

The EU-Africa partnership: At a strategic crossroads

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>> The Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) launched by European and African leaders at the Lisbon summit of 2007 has so far failed to deliver on its key promise to fundamentally transform development and political cooperation between the continents. Three years of uncertain implementation reveals just how wide a gap separates the rhetoric and reality of the new strategic partnership. Regional and global transformations compelling a revamp of relations include the expanding roles of emerging powers on the African continent; a sharp global economic downturn and pressures on Western development budgets; and an incipient pan-African integration process that commenced with the creation of the African Union (AU) in 2000. Despite this backdrop, it seems the devil is in the detail of precisely how to implement the agreement to achieve value-added cooperation across eight separate thematic partnerships.

Thematic partnerships

- Peace and Security;
- Democratic Governance and Human Rights;
- Trade, Regional Integration and Infrastructure;
- Millennium Development Goals;
- Energy;
- Climate Change;
- Migration, Mobility and Employment;
- Science, Information Society and Space.

Among the explicit political commitments are stronger European support for continental integration in Africa, closer involvement of non-state actors (especially Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and businesses) in EU-Africa relations and an upgraded political dialogue to arrive at joint positions on shared inter-continental and global concerns. Three years on, the

HIGHLIGHTS

- The Joint Africa-EU Strategy has struggled to integrate some pre-existing frameworks and transform the logic of elevated partnership.
- Both sides admit difficulties in the face of unfulfilled expectations of additional EU funding.
- Implementation of the agreement is clouded by three inter-related sets of dissonant discourses.
- Institutional complexity in Europe is matched by the hazy, embryonic process of continental integration in Africa.

»»»»» putative framework of equal ‘continent-to-continent’ partnership which commits both parties to ‘treating Africa as one’ still has to exert the promised integrating influence on relations as a whole.

DIFFERING CONCEPTIONS

European and African views of how – and through what mechanisms – the JAES should begin to exert its influence differ. African states and the AU Commission (AUC) emphasise the need for a new JAES-dedicated finance envelope with a specifically pan-African focus. They regard this as the key to finally developing the Joint Strategy into an operational framework capable of bringing existing development cooperation programmes within its ambit. In contrast, European technocrats insist on the viability of reallocating existing resources to create a separate JAES envelope. Diplomats on both sides admit there have been difficulties in the face of growing African expectations that the new framework would provide additional EU funding.

As a symbolic gesture of shared responsibility, the African partners accept the principle of co-financing the Strategy. But they also point out that the JAES – rooted in the idea of transcending Europe and Africa’s donor-recipient relationship – will enjoy more enthusiastic political buy-in if it brings additional funding benefits. This conundrum points to an underlying conceptual imprecision and a lack of clarity in the framing of the JAES ambition.

MINDING THE GAP

The agreement makes sense when viewed as a vehicle for up-scaling European commitment to economic and political advancement in a strong, united African ally, in exchange for African positions that are more sympathetic to European needs and expectations bilaterally and globally. Efforts to clarify precisely what such a bargain entails may be one potential means of moving beyond the present discordant tunes in ongoing discussions.

In terms of evolving a coherent operational structure, a joined-up continental approach is hampered by a number of factors. First, the status of rival frameworks remain unclear. The European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument (ENPI), for example, relates only to North African states, and the EU-South Africa Strategic Partnership is essentially bilateral. The JAES promises to gradually integrate these pre-existing frameworks but it has struggled to address or transform their logic of elevated partnerships, which presently benefit only a minority of states. The Africa-EU Ministerial Meeting in late April 2010 acknowledged the lack of coherence between the JAES and the competing structures, but merely calls on the AUC to improve relationships with ENPI and the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group.

Second, negotiations over a second Action Plan between the AU and EU Commissions since 2009 have so far failed to smooth over differing approaches, reconcile competing priorities, or feed into a clearer articulation of respective African and EU agendas beyond the already well established dialogue in the peace and security arena. The April ministerial statement further fuels widely held concerns of a developing mission creep. Ministers concluded that there is no need for a second Action Plan that is fundamentally different in substance from the first Action Plan – this despite glaring implementation problems. Their statement skirts around the most difficult issues – including the African demand regarding funding – just months before the next EU-Africa summit is expected to provide political approval for implementation of a second Action Plan. The current state of play raises serious questions about the extent to which agendas actually converge, and whether it is at all possible to push towards a meaningful strategic partnership in the absence of clearer guidance and political direction.

Third, even technical discussions within Joint Expert Groups (JEGs), formed with the remit of harmonising plans for synergetic, result-oriented and value-added outcomes in currently disjointed cooperation programmes, have accomplished little of significance.

