


 Comments on Africa

Number 4 ■ November 2008

The Africa-EU Strategy: The reality of treating Africa as one

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The Africa-EU Strategy emerged out of the drive for Europe and Africa to consolidate relations while drawing from their complex history. This strategy is underpinned by a central theme based on 'partnership of equals' in which the EU would engage the African continent as a single entity. This would become the frame of reference for EU-Africa relations at all levels – continental, sub-regional and national – for both groups of countries.

This commentary argues that there is a degree of selectivity in the EU strategy, which seeks to deal with Africa as one entity. Several factors account for this, not least the interplay of economic, political and social interests of both partners in which the "stronger" partner ultimately sets the agenda. Additionally, the extent to which Africa can be treated as one entity depends largely on the available institutional infrastructure in the African Union (AU). With few exceptions, it is difficult to see how the execution of the Africa-EU strategy can treat Africa as one entity. This has been most evident with the negotiations surrounding the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs).

Setting the stage for a singular approach

The Strategy's framework has four main areas namely, peace and security; governance and human rights; trade and regional integration; key development issues. The areas are interrelated and they also serve as a useful categorization of the priorities outlined in the Strategy's framework. The "single Africa" approach is evident in these components of the strategy.

On the peace and security component, the objective is that both partners will "bring the partnership to a new and strategic level". To this end, the lead structure for strengthening African peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding is the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). This is viewed as the entry point for delivering peace and security at continental, sub-regional and national levels. This holistic approach derives from the increasingly regional and continental focus in contemporary peace and security matters in Africa.

On governance and human rights, the partnership draws from enhancement of the multilateral system in the promotion of the values of democracy, rule of law and human rights. On governance issues, the EU support focuses on the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM); the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance; and the new pan-African governance architecture that is yet to be put in place. There is a drive for African ownership of the programme by emphasizing a lead role for Africa in its design and implementation.

Regarding trade and regional integration, the central objective is the establishment of an African Economic Community. To this end, the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) are seen as the "building block" of this process that is intended to "make trade rules and regimes more coherent and harmonized". The EPAs are clearly targeted for implementation at sub-regional level by the RECs and other African organizations, in line with EPA regions.

For the key development issues, the structure for engagement between the partners is less explicit. There is a clear focus on existing global structures such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, in reality, the Africa-EU partnership on development issues is essentially one of aid disbursement. Hence in the Africa-EU strategy document, much of the focus of cooperation is on aid disbursement and aid effectiveness¹. There is reference to programmatic interventions that should be jointly pursued by both partners on issues pertaining to

human and social development. However, the document is ambiguous about the form of these interventions, while there is recurring reference to funding commitments.

The reality of an equal partnership

The Strategy document obviously embraces a pan-African agenda. It emphasizes the idea of strengthening African countries as a collective as reflected in the peace and security strategy, thus lending support to the existing AU mechanism. In this regard, Africa is treated as one entity while supporting a home-grown initiative. This is contrary to the US Africa Command, AFRICOM, which will in effect compete with existing security arrangements such as the African Standby Force (ASF). Thus, there is great merit in the EU support for African peace and security, which is guided by the principle of African ownership and strengthening African capabilities.

Support from the EU for governance and human rights, is also driven by the treatment of the continent as one entity. However, the envisaged continental mechanism to deliver this support is not yet in place. It is thus too soon to tell whether African ownership of this process, with EU partners in a supporting role is viable.

The trade component, which also highlights the collective approach, has already revealed major gaps. While EPA negotiations have been carried out at the level of the RECs, the European Commission (EC) has also negotiated with individual national governments, most notably Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana in a parallel process. Both countries have initialed interim EPAs² to the discontent of the West African REC, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). This serves to undermine the very regional market structures that the EU pledges will be central to its trade and regional integration agenda with Africa.

On key development issues, there is a greater focus on global mechanisms such as the MDGs. There is limited reference to African policy ownership or the treatment of Africa as a single entity. This may be explained by the fact that such global mechanisms are more focused on national objectives and often driven, for example, by the approaches of International Financial Institutions and the United Nations to development issues.

Conclusion

The failure to treat Africa as a single entity undermines the Strategy's central objective of engaging with Africa as an equal partner. This is clear in the asymmetrical power balance between the EU and most individual African countries. Cynics argue that this is the reasoning behind EU negotiations with individual countries. The EU on the other hand, argues that the pattern of negotiations has been driven by the official signatory powers of individual countries vis-à-vis RECs³. This is question-

able, given that initial negotiations were conducted with the same RECs until it was felt that the desired progress was not being achieved. African countries must also share in the blame because they tend to pander to such individual treatment in the bid to achieve more favourable outcomes.

The success of the Africa-EU strategy should however not hinge on the treatment of Africa as one entity. In the absence of a common African vision on certain issues, not least on trade, the EU, which also lacks a common vision of Africa, will be left to decide what is "in the interest of Africa". A more diversified methodology is necessary to take into account the reality of the needs of African countries given the infancy of a cohesive approach to Africa by the EU. The Africa-EU Strategy was instituted in 2005 and is still in its initial stages. As such, both sides will need time to adapt their mandates and interests to this objective.

Perhaps the most critical issue at this juncture is the extent of the commitment of both parties to this singular approach. Without clarity on this, the Africa-EU Strategy risks being little more than an exercise in "lip-service". ■

Endnotes

- 1 The Africa-EU Strategy Partnership – Strategies, V.2.d. 50,51,52,54 pages 12 and 13.
- 2 These interim EPAs will be invalidated by an eventual regional EPA. <http://www.acp-eu-trade.org/index.php?loc=epa/West-Africa.php> accessed on 11 June 2008.
- 3 Comments by Jacques Wunenburger, Head of Unit, Economic Partnership Agreements, Directorate-General for Trade, European Commission, International policy roundtable "The Africa-EU Strategic Partnership: Challenges and Prospects" Tuesday 1st April 2008.

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