

## **CONNECTING PEOPLE, LINKING COUNTRIES, BRIDGING CONTINENTS**

### **Hon. Bert Koenders, Former Minister for Development Cooperation, The Netherlands**

My first encounter with AWEPA was already in the mid-1980s, when their temporary office was across from the Parliament in The Hague and I was an advisor to a group of Dutch parliamentarians. In those days AWEPA was a leading force in Europe calling for sanctions against apartheid South Africa. My first ever trip to Africa was with AWEPA in April 1988, to visit ANC exile camps in Zambia, where I first met Thabo Mbeki, and to attend parliamentary conferences in Lusaka and Harare. The delegation started by going straight from the airport to a meeting at State House with President Kaunda, and later in Zimbabwe we met with President Mugabe. These are the caliber of contacts provided by AWEPA.

It is extremely important for European parliamentarians to travel to Africa. This was then, and remains today, one of the most significant contributions of AWEPA. MPs need to see what the conditions are like on the ground if they are going to make informed decisions. I became an advisor to Dutch parliamentarians on Africa policy, and then made contact with Parliamentarians for Global Action. This experienced underlined for me the importance of (North-South) inter-parliamentary cooperation.

In the early 1990s, when I was working for the United Nations in Mozambique, AWEPA already had a strong democracy support programme there. I knew AWEPA President Jan Nico Scholten well, and we worked together in 1992-1994 in the preparation for the transitional elections. I was a member of the AWEPA election observer delegation in Nampula during Mozambique's November 1994 elections, which was an unforgettable experience. I went on to become a Member of the Dutch Parliament in 1997, and founding President of the Parliamentary Network on the World Bank in 2000, where continued cooperation with AWEPA was geared toward enhancing democratic accountability.

If I can point out two success that were highly significant out of the many in AWEPA's 25 year history, it would be these: the campaign to mobilize European MPs in the struggle against apartheid, in which the financial sanctions played a key role in support of internal opposition, but were in no way a foregone conclusion; and the post-Cold War opening up of Africa in the 1990s. AWEPA played a key role in the new development of European relations with and policies on Africa. Cooperation, missions, trainings, etc. all helped to strengthen young African parliaments from a low capacity base, and newly elected MPs were supported with international contacts and networks. AWEPA also succeeded in passing on its professional electoral observation capacity to African parliamentary partners.

AWEPA not only survived but flourished during a challenging period in African-European relations, when funding was problematic for the politically sensitive work it carries out and donors were used to setting the priorities. That AWEPA was able to carry on its work over this long period has a lot to do with the dedication and competence of leading members, and staff, particularly those who have been involved for many years, devoting their career to Africa – perhaps after participating in an inspiring mission there.

Looking toward the future, it is as important as ever for AWEPA to continue its work of strengthening relations between Europe and Africa, especially by engaging with European parliamentarians to get them to understand the concerns of African colleagues. African MPs also need to understand the political constraints and concerns alive in Europe. There is a strong need to consolidate the often still fragile democratic gains achieved in Africa. There is still a danger of stopping too soon after a successful election, and thinking that the task of democratization is finished. I do not agree with the so-called Asian model of autocratic rule being better for development. Internationally, we need the sort of alliances AWEPA is helping to build, whether they are on aid effectiveness, climate change, anti-corruption or peace-building. In all these areas, strong parliaments are important.

It is good that AWEPA is there working toward a better future based on the lessons learned of the past period. We need to ensure that parliamentarians take up their broad responsibilities, such as in post-conflict reconciliation, achieving the MDGs, and keeping their own behavior and compensation in line with agreed norms. Ultimately, when parliaments move from being part of the problem to being part of the solution, they enhance the public's trust and respect for the institution and role of parliament. There is still a big challenge for AWEPA to face, in Europe as well as in Africa.