

AEPI STRATEGIC VISION 2025-2026



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FORWARD BY AEPI PRESIDENT

What is AEPI

AEPI is a European based organisation created to foster and develop democratic structures in Africa, and support for Africa in Europe. It is composed of current and former Parliamentarians with significant experience in the practical running of democratic systems in Parliament and in Government.

Our purpose is to create partnerships with African colleagues, to share experience and knowledge. Democratic structures have many and varied shapes in Europe and in Africa. We aim to learn from each other the unique challenges that every society and democratic institution faces. From that shared peer- to -peer learning to strengthen the capacity and effectiveness of Parliaments and Parliamentarians in

meeting the needs and requirements of their people.

How do we go about our mission.

The following Strategic Vision sets out our history and origins which lie deep in African



political development. From mobilising European Parliament to oppose apartheid, to assisting with democratic capacity building; AEPI and its predecessor (AWEPA) organisation have built partnerships in Africa for more than forty years.

We also have as an important role, advocating for Africa in Europe. In an increasingly polarised world, where the focus on Africa is lessened, AEPI wishes to be a voice for Africa, it's importance in world affairs and its place in global governance institutions.

Brendan Howlin
President

AEPI MANAGEMENT BOARD



Left to right: John Corrie, Bodil Valero, Brendan Howlin, Els van Hoof and Katharine Bulbulia.

The Management Board is registered in Amsterdam, the Netherlands and runs the organisation's day to day operations and meets at least once every quarter. They handle both current business and plans for the future.

Mr. Brendan Howlin, President

Brendan Howlin Served for over 40 years in parliament as an Irish Labour Party Politician. He served as; Leader of the Labour Party from May 2016 to April 2020; Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform from 2011 to 2016; Leas-Cheann Comhairle (Deputy Speaker) from 2007 to 2011; Deputy Leader of the Labour Party from 1997 to 2002; Minister for the Environment from 1994 to 1997 and Minister for Health from 1993 to 1994. He was a Teachta Dála (TD) for the Wexford constituency from 1987-2024. He was a Senator from 1983 to 1987, after being nominated by the Taoiseach. Amongst other roles he served as Labour Party Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs, Northern Ireland, Brexit and Justice and continues to play a role in the Irish political arena.

Ms. Els van Hoof, Vice-President

Els van Hoof is Chair of the Commission of Foreign Affairs in the Belgian Chamber of Deputies. She has served in the Belgian Parliament since 2008. Prior to this she worked as Cabinet Advisor for a number of Belgian Ministers and for an NGO on cooperation and development.

Ms. Bodil Valero, Secretary

Bodil Valero is a Swedish politician who served as a Member of the European Parliament (MEP). She served as a member of the Swedish Parliament from 2006. She is currently Global Greens Coordinator and President of the G100 Security and Defence Wing. She is the elected President of the G100 for 2025.

Ms. Katharine Bulbulia, Treasurer

Katharine Bulbulia was elected four times to the Irish Senate (Upper House of the Irish Parliament). She was principal political adviser to the Tanaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) of Ireland for nine years. She is a specialist in professional regulation and knowledgeable about governance.

Mr. John Alexander Corrie, President

President John Corrie is a Scottish former conservative Member of Parliament and Member of the European Parliament and is Honorary Life President ACP/EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly.



1. INTRODUCTION, CONTEXT AND MISSION

It is AEPIs firm belief that strong parliaments – in their role as arbiters of peace, stability and prosperity – lie at the heart of long-term development and the realisation of human rights. Accordingly, AEPI strives to strengthen African parliaments and promote human dignity by supporting democracy on the continent.

AEPIs strategy is to put effort towards achieving SDG Goal 16: ‘Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.’

It is AEPIs vision that parliamentarians will be able to fulfil their role as the democratically elected voice of the people. They have a constitutional mandate and a sworn obligation to represent the people’s interests. Unfortunately, many African parliaments do not have the resources, or even the capacity and skills required to carry out their role effectively. In some cases, governments tend not to prioritise funding for parliamentarians, and often donors tend to fund civil society organisations. But it is the parliamentarians who are directly accountable to the people. Bypassing parliamentarians weakens democracy, undermines development efforts, and often leaves citizens without a policy-level representation of their rights and needs.

