

EU cooperation with the African Union: Problems and potential

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»» The third Africa-European Union (EU) Summit, scheduled for November 2010, will focus on the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES), which gives a stronger role to the African Union (AU). This is an opportunity for the EU to renew and simplify its partnership with Africa.

The strategy requires an end to the EU's fragmented approach, but it is not proving easy to move away from the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) framework and enhance the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) for development and trade. The EU sees the AU as a reflection of its own image – and with some reason, since the AU replicates aspects of EU institutions. But this is not enough for a forward-looking strategy of cooperation with the AU.

The AU is still problematic in terms of its international stature and institutional functioning. EU Commission President Barroso and a dozen commissioners travelled to Addis Ababa in June; this was the 4th EU-AU Commission meeting since 2005, exploring opportunities for administrative cooperation. The EU brought to the agenda the upcoming Cancun climate change conference, where it hopes to co-opt Africa more effectively than in Copenhagen. It also confirmed support for the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). The AU insisted on food security and health issues, and asked about financial transfers. This showed its limits as a strategic institution. The AU Summit in July is modestly devoted to the theme of maternal and infant health, while the West hopes for advances in security mechanisms and despairs at the AU boycott of the International Criminal Court.

The AU is often weak and is sometimes an instrument for isolated leaders such as Colonel Gaddafi and Robert Mugabe, but it has also shown

HIGHLIGHTS

- The EU must simplify its partnership with Africa and cease to use the ACP grouping as the main basis for Africa-EU relations
- This can be achieved with a stronger EU-African Union (AU) partnership, but the EU must not ignore internal AU politics and ongoing functional shortcomings
- The two areas where EU-AU cooperation should be privileged are security cooperation and the promotion of good governance

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»»»» an ability to overcome its problems. Stronger EU-AU cooperation would raise the AU's profile among African countries, and would facilitate a renewed Africa-EU relationship that fosters security and democracy.

OVERCOMING THE EU'S FRAGMENTED APPROACH

The EU cannot be an effective actor with the current large number of fragmented agreements that govern its relationship with Africa at continental, regional and bilateral levels.

The EU casts a dividing line between sub-Saharan and Mediterranean countries. The former are covered by the ACP Partnership; the latter by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Union for the Mediterranean. Some defend this division on cultural and historical grounds, but projects of African unity are as old as the states themselves. While the AU has tried to overcome this division, EU frameworks still emphasise it. Moreover, the main EU financial instruments are tied to ACP and ENP policies, both of which involve non-African partners, and therefore generate additional tensions.

ACP policies for sub-Saharan countries are governed by the Cotonou Agreement and are oriented towards development and aid. This partnership is still dubbed 'privileged' in terms of trade, but preferential agreements to export some goods actually perpetuate African countries' rentier economies. With a more geopolitical orientation, the Northern African countries are illogically grouped with the Eastern European neighbours in the ENP. ENP Association agreements do not always seem 'privileged' to countries such as Algeria, which has seen a significant loss of income (up to €1.6 billion since 2005) because the agreement lowered tariffs for EU products, while European visa policies have only become less generous. African countries feel disadvantaged in the renegotiation of agreements, despite the EU language of equal partnership.

Further fragmentation is added by the International Organisation of La Francophonie, France-Africa

summits, and Commonwealth frameworks. A single EU voice is ever less audible in Africa.

The EU conceived the JAES to streamline its approach and overcome these fragmented frameworks, underlining the 'partnership' aspect and giving the AU a central role. This is supposed to entail de facto integration of Northern and sub-Saharan Africa. However, it is uncertain that Brussels policymakers have internalised this matter – they act as if the JAES countries were only sub-Saharan, and usually try merely to apply the old ACP framework to the JAES. Non-African countries, from Fiji to Jordan, will also resist the dismantling of the ACP and ENP structures, unless the EU puts attractive alternatives on the table.

Finally, the EU-AU partnership needs more active diplomacy on the ground, based on endogenous leadership structures such as the Africa Progress Panel and on networks of civil society that Western actors know and support. The EU has positively strengthened its presence in the regional institutions in Abuja; now, its Delegation to the AU and Special Representative (SR, Koen Vervaeke) will ideally become the hub for all EU Africa policies. Bilateral EU relations with African countries are complex and diverse, but not political enough at EU level because former colonial powers retain diplomatic prerogatives. To redress this, the Delegation and SR's mandates, institutional capacity and expertise need to be clearer and stronger – this is a test for the European External Action Service currently under construction.

