

Five years of the African Standby Capacity Roster: Taking stock of lessons learnt

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The five-year anniversary of the African Standby Capacity Roster marks an important moment to reflect on challenges experienced and progress made.

In August 2020, the African Union (AU) and its partners celebrated the fifth anniversary of the African Standby Capacity (ASC) Roster. This marked an opportune time to reflect on the journey of the ASC since its inception, and to share best practices regarding the deployment of civilian personnel in peace support operations (PSO).

These deliberations also showed how far the AU has come on matters of peace and security since it was formed in 2002. In the late 1990s, a global shift saw PSOs moving away from a traditional military focus to become multidimensional; including a police and civilian component in addition to the military. They also expanded their focus and mission mandates to include post-conflict reconstruction and development (PCRD).

Recognising the need for civilian expertise – which is often cross-cutting – in PSO; and also acknowledging the difficulty of obtaining civilian expertise at short notice; the African Standby Force (ASF) Policy Framework (2003) recommended for the AU Commission (AUC) to establish and centrally manage a civilian expert roster. In response, the AUC and regional economic communities/regional mechanisms (RECs/RMs) established the African Standby Capacity (ASC) Roster, providing civilian capacity for operations under the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) – and specifically the ASF.

During the conceptualisation phase, which lasted from 2008 to 2012, a number of key tasks were undertaken. These included technical meetings and workshops; a scoping study on technical considerations of the roster; and appointing technical partners to assist with the roster development.

From 2013, the AUC in collaboration with RECs/RMs began to review and fine-tune the roster workflows and recruitment processes, and recruited rostering officers. Between 2013 and 2015, three training packages were provided for rostering officers. The technical modifications, testing and launch of the ASC database were finalised in March 2015.

The ASC represents an important operational platform through which the AU and the RECs/RMs, acting both individually and collectively, can plan, deploy and manage operations. The AU and RECs/RMs have transformed from being largely political entities to an encompassing operational aspects, which often means being the first responders in times of crisis.

The AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), for example, shifted from a primarily military PSO to a multidimensional operation. As the AMISOM mandate evolved, it became important to deploy both police and civilian personnel. At the time, the absence of a standby civilian roster curtailed operations on the ground.

Similarly, in Mali and the Central African Republic, operations were also limited by difficulty in recruiting and deploying civilian personnel. Instead, AU headquarter staff were dispatched to Bamako

and Bangui. Their deployment was rapid, and personnel knew the organisation and brought their expertise with them. However, it also created challenges, as staff were neither properly prepared nor trained for the mission environment. Additionally, their absence at the AU headquarters created gaps in strategic capabilities, and meant that their regular AU work was put on hold.

The ASC Roster was intended to ensure that capacitated personnel would always be available and on standby for deployment. This paved way for deepened engagement between the AU and RECs/RMs in recruiting civilians for field operations; the use and assessment of roster systems and procedures; and other dialogue forums – including an annual coordination meeting.

Each region is intended to have a minimum of 300 capacitated roster members ready for deployment at any given time. This quota is, however, yet to be achieved.

Globally, the dynamics surrounding the maintenance of peace and security continue to evolve. At the same time, the need for the AU and RECs/RMs to fill that space is growing. Already, Africa deploys the highest number of staff and troops to United Nations (UN) missions globally. Increasingly the dynamics of the UN Security Council (UNSC) are also changing. The role of the regions is also receiving greater attention and priority by the UNSC – not only at the political and military-security level, but also in working together on the civilian dimension of PSO. In the last two to three years, the UNSC has increasingly been calling on the AU and regional organisations to collaborate in further developing the civilian dimension.

- The ASC is key in this regard, as it allows the AU and RECs/RMs to deploy civilian experts in a manner that is rapid, predictable and replicable. Apart from PSO, there has also been growth in other operational deployments, including human-rights observer and investigation teams, election-observation teams, ad hoc operations and medical personnel in response to the outbreak of epidemics.
- The AU aims for 50% to 70% of civilian personnel to be deployed through the ASC Roster, as had been decided by the AU Specialized Technical Committee on Defence, Safety and Security. However, previous deployments reported that the RECs/RMs had recruited roster personnel without following the processes stipulated by the AU. This challenge is further exacerbated by the AUC human-resources processes. The policies and systems that were put in place for deployment using the ASC are not part of the staff rules and regulations. The AUC's recruitment process for civilian personnel is an internal procedure that takes up to nine months. This means that, amid all the policies in place, if the need for civilian expertise arises in an AU PSO, it may take up to nine months to have the required staff on the ground. During a crisis, nine months is a long period – given that the response is meant to be immediate.

For the ASC to be optimally functional, these recruitment and human-resource procedures have to be resolved. An exclusively military approach is incapable of resolving a conflict; nor can such an approach address matters like poverty, unemployment or inequality. A military presence is intended to bring stability, while the civilian and police components are at liberty to address matters that relate to PCRD and nation-building. These can be diverse, and range from law and order, to improving roads and infrastructure, to economic reforms, to security-sector reform. In this way, civilian experts help the mission to address the underlying drivers of conflict.

Over the past years much has been achieved by the ASC to operationalize the roster system such as the:

1. Conceptualization of the ASC in 2013 in terms of how the roster should be in terms of screening mechanisms, training and deployment, the tools needed (e.g. HR Policy Framework that would allow for the usage of the roster as a recruitment tool), and how Rostering Officers can be trained efficiently and effectively.
2. Finalization of the Human Resources Policy Framework in 2015 titled “The Administrative Guidelines on Recruitment, Selection, Deployment and Management of Civilian Personnel in Field Operations”.
3. Development of the ASC database system and standardization of the screening processes outlined in the Selection Guidelines Manual.
4. Development of an online training platform to harmonize the training and preparations of Rostering Officers in the different RECs/RMs.

The level of cooperation and consensus-building that is required to ensure the full operationalisation of the roster system has often delayed the progress of the ASC, and it has been challenging for the AUC to obtain sufficient buy-in from political policy organs. Furthermore, for the roster system to be fully operational, it will require political will from member states, backed by solid recognition of the role of a well-capacitated civilian dimension in PSO.

A major challenge in most RECs/RMs has been that the ASC Roster has been maintained single-handedly by the roster officer – and not at an institutional level. This has undermined sufficient understanding of the ASC and has caused interruptions whenever staff changes occur in the RECs/RMs of the roster officer, or within the AU Peace Support Operations Division and its partners. Frequent staff rotations at the RECs/RMs limit continuity and also disrupt the retention of institutional memory. This means that every two to three years, following staff rotation, additional efforts are needed to capacitate new rostering officers.

Platforms to enhance the ASC roster system through collaboration, joint activities and programming should continue. Opportunities such as the annual civilian focal point retreats and the ASC coordination meeting have managed to take stock of progress on the continent, and have been effective in ensuring well-coordinated implementation strategies and programmes.

It is evident that knowledge of the civilian dimension needs to be enhanced further among decision-making level officials – within the AU as well as within the regions. The complexities of contemporary security threats and challenges, and the variations of response options outside the traditional ASF model, highlight the need to diversify peace operations. The AU and regional organisations have to continue to raise the knowledge and awareness on different threats and opportunities that exist in conflict environments.