Years of experience have demonstrated that networks of parliamentarians have proven to be important vehicles for enhancing their individual and collective capacity and effectiveness, especially in the developing world. The World Bank said in a recent report that *‘the importance of networks in developing capacity and improving the effectiveness of parliaments and parliamentarians in developing countries was ‘a critical lesson’ they learnt from their work with parliamentarians.*

Many players on the global arena, and the African continent specifically, do not always have the local people’s best interests forefront in their decisions. Neither do they consider the long-term effects of their actions today. People elected by the people are mandated to put the interests and needs of the people who elected them as a priority.

The uniqueness of AEPI is in its peer to peer learning that helps build the capacity and effectiveness of parliamentarians in Africa, whilst also providing invaluable insights and knowledge building for their counterparts in Europe. Exchanging with and learning from those who have faced similar issues, and who understand the ways of democracy, and the workings of a well-functioning parliament are invaluable.

The challenge today is to make aid even more effective in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The capacity of parliaments in Africa needs to be strengthened as the principal institution of representation, legislation and oversight. They need to participate in drafting national development policies and targets and receive progress reports from their governments. They should be able to promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all.

In the past, AEPI has played an important role in leading the initiative to have parliamentarians represented in national and global aid discussions. Emphasizing the central role that parliamentarians should play in policy discussions. AEPI aims to broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance.

History of AEPI

AEPI stands upon solid parliamentary experience in Africa stretching over 40 years. It has its roots in fighting apartheid in the early 1980s. Originally known as AWEPA and then AWEPA, it was formed primarily to mobilise Western European parliamentarians against Apartheid, supporting the anti-apartheid struggle in Africa, and the organisation of post-conflict and post-Apartheid democratic elections.

After the abolition of Apartheid in 1994, at the request of African partners, AWEPA continued its work to support democratisation processes and respect for human rights in Africa, through capacity building of parliaments. This enabled AWEPA to broaden its scope to other parts of Africa, where the end of civil war and undemocratic regimes gave rise to a growing demand for support to parliaments, political parties and democratic institutions in general.

The parliaments that AWEPA supported just after the first democratic elections developed into more democratic, and more sophisticated institutions. Whereas right after the elections, the needs of parliaments are usually quite basic and general, as the countries develop further, needs become more specific and complex.

After the cessation of AWEPA, many African parliamentarians and parliamentary institutions asked where they could find the type of invaluable support they had been receiving and still needed. At the same time, many of the European parliamentarians involved in AWEPA felt that the vital work needed to be continued. Thus, AEPI was formed to continue the important work.

AEPI has legal rights to all of AWEPA's intellectual property and its large network. Starting afresh gave the opportunity to modernise and streamline the structure and procedures, learning from and leaving behind unnecessary procedures. This has enabled AEPI to be more in tune with the development cooperation environment of today and is something it

1.1 Uniqueness and added value

The unique advantages of AEPI are in three main areas:

1. Membership skills base: AEPI has a membership base from the European Parliament and European national parliaments, who are willing to devote their extensive knowledge, experience and wide-ranging expertise to cooperate and offer peer to peer learning with African colleagues and to push for people-oriented policies in Africa.

2. Partnership approach: AEPI's development of long-term and trusting partnerships with its African parliamentary colleagues ensures local ownership and accountability. This enables a successful convening role under even sensitive political circumstances and extends through the project cycle to joint monitoring and evaluation processes that determine new programming.

3. Network: AEPI has a well-established network of political and parliamentary entry points, extending back more than 40 years, with direct access to parliaments and regular harmonisation contacts. Through direct access to parliaments, AEPI functions as a catalyst for change.

Added value of AEPI:

- A compact, non-bureaucratic organisation;
- Concrete actions are relevant to real needs;
- Political neutrality and demonstrated impartiality;
- Pragmatic, action-oriented approach and quick response;
- Political contacts and entry points at the highest levels;
- Capacity and experience in democratic transition and peace processes;
- Reliable accountability to donors for programme funding;
- Quality and dedicated leadership.