DISCURSIVE DISSONANCE

At a political level, implementation of the JAES has been clouded by at least three inter-related sets of dissonant discourses now evident between the parties. First, Europe's negotiation of Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with African states has been pursued in ways that undermine the regional integration objectives of the Joint Strategy. In southern Africa, for example, interim EPAs have been concluded with individual states (including Swaziland, Botswana, Lesotho and even Zimbabwe), but the agreements are seen as impeding prospects of harmonising overlapping regional arrangements like

the SADC and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). In reality, the à la carte approach undermines the JAES Trade, Regional Integration and Infrastructure partnership and limits its scope

to lend greater coherence. The EU defends the agreements as a step towards eventual region-wide deals; critics condemn their bilateralist slant and the strong-arm tactics involved.

The negotiations have, not surprisingly, struggled in the other regions. ECOWAS in West Africa insists for instance on negotiating additional development assistance as 'sweeteners' for some of EPA's less palatable aspects (a framework better known by its French acronym, PAPED). Given that Europe broadly agrees with African partners that fair non-preferential trade agreements are cornerstones of integrated regional development to support broader inter-continental partnership, it is odd that the strategic objectives of the JAES are easily trumped by narrower considerations.

Dissonance is further compounded by lack of trust about motives and unspoken intentions. For instance, the EU sees the JAES as an avenue to address challenges posed by emerging economic powers and their growing rivalry to Europe's own

historic role in development cooperation in Africa. In this connection, the agreement of the JAES in 2007 was telling in terms of its timing. It came in the wake of the inaugural China-Africa summit of November 2006, attended by no less than 48 African Heads of State and Government and later followed by the first India-Africa summit in April 2008. However, the European side has found itself repeatedly pushed onto the back foot in its attempts to stimulate debates about the compatibility of China's approach – especially with hard won advances in good governance and other practices. Nevertheless, the Asian model (based on 'resource-for-infrastructure'/concessional loans) continues to expand its reach into many African resource producers. Such discussions have been carefully airbrushed out of the JAES agenda, even though they remain a major point of friction.

Related to this, recent expressions of disappointment on the part of the African partners stem from the unfulfilled expectations of additional European finances anticipated through the Joint Strategy. How does Europe respond to the Asian rivalry – on a continent where it was once the pre-eminent, unrivalled development partner – when the discourse among African diplomats has turned to questioning Europe's very ability or will to offer a meaningful alternative to the Asian model? These three inter-related sets of issues form the larger backdrop of the unaddressed expectations against which the difficult dialogue on a second Action Plan on the Joint Strategy is taking place.

UNLOCKING INSTITUTIONAL GRIDLOCKS

On the practical side, three sets of inter-related challenges continue to constrain progress towards a robust and meaningful partnership: cumbersome and complex institutional structures; funding the Strategy; as well as incomplete understanding of institutional dynamics on both sides. Failing efforts to achieve traction and integrate pre-existing development cooperation programmes into an overarching JAES framework partly reflect a stasis within European bureaucracy. Discussions with EU offi-

»»»»» cials reveal uncertainty about how to proceed in the absence of a driving political initiative to push through the necessary re-tweaking of internal EU development cooperation processes. Ongoing debates about the structures of the new European External Action Service (EEAS) have in the meantime introduced additional complexities into the process.

Institutional complexity and rigidity in Europe is also matched by what many regard as the hazy, embryonic process of continental integration in Africa. Division of labour and spheres of responsibilities between pan-African structures and sub-regional ones like ECOWAS and the SADC in southern Africa is defined more by a complex bureaucratic turf war that Europe is only just beginning to understand. In the controversial EPA negotiations for instance, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) have not ceded the initiative to the AU in an area seen as their own core economic competency. Indeed, the AU is only mandated by African Heads of State to coordinate and promote coherence between its own integration strategy and those of the RECs. Senior AU officials often point out that some difficulties arise because Europe does not fully understand that the AU, 'unlike the EU, [does] not control the economic agendas of [its] member states and RECs'. The complex intra-African dynamics in fact beg the question of how many of the AU's own commitments are real deliverables; particularly in those matters where RECs wish to remain in the lead.

The EU's plans in the recently concluded Cotonou Agreement review to redistribute European Development Fund (EDF) allocations from African states towards the AU's peace and security functions have highlighted other tensions between national governments and the continental body. African states preferred EU allocations to the AU to come from additional earmarks rather than having to relinquish parts of their own national allocations under the EDF. The EU's Africa Peace Facility (APF) previously supported AU peace operations with disbursements of €440 million under the 9th EDF and a further €300 million under the 10th EDF facility. However, the AU's limited capacity for absorption remains a major challenge: of the €92 million capacity-building allocation under the 9th and 10th EDF,

only 16 per cent was actually utilised within the evolving Africa Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). At the same time, a clear financing package for Joint Strategy programmes is absent. Indeed, many multi-region funds including the EDF governance facility remain duplicated in and continue to operate in near-total independence from the JAES. While it has been carefully side-stepped so far, the ongoing review of a second Action Plan will need to elaborate a clear, comprehensive and quantifiable financing proposal if Europe and Africa are serious about bringing budding ideas of strategic partnership to fruition.

