



Policy Brief

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The EU and Africa: coming together at last?

By John Kotsopoulos

Background

It is only two short years since Tony Blair declared that 2005 would be the “Year of Africa”. It was the culmination of a process that saw the continent return to the top of the international agenda after years of relative neglect – a victim of the risk-aversion and general apathy of a Western world first basking in the post-Cold War ‘peace dividend’, then hit by the terrorist threat.

The scale of the economic, governance and security challenges in Africa has prompted Western governments and organisations to renew and bolster their commitments to the region. This also reflects a shift in Western priorities, especially since the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks, with a greater focus on the nexus between security and development. In an age when security of supply has become a major issue, Africa’s abundance of natural resources is also fuelling Western – and non-Western – engagement in the region.

In this mix stands the European Union, which has had special ties with Africa since its inception and includes within its ranks former colonial powers with long relationships with individual African

countries. Is it doing enough to make the most of the opportunities Africa has to offer and successfully confront the challenges it poses? Or is it in danger of missing the boat, leaving a vacuum which others – starting with China – are already rushing to fill?

The EU is indeed well-placed to capitalise on the opportunities now opening up. Africa presents it with a unique chance to further improve its own external relations’ capacity and coherence, and play a constructive role as a power in the region.

However, it takes two to tango and it will also be up to Africa – under the auspices of its own evolving multilateral institutions (particularly the African Union, AU) and with leadership from major regional players such as South Africa – to ensure its relationship with the EU is both meaningful and fruitful.

Portugal has identified EU-Africa relations (with a formal focus on sub-Saharan Africa) as one of the top priorities for its six-month EU Presidency, as it did in 2000. How can both sides capitalise on the attention currently focused on the continent and meet the expectations

increasingly being placed on the relationship?

What is needed is a genuine partnership, based on shared goals, clarity and transparency. The EU-Africa Summit planned for December (only the second-ever and the first in seven years) could go a long way towards achieving that goal by launching the proposed EU-Africa Joint Strategy – the culmination of a year of consultation in both continents.

Developing ties

Although the EU-Africa relationship stems back to the very beginnings of the European Community, it has changed over time, reflecting changes in the geo-political climate, the emergence of independence movements on the African continent, and advances in European integration.

As it did in virtually every part of the world, the Cold War played itself out in Africa too. Both superpowers and their respective supporters attempted to curry favour in the region and did not hesitate to support African governments – good or bad – which aligned themselves

accordingly. This Cold War 'by proxy' had serious consequences, directly fuelling many conflicts during the 1970s and 1980s (for example, in Angola and Mozambique).

The rise of independence movements throughout the African continent also had a significant impact on the relationship between Europe and Africa during this period, although old colonial relationships persisted, with major powers such as the UK and France retaining spheres of interest corresponding to their former colonial 'holdings'.

All of this coincided with the accelerating pace of European

integration. The European Commission's early steps as an external actor were directed towards Africa, with the EU eventually playing a key role in areas such as aid and trade, culminating in a series of privileged agreements such as the Yaoundé Conventions (1964-1975), the Lomé Convention (1976-2000) and the 2001 Cotonou Agreement.

However, while the nature of the relationship has evolved over time, critics argue that the changes have not been mutually beneficial.

Despite a consistent emphasis on "partnership" and EU declarations about a post-colonial relationship, EU-Africa ties have often suffered

from an expectations-capability gap, with European demands clashing with a lack of African capacity or willingness (at times) to meet them, and *vice versa*.

Some also argue that agreements between the EU and the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) bloc have served to retrench and maintain European interests, since the sacrifices involved are more onerous for Africa than for the EU. This is underlined by trade figures showing that while the EU accounts for 75% of sub-Saharan Africa's trade, Africa is an increasingly marginal market for both EU exports and imports – let alone direct investments.

State of play

Lately, a combination of internal and external factors has put Africa squarely back on the European agenda: the security-development nexus, changes within both the EU and AU, new international development commitments, increasing competition from countries such as China, and the growing focus on natural resources and energy security.

There is now an acceptance in the developed world that, as former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan eloquently put it: "We will not enjoy development without security, we will not enjoy security without development, and we will not enjoy either without respect for human rights."

While this linking of security and development has widened the range of issues deemed ripe for cooperation, it has also emboldened donor countries to be less reticent about attaching conditions to aid and trade with Africa, aimed in particular at encouraging good governance and democracy.

