a political climate for continuation of the actual talks. According to the SA government, South Africa consulted widely during the talks on the Accord and that it received the backing a wide range of countries in Africa and beyond. The
Accord would have been reached without South Africa’s participation, any way; and that might have not taken into consideration Africa’s demand for a commitment to emissions cut by developed countries.

**General Observations**

*Diplomatic clout:* In both case studies, the idea of common negotiating positions represents a growing realization by African countries that they stand to lose in international negotiations unless they harmonized their positions. It is a realization that individually they do not possess sufficient political and economic clout; and that they have inadequate diplomatic capital to ensure favourable outcomes. It is also recognition of the growing complexity of the multilateral negotiations environment with many competing interests and new fault lines as club diplomacy becomes more common.

*The complexity of African interests:* The African Group comprises of 53 states of different sizes, political outlook and economic make-up. While they belong to five AU regions (and eight recognized regional inter-governmental organizations) recognized by the African Union, there are currently fourteen regional organizations in total. African countries group themselves into linguistic formations often influenced by their colonial history. As a result, there are many commonalities among former French and British colonies as the largest two groups of African countries, but there is very little in common between the two. There are no processes in place to enable these groups of countries to harmonies their views and interact with each other, so that they bring to continental negotiations positions that represent their shared interests. While Africa uses the principle of simple consensus to arrive as common positions, there is insufficient room for especially small and island states to make significant inputs into the process. Yet, because the discussions are inclusive in form, at least, and are geared at getting every country pleased with the outcome, the African common positions generally represent the regional interests of countries. But when this collides with their national interests, countries tend to deviate from common positions.
The intergovernmental coordination: The official AU position is that the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) are the building blocs for continental integration. The Protocol on Relations between Regional Economic Communities and the African Union sought to enable RECs to establish ‘an organic link with the Union’ in order to strengthen relations, to harmonies policy positions and prepare for integration into the African Common Market. It makes provision for RECs to make proposals on modalities and policy issues through the AU Specialized Technical Committee. In line with the systems theory of decision-making, RECs are seen as constituent parts of the whole, whose duty is to allocate values to parts in order for multiple actors to contribute to policy decisions and, therefore, the outcomes. But there is no effective interface between the AU Commission and the RECs, and the RECs only have an observer in the AU. There is inadequate institutional mechanism to co-ordinate this interface especially at the political level because the Committee of African Ministers of Integration remains an ad-hoc body.

Suprenationalism?: Common positions are undermined by the failure of the organization to evolve into a supranational organization. The AU remains an intergovernmental organization whose decisions are still driven by interests of individual member states. While the intention has been to turn the institution into a supranational body underpinned by shared sovereignty, nation states are reluctant to cede any sovereignty to the organization in order to enable it to independently pursue the common interests of the continent. For this reason, individual states’ interests tend to compromise the shared interests that common positions epitomize. This is why member states tend to choose one or more of them to champion and manage its common positions instead of mandating the chairpersons of the AU and the AUC to represent their common interests.

The co-ordination of Africa’s external relations: The idea of concerted negotiating positions is weakened by lack of a framework for co-ordination of external relations by RECs and the AU. As a result, both RECs and the AU conduct international relations separately and often in competition with each other.
There is very little evidence of alignment of RECs’ international relations and African Common Positions. The draft Protocol on Relations between the African Union and Regional Economic Communities is vague on this matter, only pointing out that RECs should ensure that their international engagements are in harmony with harmonized policies and programmes between the two tiers of continental governance. However, this does not specifically enjoin the two sides to harmonies frameworks and the conduct of external relations.

*The flexibility dilemma:* in both cases and in all other new position, the AU makes provision for concessions to be made, but the national interests of individual African countries have tended to prevent consensus on compromises to be made. There is intransigence on the part of individual countries, part of which has to with discomfort of some about the power and influence of a few big countries. The compromise mechanisms tend to over-estimate the ability of the AU central organs to manage continental diplomacy when the power still lies with national capitals. By and large, there is no room for compromise during negotiations because it is often extremely difficult for the AU to work out areas of compromise before hand because that would require difficult internal negotiations. They also need to know beforehand about parts of the common position that other parties could find difficult to agree to.

*Regional powers as champions:* Often common negotiating positions benefit from the willingness of major African states or leaders to champion them, which means willingness to lobby internally and externally about its content and concessions to be made. All multilateral diplomacy requires sufficient political will on the part of decision-makers to work effectively. Political pressures can make or break multilateral negotiations and a political champion (or several champions) is, therefore, important.²¹ Besides political championing, such states should also be willing to put human and technical resources into ‘getting others say yes’ to the common position, a complex and highly technical process at times. Chances of successful championing or robust, but pragmatic leadership are enhanced when the champion has a good understanding of working methods, systems and protocols involved and when it has influence or prestige in eyes of
others involved in the negotiation process. The challenge for Africa is that only few states possess these qualities and choosing them all the time may go against the principle of regional representation and rotation of leadership. In Copenhagen, Ethiopia led the championing of the African position, but it lacked the technical wherewithal, diplomatic clout and international prestige to do this successfully. In the end, South Africa had to step up to the plate and risk being seen as a power-monger.

**Conclusion**
The making of multilateral positions and agreements through negotiation process is difficult, but making these positions work is even more complex as it entails causing individual actors and institutions to act in keeping with the compromise position even when the temptation to advance ‘own’ interests is enticing. This applies to the implementation of AU positions within Africa and to how Africa participates in international negotiation processes. Understanding how Africa conducts negotiations, navigates the complexities generated by competing interests and pressures that characterize international negotiations helps understand the many factors often reduced to the idea of political will. Political will is stating the obvious without shedding light on the dynamics of African multilateral diplomacy; it is as good as ascribing the change of weather to forces of nature. Africa has improved its ability to harmonies its diverse national and regional interests to produce consensus positions to guide its participation in international organizations.

As has been the case with the Ezulwini Consensus and the African Common Position on Climate Change, common positions are easier to make than to implement during complex multilateral negotiations. They do not necessarily result in outcomes that are in the best interest of the continent. At times, these positions have contributed to stalemates and collapses in international negotiations much to the detriment of small and poor states in Africa who depend on multilateral coordination to advance their interests. Africa needs to improve how it arrives at common positions, especially the role of small and marginal states, and how these positions are championed to the benefit of all in
Africa. The engagement of with civil society and other partners is a critical missing link between good positions and desired outcomes.

Notes

6 See, for instance, Murithi, T., Between Paternalism and Hybrid Partnership: The Emerging UN and Africa Relationship, FES Briefing Paper 2, February 2007.
10 See the speech by the South African Representative to the UN during a recent UNGA debate on the restructuring of the UN at http://www.southafrica-newyork.org/pmun/view_speech.php?speech=4924406 (accessed 6 January 2011).
13 'Report of the Open-ended Working Group.'
14 'Africa holds key to UN Reform' at http://www.southafrica.info/africa/un-180506.htm (accessed on 3 September 2011).
16 ‘Africa at the environment meeting,’ The New Nation, 12 December 2006.
17 The African Group was heavily criticism by among others the chair of the G77+China for capitulation to developed countries of climate change funding and by others for being rigid and unrealistic. ‘Copenhagen was a disaster for Africa’ at http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cif-green/2009/dec/23/copenhagen-africa-climate-change-deal (accessed 23 December 2011).
19 This idea was first contained in the Declaration by the first Conference of African Ministers of Integration, 30-31 March 2006, Ouagadougou. Several AU Summits then reiterated it subsequently.
20 See the Draft Protocol on Relations between the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities at www.african-union.org.