AU CHALLENGES AND SUB-REGIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Nevertheless, the EU cannot rely too heavily on the AU too quickly. The EU must not ignore internal AU politics and the practical problems it still poses as a partner. It must maintain economic cooperation at the level of Regional Economic Communities (RECs).

Internal politics undermine the potential EU-AU partnership, because African interests and leader-

ship are often directed elsewhere. Algeria is speaking to South Africa about energy, but outside the AU. Nigeria and South Africa are among the AU's main contributors but they invest more in their respective sub-regions than in AU integration. The AU's prestige is damaged by its protection of Mugabe and its ambiguity about Al-Bashir's indictment by the International Criminal Court. Fortunately, AU members were wise enough to prevent Gaddafi from stopping the rotating AU chairmanship. But Tunisia and Mali – among others – still follow Libya's lead. The Africa-EU Summit will actually take place in Tripoli.

Among the practical problems, the AU suffers from poor decision-making chains and a weak bureaucracy. Only days before its summit in July, a committee realised that several activities had been

duplicated, thereby draining the budget.

The JAES foresees a new financial structure – the Pan-African Support Programme – that would eventually substitute ACP funds. But this is on hold due to

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serious problems of appropriation and disbursement. The AU wants power and more autonomy, but the EU understandably needs AU accountability. Overall, the AU Commission lacks the legal power and staff of its EU counterpart, for example its overburdened Department of Economic Affairs was tasked with all of the JAES questions. To boost the partnership, the EU must step up institutional twinning initiatives within African governments and insist on a capable Commission both for the AU and the EU-AU partnership. This should be additional to the EU's existing commitment to bureaucratic support (€55 million in 2006).

EU-AU cooperation will achieve more on development and trade through the Regional Economic Communities, as is suggested in the revised Cotonou Agreement. The RECs are an integral part of the AU; eight have been officially recognised, but their relevance varies within the AU. There is nevertheless a risk of competition

between the AU, RECs and individual countries for EU attention. In 2005, the AU became eligible for ACP funding from the European Development Fund, but this should not be at the expense of more tangible economic programmes at RECs level. In general EU policy-makers have limited knowledge about sub-regional opportunities. In Central Africa, integration is only incipient, but it could help tackle illegal trafficking and human displacement. In West Africa, the EU is asking for the unification of ECOWAS and WAEMU, but this approach needs to be nuanced. On a different scale, ECOWAS and SADC already have experience with security intervention. It is uncertain whether the EU strategy is currently taking all these complexities into consideration.

SECURITY COOPERATION

The EU has devoted up to €1 billion for AU operations (in places like Burundi, Comoros and Darfur) and for the development of AU-led security structures since 2003. It is also training troops and updating facilities under Exercise Amani, building on France's experience with capacity building in several countries. The EU has ambitious plans to help operationalise AU standby forces, and to commit regular financial resources. In this process, rigorous assessment and follow-up after consultations between the relevant EU and AU Councils are necessary, but not yet sufficiently systematic.

This EU investment flows from the initiatives that Romano Prodi undertook at the end of his Commission presidency, and even more so since then. In 2009, Prodi's Report to the UN Security Council on African Peacekeeping stressed the role of the AU in the continent, and its need for more international resources – financial and material. A mainstreamed EU-AU partnership will also strengthen High Representative Lady Ashton and the European Parliament committees overseeing the EU engagement, and possibly translate into a unified EU position in the UN Security Council. Strengthening the African Peace and Security Architecture through the JAES framework is a key EU priority, and Brussels would like to establish a



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»»»»» capabilities roadmap for next November. So there is momentum.