The 2005 UN World Summit explicitly inter-linked development and security, citing human security principles such as freedom from fear and want. The G8 has picked up on this theme, most notably at the Gleneagles meeting, also in 2005, which sought to put Africa "back" on the international agenda and at the June 2007 Heiligendamm Summit.

Two other international agreements have also had a significant impact on EU-Africa relations: the UN Millennium Development Goals, which commit signatories to meet eight development targets by 2015 (individual EU Member States have, for example, pledged to spend 0.7% of GNP on aid each year, doubling the current average of 0.34%); and the 2005 Paris Declaration on effective development aid and coordination agreed under the auspices of the OECD/Development Assistance Committee (DAC).

The Union as a whole has a long way to go to achieve the aid target set by the former, with some countries, especially in the North, already exceeding it but many, notably in the South, lagging well behind. It

has, however, taken a significant step towards achieving the latter by drawing up a joint Council-Commission "European Consensus for Development" to serve as a code of conduct in applying the Declaration.

Africa's importance as an alternative to the volatile Middle East as a source of energy and raw materials is making fruitful cooperation between the EU and Africa even more urgent, especially given the rise of China as a major player on the continent.

The Chinese presence is growing rapidly, with direct investment in Africa easily surpassing €1 billion in 2006 – with most of this poured into natural resources. A €3.6 billion-plus China-Africa Development Fund was launched in November 2006 and Asia is now Africa's third largest trading partner after the EU and the US. But China has been strongly criticised for being 'less scrupulous' about dealing with repressive or corrupt regimes in the region and accused of using the Development Fund to help Chinese enterprises in Africa rather than providing untied aid to the continent.

The US has also entered the 'race' for resources, with some experts predicting that it will import more oil from Africa than from the entire Middle East in the next decade. The US is also seeking to establish a unified military command centre for the region, dubbed "Africom".

Developments at the World Trade Organization have prompted changes in EU-Africa relations, with special preferential arrangements (such as for sugar and bananas) that withstood decades of Yaoundé, Lomé and Cotonou Agreements falling foul of new global trade rules and the now-orthodox principles of free trade arrangements.

Faced with little choice but to move away from privileged bilateral to WTO-compatible multilateral trade deals, the EU launched negotiations on Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with all the ACP countries in 2002, in the hope of concluding the process before a WTO waiver expires at the end of 2007. Progress has already been made in the negotiations with some countries, such as South Africa, but has been far slower with others – and the outcome remains uncertain, just months before the deadline.

Inside Africa

EU-Africa relations have been affected by developments on the international stage, and by changes within Africa that have emboldened Western partner countries.

Overall stability on the continent is improving, with a diminution in conflicts (although many hotspots remain). The countries of Africa are also taking a far more comprehensive approach towards addressing the continent's collective problems, primarily through the AU but also in other important multilateral organisations such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

The AU was established in 2001 as a successor to the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the African Economic Community. The use of the term "Union" in its title is indicative of the AU's ambition – and it is more than just talk.

Progress has been made towards establishing an African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), an African Court of Justice, and a Peace and Security Council, and on integrating the 2001 New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), which takes an 'African-owned' approach to development. The expanding scope of such initiatives is slowly but surely making the AU a "face" for Africa in multilateral negotiations.

Inside the Union

Meanwhile, the EU's policy towards Africa has also gradually evolved in line with developments in its overall approach to external relations.

The European Security Strategy (ESS) marked an important step towards achieving greater doctrinal coherence in EU foreign policy, to the benefit – at least in theory – of all the Union's international partners. The ESS picks up on the concept of development as a precondition for security, as well as the EU's continued commitment to Africa.

Progress has also been made in developing the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), with several operations in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Future missions in Africa – from Darfur to Somalia – look likely.

In parallel, EU-Africa dialogue on issues such as governance, security and democracy outside the regular Cotonou framework has intensified. The EU and AU now hold bi-annual Joint Task Force meetings, and the respective Commission colleges meet regularly. In July 2007, Commission President José Manuel Barroso and EU President José Socrates underlined the AU's

importance by attending its annual summit in Ghana. Heads of Government are due to meet at the EU-Africa Summit in Lisbon in December 2007. In addition, a 'double-hatted' EU Special Representative to the AU (representing the Council and Commission) will be appointed soon.