In the context of JAES plans to implicate CSOs and business in intercontinental relations, the EU has also been perceived as seeking to influence the choice of African civil society representatives. Disagreement over selection and funding of African participants to the proposed African-European CSO Forum in Brussels led to postponement of the meeting in April and in September 2009. The AU cites the close coordination between the EC and European CSOs while asserting African prerogatives to elect representatives in the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOCC), where African CSOs participate. Similarly, the AU demurred on EU proposals to co-host an Africa Diaspora conference. AU officials were concerned that such a forum would be instrumentalised towards internal cohesion concerns and integration of migrant communities in the EU. The AU's plan was to tap the Diaspora as a development resource. Some of the tension partly mirrored unsettled debates within Africa itself, but the EU's interests would be better served if those dynamics were understood and managed accordingly.

Beyond the promotion of the Joint Strategy at the level of the AU, the process of actually coalescing and clarifying pan-African agendas and positions on various issues is still at a very early stage. Outside foreign policy circles, government ministries and officials in many national capitals are unaware of the JAES. This partly explains the distinct lack of enthusiasm to take ownership of the JAES agendas among African non-state actors, particularly the business community. It seems that intra-African integration processes are not mature enough to sustain the type

of strategic, equal inter-continental exchanges envisaged under the JAES. With such nagging concerns about capacity asymmetry between the two sides, it could indeed be argued that JAES seems entirely ahead of its time.

CONCLUSIONS

The EU and Africa can decide to follow either the bold original vision of the Joint Strategy or pursue instead a limited tweaking of its technical implementation aspects. Yet, given the uncertain debut of common EU foreign policy post-Lisbon Treaty, attention to Africa's multi-dimensional developmental challenges may even represent Europe's own best prospect for quick, morale-lifting successes on the fast evolving development cooperation front in Africa. Handled properly, ongoing discussions of a second Action Plan on the JAES may still succeed in laying the foundation for a more mature EU-Africa strategic partnership, while helping to accelerate pan-African integration plans and development from Agadir to Zanzibar. Opting for the bolder strategic route, however, will require clearer political vision and a much more forthright political dialogue than that demonstrated to date.

The EU and Africa's peace and security partnership is seen by some analysts as the most successful partnership in the JAES. Those who take this view point to three constitutive elements which they see as accounting for its triumph: shared security interests, well-developed agenda-setting and structures that support inter-continental collaborations, as well as availability of dedicated funding. However, the processes and underlying structures of EU-Africa cooperation in this sphere predate the existence of the JAES. Some even more optimistic assessments argue that it is possible to artificially replicate the enabling conditions in other partnerships to achieve results. Yet these arguments gloss over the question of core shared imperatives, which are necessary for a functioning partnership to take root and command resource allocations away from other priority areas. The April 2010 ministerial meeting moved beyond technical implementation details to call for prioritising activities of a transnational scope with clear

'added value', and potential for 'buy-in of a critical mass' of actors on both sides. Acknowledging in such an open manner that the strategy has failed to generate interest in critical constituencies is a positive first step. Beyond that, policymakers need to agree on the core expectations that have not featured prominently in discussions so far, for example the question of Europe's redefined role in Africa alongside the new global players from Asia.

Despite current budgetary constraints, the EU will need to work with African states to gradually create a pan-African envelope specifically for the JAES. One possibility is to agree a formula for carving out a separate JAES envelope out of the EDF, combined with new money and an incremental redistribution of funds out of existing programme budgets to widen the scope, coverage and visibility of the JAES overtime. This can even serve to put the EU on the same footing with China with respect to pursuing coherent, high-impact partnership programmes.

The substantive contents of some of the JAES thematic partnerships also need updating to more closely reflect current realities on the ground. One example is the agenda-setting in the 'Science, Information Society and Space' partnership. A more proactive approach will explore means to strengthen internal regulatory capacities within African nations, especially those where illicit communications and other internet-based crimes continue to threaten the integrity of global information flows.

In practical terms, there is a need for more focused and deliberate effort to help align common positions around shared continental agendas in Africa; a more integrated European approach to EPA negotiations at the sub-regional level would help accelerate this process. Moreover, African states will need to agree on the intrinsic worth of a values-based strategic partnership with Europe – while themselves defining shared African agendas that should frame it – regardless of the additional financial incentives that may or may not come with it.

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