Firstly, the EU-AU partnership should articulate a more comprehensive security approach. The APSA has been tied to specific military missions (Sudan, Somalia, Central African Republic) and to EU member states' voluntary funds, channelled through the African Peace Facility. This emphasis on military operations is explained by the role of EU member state militaries in policy-making, as well as by a reactive approach. Thus far, crisis management has been the driver, while the concept of 'human security' remains an unattained ideal. The EU must show it really is ready for a more comprehensive – yet realistic – approach, shifting to crisis prevention and peace-building mechanisms. This fits in well with EU Development Commissioner Andris Piebalgs' recognition that conflict and state fragility are connected to the Millennium Development Goals. The Horn of Africa, including Sudan, is a case in point where it is clearly necessary to combine EU operations and AU action within a broader policy scheme.

Secondly, the EU needs to be attentive to the politics in the AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC), which is the monitoring and decision-making body of the APSA. The PSC is still understaffed at military level, and there is no multi-annual budget to guarantee resources. The EU is expected to contribute in this regard, but not without considering the politicisation of the PSC – especially when PSC member states are affected by operations. Current PSC members Cote d'Ivoire and Rwanda may confront France, even if it is a main PSC supporter. Overall, an open, pragmatic EU-AU dialogue would also help the PSC 'deliver' in a more effective way, for example overcoming the stalemate of negotiations in Comoros.

FIGHTING AUTOCRATIC TRENDS

In its 2009 report, Freedom House considered that only 10 African countries were free, and that 'Sub-Saharan Africa presents [...] some of the most disheartening examples of political stagnation,

democratic backsliding, and state failure'. Its assessment of Northern Africa was also pessimistic. Against this background, the EU is not living up to its foreign policy values; it needs to bring democracy to the forefront of its African agenda, countering AU timidity and the persistent control of autocratic elites. Indeed, when Malawian president Bingu wa Mutharika was elected as AU chairperson last February, he claimed 'we must declare war on unconstitutional changes of government on African soil as it hampers the auspicious move of the continent'. Yet the AU is dragging its feet.

The EU has allocated €1 billion to the AU's election branch, but it should reconsider this focus on elections. Elections are usually expensive (for example, the 2006 DRC election cost €300 million), but deliver meagre results in 'winner-take-all' regimes. Instead, the EU must co-opt the African Union more effectively to consolidate pro-democratic institutions and leadership. The AU has agreed to democratic principles in its own Constitutive Act, but it could do much more in practice.

The African Peer Review Mechanism involves some 30 states that voluntarily subject themselves to governance monitoring. Country Reports tentatively go beyond 'naming and shaming', but there is an inherent focus on the leaders instead of the system. Many states have boycotted the Mechanism. Its Panel (the main body) has lacked the political will to formulate open criticism or to sanction bad governance. The Mechanism needs stronger institutions and active support from the Pan-African Parliament and the RECs. The EU has committed funds from its Governance Incentive Tranche, and included the Mechanism within the JAES section on Partnership on Democratic Governance and Human Rights. Co-opting the AU in this regard will enhance both the AU's democratic credentials and the initiative's profile.

In addition, the AU is not doing enough to prevent and condemn military coups, or governments refusing to leave power after losing elections. Many internal documents focus on these problems: the Lomé Declaration (2000); the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance; and a

growing body of precedents and public support. The AU's record against unconstitutional changes of government has been ambivalent. It reacted against the coups in Mauritania and Guinea in 2008, but has struggled with the cases of Madagascar and Niger. Individual leaders (such as the autocratic Blaise Compaoré) and the RECs have been in charge of mediation and sanctions in recent times, making the AU redundant. The EU must exert political pressure and help to institutionalise AU top-down democracy mechanisms.

Despite the challenges, both the EU and the AU have interests in fostering a privileged partnership. On the EU side, this would help the EU overcome its dated and fragmented policies. The Africa-EU Summit in November presents an opportunity to put meat on the bones of the JAES and eventually subordinate the ACP framework. The new narrative of partnership with Africa is as important as the practical streamlining. On the AU side, stronger cooperation will effectively raise the institution's profile, making Nigeria and South Africa gravitate towards the AU – improving the potential for security and democracy in the continent. These are prerequisites for African economic development, as well as key objectives in European external relations.

However, the AU still faces functional shortcomings, and its internal politics often downgrade it to geopolitical irrelevance or obstruction; the EU can only be serious about a serious AU. Likewise, Africa will only engage with a Europe that is perceived as powerful and unified; this is not the image that the EU is currently projecting with its uncertainty over the economic crisis and its mixed signals about integrated policies.

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