Changes in the Commission's internal organisation have also had an impact on the relationship, with, for example, responsibility for ACP trade moving from the Development Directorate-General (DG) to DG Trade, and political relations with the ACP from DG External Relations to DG Development. This has challenged coherence and shuffled priorities to reflect different departmental objectives.

Funding

EU funding for Africa comes from several sources, with the lion's share coming from the (formally intergovernmental) European Development Fund (EDF), which will have €22 billion at its disposal between 2008 and 2013, of which €20 billion has been earmarked for sub-Saharan Africa. Other sources include the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) for North Africa, the Instrument for Stability, the Instrument for the Promotion of Democracy, and the European Community Humanitarian Aid Department (ECHO).

The broadening of the EU-Africa cooperation agenda has also led to the creation of other funds, particularly in the area of security – although in some cases money has simply been moved from one EDF category to another. The most visible of these programmes is the Africa Peace Facility (APF), which has been allocated €300 million for 2008-10. The EU also supports UN initiatives in many parts of the continent, and has provided direct support to the AU, specifically €242 million in support of its mission to Sudan.

Prospects

Given the overall picture outlined above – from more frequent and intense ESDP operations and a more robust EU presence in the region, to a shrinking African share of European trade markets and increasing Asian influence in the region – what are the prospects for the future?

One of the objectives of the December 2005 EU Strategy for Africa (approved by the Council, Commission and European Parliament) was “to give people in less advanced countries control over their own development”, focusing on four main pillars: peace and security, human rights and good governance, health and education, and economic growth.

The launch of this strategy was indicative of a growing European consensus on many aspects of development policy and took account of the changing environment in Africa, and specifically the AU’s enhanced role. It also set goals which can be both implemented and verified.

This sets it apart from other EU strategies, including the ESS, which serve more as rough guides than real frameworks. For example, the Africa strategy includes an ‘implementation matrix’ through which progress can be assessed and obliges the European Council to review the strategy every two years.

But for a true partnership to flourish, something extra is needed, going beyond a traditional ‘north-south’ relationship. This is what the proposed EU-Africa Joint Strategy is intended to provide.

It could be a genuinely significant step forward, although at this stage it remains an idea with some positive prospects which will have to be fleshed out if it is to have a real impact. But the big question which remains to be answered is whether such a joint strategy will really change anything.

Cynics point to the fact that while the first and only EU-Africa summit to date, in 2000, launched a “comprehensive framework for political dialogue”, it is unclear whether this resulted in any tangible progress.

It also remains to be seen whether the EU and AU can resolve the thorny issue of Zimbabwe – the main stumbling block which has derailed hopes of holding a second EU-Africa summit over the past seven years and which could yet derail the planned December meeting. African leaders resent European efforts to exclude Zimbabwean President Mugabe, while several key EU Member States still regard him as *persona non grata* for his authoritarian and repressive domestic policies.

Finally, there is the risk of ‘agreement overload’, with Cotonou, NEPAD, MDGs, EPAs and the EU’s own strategy already cluttering the landscape and challenging institutions with limited means.

Where next?

The EU’s long-standing ties with Africa and its unique character as a multilateral body where policies are developed by consensus make it potentially the most attractive partner for the continent, particularly

in comparison to more nakedly self-interested actors such as China and, to a certain extent, the US.

Africa also offers the EU an ideal ‘incubator’ for developing greater inter-institutional coherence in foreign policy-making, especially given the physical, historical and cultural proximity between the two continents and the general consensus within the EU on how to deal with the region.

It is also an arena in which the EU can fulfil its commitments under the 2003 Joint EU-UN Declaration on Crisis Management, and start implementing its ‘battlegroups’ concept – especially as EU security initiatives do not clash with any NATO commitments or objectives.

However, to capitalise on this, the EU needs to move beyond (though not away from) its traditional focus on development issues. The proposed EU-Africa Joint Strategy is a welcome development, indicative of a more inclusive and balanced European approach.

The next few months could have a decisive impact on EU-Africa relations for many years to come. It is heartening that all sides seem willing to move the relationship forward. The challenge now for all the parties involved is to translate words into deeds.

* The EPC plans to launch a new EU and Africa Forum in the autumn, and establish a network of institutes and centres on both continents to enhance dialogue on topics of common interest.

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