AEPI is structured in such a way as to ensure due diligence, accountability and transparency within the organisation. It has established a system of policies, practices and processes designed to promote corporate governance principles for its direction and control.

1.2 AEPI's methodology

AEPI carries out thorough problem analysis to inform the planning process of potential interventions. To achieve this, AEPI and its relevant partner/s conduct a thorough needs assessment. It collects, analyses, and evaluates data and information on the background and context of a possible programme. This enables AEPI to agree with the potential beneficiaries in designing specific and relevant programme interventions.

1.3 AEPI's Core Competencies

AEPI provides technical and procedural support to legislative institutions to mainstream their interests and concerns into the functioning and management of the institutions.

1.4 Parliamentary Process Improvement

AEPI's approach is to improve existing processes or create customised parliamentary processes that respond to local demands. Those include:

- > Training MPs and Staff in Parliamentary Procedures and Practices;
- > Training MPs and Staff in the operations of parliamentary committees;
- > Induction Training of new MPs;
- > Mentoring and providing technical /procedural advisory services to the Presiding Officers;
- > Developing/Improving the Rules of Procedure;
- > Training in the legislative process, including Bill analysis;
- > Empowerment of special interest groups in the parliament, such as women and youth MPs in lobby and advocacy skills;
- > Production of parliamentary reference materials such as manuals, handbooks and training films;
- > Providing ongoing technical assistance.



1.5 Parliamentary Outreach

- > Methods of Parliamentary outreach, more particularly constituency outreach and public hearings;
- > Training MPs and staff on the content, conduct and follow-up of parliamentary outreach events;
- > Providing ongoing technical assistance.

1.6 Objectives

- > Seeking a broader funding partnership basis;
- > Further develop AEPI's relationship with EALA: The East African Parliamentary Institute, the EALA Women's Caucus and training with EALA members.
- > Further develop the Six Provinces Programme in DRC with Enabel, Belgium.

2. ACTIVITIES

2.1. Internal Functioning

AEPI is registered in the Netherlands as an Association since 2018. It has a Management Board consisting of (former) parliamentarians from across Europe and across the political spectrum. Its membership consists of parliamentarians from donor countries, who also carry the role of overseeing the implementation of their countries' funding. Its structure also consists of an Advisory Board consisting of both African and European parliamentarians.

There is a trend in the donor funding to put money into large projects and large basket funds or to local Civil Society Organisations. This leaves little space for an organisation such as AEPI which has a unique and important role to play. AEPI plans to bring this issue to debate in Europe as there is a great benefit in working also with smaller, more streamlined organisations.

AEPI's strategy for the coming years is to build on its strengths such as its short line of command, enabling it to respond to a need within 24 hours. Overhead costs are kept low, ensuring that the majority of the resources its partners donate to AEPI are used for its objectives and mission. AEPI works with consultants, which enables basic costs to be based on actual work done, and limits ballast during less active periods of a specific activity. Where feasible, consultants in Africa are hired, where they have direct access to partners.

Over the last two years, AEPI has developed a series of policies and procedures to ensure transparency, safety and effectiveness. This includes various forms and HR and reporting systems. The main ones can be found on the AEPI website at www.aepi-international.org.

Work will continue in the coming two years to improve and solidify AEPI's transparency and accountability and the sustainability of its work.

2.2. Europe

AEPI believes it is important for there to be a group of current and former parliamentarians from across Europe acting together to strengthen the voice for Africa in Europe, and to work together to assist the practical tasks of African Parliamentarians. All AEPI's intentions for this Strategic Vision needs resources to actualise. Therefore, throughout the year, communication will be maintained, further explored or started with the donor community throughout Europe. Parliamentarians of the respective parliaments play an important role in this process.



During the period 2025-2026 AEPI intends to continue to strengthen and expand its network in Europe to further its mission in Africa and strengthen the ties of like-minded parliamentarians across Europe. This includes:

- Strengthening and expanding its network of AEPI members;
- Assisting in keeping African issues high on the agenda in Europe and assist in strengthening the role and unity of the European and national development cooperation agendas in relation to Africa;
- Keeping members involved through regular and professional communication and dialogue;
- Facilitating the pro-active and timely approach of members who demonstrate an interest in participating in AEPI activities.

