

Spain's foreign policy in Africa: time to reassess the vision

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>> In his appearance before the Spanish Congress on 12 May 2010, Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero announced a reduction in official development aid (ODA), the first since his arrival in government; naturally, this led to complaints from various Spanish cooperation actors. Confirmation that the economic crisis is affecting foreign policy has come with the approval of the 2011 budget, which reduces ODA by 900 million euros (20 per cent of the total); and the nomination of Trinidad Jiménez as the new foreign affairs minister, largely for domestic reasons.

Beyond criticising Zapatero for failing to fulfil his promises with respect to aid, what needs to be studied in detail is how to reorganise Spanish foreign policy towards Africa in light of the current situation. Furthermore, an effective foreign policy cannot solely be sustained through an increase in aid; this has already been pointed out by several analysts who have noted the greater commitment to Africa, but criticise aspects of the foreign policy that could be improved, are lacking, or are inconsistent with the stated aims. These criticisms point to the main shortcoming of Spanish foreign policy towards Africa: the lack of a strategic, forward-looking vision that recognises the continent's complex reality and that goes beyond charitable rhetoric centred on development aid.

The impact of the economic crisis, changes in Spanish institutions and the changing international scene – in Africa and Europe – indicate that if Spain continues to maintain the narrow vision dictated by development aid models as its main reference, the important advances made in recent years may come under threat. Therefore, it is time to reassess this vision. To this end, the priorities of Spanish action need

HIGHLIGHTS

- Spain needs a strategic vision of Africa that recognises the continent's complex reality and that goes beyond charitable rhetoric centred on development aid.
- Spanish actions must be coherent with the principles that have been formulated, and cooperation policies should stand out for both their efficiency and their innovative character.
- A new and brave foreign policy could serve as a reference point for EU actions within the JAES.

»»»»» to be identified; this process ought to involve a variety of actors, and the main purpose must be to ensure that foreign policy aims are coherent both with one another and with the progressive principles upheld by the government. Furthermore, Spain must be one of the main drivers of a new, fairer relationship with Africa in European fora, through the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES).

SPANISH COOPERATION IN AFRICA

The importance of Africa in Spanish foreign policy has increased since Zapatero's arrival in government, and especially since the publication of the first Africa Plan (2006-2008) and its successor (2009-2012). Development cooperation is a 'fundamental pillar' in these documents, which seek to show 'clearly the objectives to be pursued and the necessary means put at the disposal of Spain's different foreign policy actors'. The need for such a document, which is recognised by the majority of experts, has not prevented both Africa Plans from being criticised for their reactive character, lack of a strategic vision, diffuse nature and lack of coherence.

Any foreign policy analysis also needs to mention the Master Plan for Spanish Cooperation. In its third edition (2009-2012), this seeks to be 'above all, the Master Plan for the quality and effectiveness of Spanish cooperation', and to make development 'one of the main reference points of government policy, a [...] sign of Spain's identity in the international sphere'. The Master Plan also emphasises the 'culture of learning and evaluation' that is essential to implement the aid effectiveness agenda, established in the Paris Declaration and the Accra Agenda for Action. As well as the necessary reform of the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), other notable decisions of political importance include those related to the geographic and sectoral concentration of development cooperation and Spain's possible 'exit' from countries where it currently works.

This seems a good opportunity to evaluate and (re)define Spanish foreign policy objectives in Africa. Having reached this point, we need to be clear and realistic about Spain's position in Africa: Spain lacks historic links in the continent comparable to those of France or the United Kingdom; it is also a country which, in spite of having increased its volume of ODA from 2 billion euros in 2003 to almost 5 billion euros in 2010, does not have the requisite economic might to compete with the United States or China. Moreover, the economic crisis is preventing Spain from continuing to increase aid volumes for the moment. From this standpoint, the first recommendation is that Spanish cooperation should be more integrated within diverse multilateral actions, especially those of the European Union (EU). If this means losing some of Spain's visibility, it is nonetheless the way to contribute to an EU that is stronger internationally and, if Spain can translate this commitment into greater participation in decision-making, to a Spain that is better situated within Europe.

The potential loss of Spain's visibility can also be compensated for if the AECID is able to devise differentiated actions, based on Spain's 'comparative advantage'. According to the Master Plan, this 'comparative advantage' will be officially evaluated in 2012; to date, the only notable 'distinctive identity trait' of Spanish cooperation is its values, based on human rights. This is insufficient, since few donors would state an aim to maintain a development policy contrary to human rights. Spain's comparative advantage must be more distinctive and concrete. If it does not yet have such an advantage, there is nothing preventing it from promoting one, seeking to ensure that Spanish cooperation stands out for the innovative nature of its actions, the use of Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D), or the adoption of new models for project follow-up, such as the 'Cash on Delivery' model. If there is a particular desire to emphasise progressive principles, Spain could even use its historical experience to, in the medium- to long-term, develop concrete models to support democratic transition processes.

A CONSCIOUS AND COHERENT FOREIGN POLICY

Although progressive values alone do not serve to distinguish Spanish cooperation, the commitment to these in foreign policy is as desirable as it is unfulfilled to date. The principles included in the Africa Plan – such as cross-cutting objectives (gender equality, human rights) and general objectives (support to processes of democracy consolidation and peace- and security-building in Africa) – are often overlooked when concrete decisions are taken. These significant issues of incoherence need to be resolved through firm political will, and not simply by increasing the volume of ODA. Spain's foreign agenda towards

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Africa must be articulated through politics, not development aid. This may seem obvious, but it perhaps needs to be emphasised at a time as crucial as this when, in addition to the reduction in resources, it is possible that changes to the leadership of the foreign affairs ministry and the AECID may mean that the attention of Spanish foreign policy is diverted towards other regions in the world. Africa should not slip off the agenda, and not only for altruistic motives either.