2.3 Africa

The requests from AEPIs African partners are broad. The Management Board decided to focus on the East Africa region through its partnership with the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA).

2.3.1. EALA

AEPI has been involved with the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) in Arusha, Tanzania since EALA's inception in 2001 as the independent, legislative arm of the East African Community. Today, the East African Community has grown from three original partner states to eight with the admission of the Democratic Republic of Congo in July 2022.

Facts about EALA

EALA's core functions include law-making, approval of the Community budget and support of its programmes, liaison with National Assemblies of Partner States on EAC matters, and providing advice to the Council of Ministers on the implementation of the EAC Treaty. EALA carries its functions through bills, motions for resolutions, questions and reports of Committees. It consists of the legislature and the administrative division.

The overall objective for EALA has six Strategic Interventions:

Legislation of Regional Laws.

Establishment of a harmonised framework for EALA Members at National level.

Establishment of an efficient and effective communication and reporting mechanisms between the EALA and National Assemblies.

Establishing and strengthening the legislative, oversight and representation functions of EALA that have clear linkages to those at national levels.

Establishing Standing Committees in Partner States' Parliaments responsible solely for EAC affairs.

Promote and branding EAC corporate image.

agreed that the programme would aim to build and enhance the capacity of EALA to meet the

As the period of the current Memorandum of Understanding has ended a new one has been drafted to cover the three areas below. The aim is for this new MoU to be signed during the first half of 2025.

The AEPI/EALA programme is highly demand-driven, and EALA Members and staff express a strong feeling of ownership for the programme. The work plans, both in terms of design and content, originate within EALA. In addition, EALA staff members are integrally involved in all aspects of the programme's administration; this is to ensure the sustainability of the programme.



The three overlapping programmes within the EALA-AEPI partnership that will be addressed during the period of this Strategic Vision.

2.3.1.1 The East African Parliamentary Institute (EAPI)

EALA passed the East African Parliamentary Institute (EAPI) Act, providing the legal framework for establishing a parliamentary training Institute. Once operationalised, EAPI will be the first regional Parliamentary Institute in Africa to provide a unique opportunity for Parliamentarians and other stakeholders within the East African Community to sharpen their skills in parliamentary matters. It will also be the think tank of the East African Parliaments on how to deepen democracy and fast-track regional integration. The role of the Institute will also be to contribute to the effective and efficient execution by Legislatures of their roles and functions in democratic governance; to participate in the preservation and transmission of parliamentary knowledge; and to provide directly, or in collaboration with other institutions of higher learning, facilities for parliamentary research, studies and training.

It is aimed to be a specialised resource centre for the training and capacity development of both Members and staff of EALA, member states' Legislatures and beyond the region. The project would aim to create an institutional mechanism for the delivery of capacity building interventions for Members. Parliamentary staff and stakeholders.

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Nairobi, EAPI's training and research activities will target Parliamentarians, Parliament staff, civil servants, representatives of the private sector, civil society, youth and women groups and other stakeholders on issues of regional integration. This will include trade facilitation, accountability, relations between the East Africa Community (EAC) and its major trade partners and developing a culture of accountability and delivery on regional, projects, programmes. The aim for 2025 is to discuss with EALA and The Centre for Parliamentary Studies in Nairobi priorities and planning and to arrange for the launch of the institute.

The Institute would automatically provide access to policy-makers of one of Africa's biggest regional blocks. Such opening through interactions with staff and parliamentarians from the region would facilitate AEPI's work with the eight-member states of the region and beyond.



2.3.1.2 Training of EALA members

In 2018, EALA and AEPI entered into an agreement to implement a parliamentary capacity building programme with EALA members. Since AEPI's predecessor closed down EALA has been struggling to find a partner for capacity building so there is a distinct lack of capacity. In consultation with EALA the most urgent needs are:

- Budgeting processes. How members should be and the role they play in budget approval.
- Oversight of the budget.
- How the assembly through the Committee on Accounts plays a role in overseeing implementation of projects of EAC.

2.3.1.3 EALA Women's Caucus

Drawing on the Strategic Plan of the EALA Women's Caucus, AEPI and the EALA Women's Caucus produced a Concept Note: The voice of women in the East Africa Region. Focusing on capacity building of intending, young intending, new and current women parliamentarians in the eight EALA member states, the aim of the programme is to assist more capable women parliamentarians into office in the region, and to assist them in carrying out their mandate effectively.



2.3.2. DRC

2.3.2.1 Background

The aim of the Programme of Cooperation (2023-2027) between the Kingdom of Belgium, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, is to increase the capacities of newly elected MPs in order to strengthen democracy and the rule of law. DRC has reorganised its province system from 11 to 26 provinces. Many of the provinces have little or no experience with regional governments and need assistance. Six provinces have been selected to receive parliamentary training in which Enabel, Belgium, aims to partner with the Belgian Parliament and AEPI in the implementation of the programme.

2.3.2.2 Programme summary

The scope of work is as follows:

1. Strengthen technical skills: Assess the needs of Parliamentarians and their support administrative staff and develop a bold foundation of essential skills (control, interacting with provincial executives, writing skills, useful monitoring skills, etc.);

2. Strengthen technical support for the production of parliamentary acts;
3. Strengthen technical capacities of new elected MPs to collect information and sustain evidence - based dialogue to challenge provincial executives;
4. Organize exchanges of practices between MPs at national or international levels;
5. Develop tools to promote a consultative dialogue between populations and CSOs including farmers' organizations.

Within the scope of the Programme of Cooperation, Enabel aims to strengthen institutional and technical capacities of Parliamentarians at regional levels in many fields including:

1. How to build strong ties in interacting with regional governments?
2. How to improve interactions with CSOs and populations to promote a constructive dialogue? What, When? Where? With what tools?
3. Building technical skills to draft Parliamentarian acts
4. Strengthening data collection and analysis skills: What kind of data are essential for MPs for their work and how to effectively collect and disseminate them?
5. Effective budget control
6. Which tools for MPs' efficiency?



It has been agreed that six provinces is too many to start with. The province of Tshopo has been selected as the pilot for the programme, with others to follow if the first is successful. The idea is to screen for:

- An estimate of their parliament's knowledge;
- To assess what they need;
- To use that information to create a strategic plan.

3.2 Thematic Programmes

AEPIs strategy is first and foremost to help build strong, democratic institutions throughout Africa. They also have a history of assisting with specific, and important thematic areas in parliament which will assist in this, and assist in achieving various targets indicators of SDG 16. The following are three thematic areas AEPI aims to develop further in the coming years.

3.2.1 Aid Effectiveness

Since parliamentarians have the power to adopt policies, oversee budget implementation and monitor government performance, they should play a leading role in development policies and aid programmes. A well-functioning parliament remains the cornerstone of democracy, with free and fair elections an essential pillar. Elections need to be coupled with and followed by effective parliaments, which exert the constitutional powers they possess.

One of the constitutional duties of Parliamentarians is to scrutinise activities and prevent abuse by the Executive arm. It is their role to put in place a continuous review mechanism to ensure timely course-correcting when/if necessary. The strength and effectiveness of a parliament depends on the extent to which parliament's operations remain determined by itself, but few African parliaments can determine and approve their own budgets, severely compromising parliamentary autonomy. Those parliaments with independent budget offices, such as Kenya and Uganda, prove more effective with budget oversight.

Most European parliaments have systems in place to hold the executive accountable for aid funds and programmes. They are kept transparent and accountable, and all official development programmes are available for examination by parliament. In many European countries, parliamentarians work closely with NGOs who alert them to concerns and can give detailed briefings for issues that need to be addressed and debates to be had.

If all countries had similar structures and oversight systems, then parliamentary partnerships would run much smoother, especially in the field of development aid. Transparency in both donor and recipient countries keeps the development budgets relevant and on track, and increases ownership. To be effective parliamentarians need to understand what this entails. In many countries in Africa, this is still too weak.

At the Second-High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness (2005) it was recognised that aid could - and should - be producing better impacts. The Paris Declaration was endorsed in order to base development efforts on first-hand experience of what works and does not work with aid. In 2008 at the Third High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness held in Accra, all OECD donors, more than 80 developing countries and some 3000 civil society organisations from around the world joined representatives of emerging economies, the United Nations and multilateral institutions and global funds in the negotiations leading up to and taking place during the Accra meeting.