In fact, claiming that cooperation should be the axis around which foreign policy towards Africa is built does not only denote a discourse with paternalistic overtones; it is also untenable. It is true that the continent is home to the least developed countries in the world, but it is also a region with an average annual growth rate of six per cent in the last decade. This offers important opportunities to the Spanish economy – as proof of this, of the ten countries considered 'of importance' for the foreign affairs ministry, only

six coincide with the countries designated as needing 'special attention' by the AECID. The other four include Nigeria and Angola (oil-producing countries) and Kenya (a key ally against piracy in the Indian Ocean).

The frequently denounced lack of coherence between development policies and other external actions is not exclusive to Spain. The clearest example of this is the unequal trade terms established by the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) signed between African (and Caribbean) countries and the EU. There is also frequent criticism of the development models that promote projects in isolation, without taking into account how other actions neutralise potential benefits. The need to go 'beyond aid' is increasingly heard and recently the EU and the United States have pointed out how important economic growth is for development. Perhaps this only means greater reticence to keep spending money on aid programmes, but the need for a more comprehensive vision of development cannot be denied.

If Spain wants to achieve a more effective development policy, it is clear that important reforms must be undertaken. Moreover, these cannot be limited to technical questions, but must also involve drawing up a coherent position on all aspects of foreign policy. However, these reforms must not serve as an excuse to reduce commitment in budgetary terms. This revised foreign and development policy can then be defended in multilateral organisations, but it must start at home. For this, strong political will is needed in order, for example, to link the AECID's new Country Partnership Frameworks to the other trade and exploitation agreements in existence (on energy, fishing, mineral resources), so that African countries benefit, even if this means lesser gains for Spanish businesses.

The need for coherence is even clearer in relation to political objectives such as the protection of human rights and support for democracy. Two examples suffice to illustrate this. The first is Guinea Conakry (a country on which the

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»»»»» AECID focuses attention), where the political situation has been extremely volatile in the last two years. As Spain asserted its commitment to 'peace- and security-building processes', the sale of arms and munitions was authorised for a value of 2.4 million euros (Spanish aid to Guinea in 2010 amounts to 1.8 million). This was at the start of 2009, in spite of the military coup of the previous year, and only a few months before the police killed more than 150 people at a demonstration in favour of democracy. The second example is the oft-mentioned case of Equatorial Guinea, where the bloodthirsty dictatorship of Teodoro Obiang continues to receive shameful public support on the part of the Spanish diplomacy. As well as being incompatible with democratic values, this benevolent attitude towards the dictator must be reviewed, and sooner rather than later if certain information about Obiang's health is true, so as to face the scenario of a post-Obiang (senior) Guinea.

DEFENDING THIS VISION IN EUROPE

The changes needed to achieve a coherent policy on Africa require courage on the part of the government, since they cannot please everyone. This is not only because of the possibility of limiting economic agreements that benefit Spanish businesses at the expense of African countries, but also because the measures oriented towards improving aid effectiveness (geographic concentration, greater multilateral contributions, increase in AECID projects) may result in a reduction in the volume of ODA managed by Spanish NGOs. The opposition that these decisions could generate is not as great as their potential advantages. If Spain can develop a brave and coherent policy, there is nothing stopping this from serving as a reference point in the EU, at a time when the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty has created an impasse, just when the need for leadership is most pressing so that Europe can recover its international position.

The JAES, approved in 2007, constitutes the main collaborative framework between Europe

and Africa. In spite of its ambitious aims (centred on eight thematic partnerships), various studies have pointed to the obstacles which the implementation of this agreement faces. The main limitations are related to the institutional characteristics of the African Union and the existence of various levels of cooperation (sub-regional, bilateral) with responsibility over competences theoretically organised by the JAES. The only solution to resolve this involves a greater political commitment at the highest level; the forthcoming Africa-EU summit, in November, is a crucial moment in this sense.

So that the JAES becomes a powerful tool, EU leadership needs to be promoted. The paralysis generated during the setting-up of the European External Action Service (EEAS) may perhaps lead some member states to think that their interests are better served through bilateral agreements. As pointed out earlier, Spain cannot adopt this attitude; therefore, in a way, Spain is obliged to do all that it can to turn the JAES into a real instrument of mutual benefit. Faced with the strength of rapidly growing markets (China, Brazil and India), Spain must promote a decisive attitude in Europe that leads to the adoption of new ideas and models. An example could be greater collaboration in the renewable energy sector to promote the growth of African and European businesses, a sector in which Spain also has well-positioned companies. Nothing prevents Spain from working energetically but flexibly within the already existing mechanisms to improve political and economic collaboration between Europe and Africa.

CONCLUSION

This is a key moment for Spanish foreign policy in Africa. Several factors require a significant revision of foreign policy, including the impact of the economic crisis, both directly (reduction in ODA) and indirectly (first changeover in the foreign affairs ministry since 2004); changes in the practices and structures of Spanish cooperation (oriented towards improving aid effective-

ness); and the changing international context – marked by a post-Lisbon Europe and an Africa where economic growth and the appearance of new actors are altering the main dynamics. The Spanish response to these challenges must be clear and decisive.

After years of rapid increase in the volume of ODA, the time has come to take stock of what has been achieved and to visualise in detail what the future direction should be. Given Spain's characteristics, a successful foreign policy in Africa needs to be achieved through a double-sided move: current Spanish actions in the continent need to be reconsidered to make them coherent with the principles that have been formulated, and cooperation policies need to be devised to stand out for both their effectiveness and their innovativeness. These actions should also be accompanied by a more vocal and committed attitude within the framework of the EU, to promote a fairer and more prominent relationship between Europe and Africa.

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