AEPIs President, Brendan Howlin, led a parliamentary delegation to Accra, ensuring that from that point on parliamentarians would be part of the aid effectiveness debate. AEPI believes that parliaments are at the centre of the domestic accountability cycle. It is vital that they are able to hold their governments accountable. Without that oversight, aid is in danger of subverting accountability.

Whilst progress is being made, many African countries still rely heavily on foreign aid. Yet several studies have shown that foreign aid has failed to deliver sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction. Critics point to the fact that official aid creates dependency. Others argue that foreign aid might not be a problem by itself, but misallocation of resources, corruption, and bad governance limit Africa's ability to use aid.

But substantive research has found that, in the absence of good governance and institutions, aid had minimal impact on delivering long-term growth. It's not the aid that is ineffective, it is the lack of good governance. This is why one of AEPIs strategies is to do work towards ensuring parliamentarians have the capacity, and understand their oversight role, in ensuring aid is effective.

3.2.2 Equal Opportunities

It is AEPIs firm belief that all people should have a voice. This includes women, youth, people with handicaps and minorities. It is part of AEPIs strategy to work to ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels.

From its inception, AEPI worked with women's caucuses and women MPs to empower them in their work and their lives. AEPI has been involved in legislation concerning women's rights, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and child marriage. They have trained youth and young parliamentarians and helped give them a stage.

AEPI has been instrumental in bills being passed concerning the rights of women such as the ground-breaking 2016 SADC Model Law on Eradicating Child Marriage and Protecting Children already in Marriage.

At the time of AWEPA's demise, they had established a Regional Parliamentary Network on FGM with MPs from eight West-African countries (Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Niger, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau). AEPI had also created an Anti-FGM/C Parliamentary Caucus in Kenya.

In Europe, AEPI was also active in bringing gender related issues onto the agenda. For example, AEPI Vice-President, Els van Hoof, worked to expand the Belgian law on FGM, making individuals who actively promote and facilitate FGM in Belgium also prosecutable and not only the implementers of FGM. She also drafted a bill concerning medical support for victims of FGM/C.

These are just a few of the types of activities AEPI hope to continue in the coming years. SDG 5 aims to 'Achieve Gender Equality and Empower all Women and Girls.' But as UN WOMEN's website states 'While women are a source of economic vitality across Africa, discrimination hinders their opportunities.' There is still a great deal to be done.

3.2.3 The Environment; Climate change and food security

In the preamble to the 2030 SDG Agenda, world leaders affirmed that they are: *“Determined to protect the planet from degradation, including through sustainable consumption and production, sustainably managing its natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change, so that it can support the needs of the present and future generations.”*

Increasing temperatures, rising sea levels, warming oceans, changing precipitation patterns and more extreme weather are threatening the ecology and human health and safety. If it continues, food and water security and socio-economic development in Africa will be severely impaired.

Over the years AEPI has worked to assist with climatic issues in Africa. From conferences raising awareness on climate and food security to field trips with parliamentarians of the Lake Chad region, which has shrunk by 90 per cent over the last 60 years causing numerous problems in the region.

The FAO begins its 2022 report on 'Food Security and Nutrition in the World' by saying that their report *'should dispel any lingering doubts that the world is moving backwards in its efforts to end hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition in all its forms.'* Conflict, climate change and economic instability are combining to create a serious food shortage and raise the costs of nutritious food. The distance between achieving SDG 2 is growing rather than shrinking.

Governments play an important role in transforming their country's agrifood systems. Parliamentarians need to ensure that policies are in place to ensure better access to affordable nutritious food for all citizens. Guidance, training and awareness raising is needed in many parliaments in Africa. Focus needs to be given to their role and responsibility in ensuring investment is made in sustainable food production.

Achieving a more sustainable environment, and mitigating the effects of climate change is a goal that cross cuts through nearly all the 17 SDG goals. Specifically, it is mentioned in goals 2, 6, 7, 12, 13, 14 and 15. This crisis is something that affects every single person in Africa and is something AEPI envisions incorporating into its activities in the coming years.