

The EU-Africa Summit: African perspectives

The much-awaited Lisbon Summit between the EU and Africa in December 2007 has been regarded as an essential element missing to date in the evolving and deepening relationship between the two continents. Clearly, the occurrence of the Summit carries substantial political symbolism, which will be concretised in the signing of the Joint Strategy.

However, although the two regions have not met at Summit level since 2000 since Cairo, this has not implied stagnation in the relationship between them. Rather, the engagement has been steadily deepening and broadening since 2000. The establishment of the African Union Commission provided a new avenue for cooperation, beyond development aid, with the European Commission too.

The adoption of a JOINT strategy is an extremely important initiative – one which reflects the intentions of both parties to place the relationship on a more equal footing. The Summit and the adoption of the Strategy will not automatically make this happen, but they provide the framework for action.

Of all Africa's Northern partners, the European Union has been an innovator in seeking ways of elevating the relationship between the two continents to one of greater partnership and mutual accountability built on the shared values that underpinned the formation of the EU, but were also reflected in the founding documents of the African Union – of democracy, peace and security, good governance, and sustainable economic development.

Although there cannot be one Africa view either of the relationship with Europe or of the way in which the Strategy and the new relationship will unfold, it is true to say that for Africa, Europe – notwithstanding the contradictions reflected in its practices, as opposed to its policy towards the continent – is an extremely significant partner and friend.

However, it is necessary to set out some of the underlying perceptions among African states about Europe and the specific areas of difficulty; and examine also the importance of processes.

Although the document to be signed in Lisbon has been jointly developed, the truth is that most African countries have not really been in a position to fully interrogate the contents or indeed make significant input into the paper during the course of its negotiations. This is largely due to their own capacity constraints, which were also stretched further by negotiation of the Economic Partnership Agreements. Thus the document and the plan of action largely reflect the inputs of a few African countries. (For example, it is revealing that the AU Commission has a staff of just over 500, compared with the 'legions' at the disposal of the European Commission.) This is bound to happen – but awareness of this constraint is critical as both continents move forward to give flesh to its vision.

The underlying values of the partnership

I will briefly address two questions here. Firstly, are the value priorities of both sides

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ELIZABETH SIDIROPOULOS

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the same? Secondly, what is the true meaning of partnership in a situation where the two parties are clearly unequal?

There would be little dissent at least at the rhetorical level that both continents share values of democracy, good governance and people-centred development. Yet, while we share values and principles, priorities differ as do the ways in which they are articulated and addressed.

Many Africans often see the Europeans' 'obsession' with democracy and human rights when dealing with Africa, as a neo-colonial conditionality which pays little respect to the particular local conditions. Some argue that democracy and human rights are sometimes elevated above poverty alleviation and development. These may be one-dimensional perspectives, but they exist... and the actions of the EU sometimes reinforce them. Such perceptions are compounded with the entry of new external actors on the continent – most notably China, whose economic engagement leads many states to believe that it contributes to their development without the overlaying conditionality of democracy.

Clearly, good governance is a necessary precondition for sustainable development, as is responsible and accountable political leadership. Absent an open articulation of different interests domestically with the requisite pressures exerted on political leadership, the elite has often abused its power for its own gains, and suppressed opposition when that has become inimical to the promotion of these interests. Thus the emphasis on leadership accountability and respect for human rights and the rule of law should not be lessened either in Africa or in Europe, because it is important to send the message that leaders cannot operate with impunity.

The unfortunate fact is that notwithstanding the existence of a large body of declarations and institutions aimed at promoting the values noted above, African leaders are still uncomfortable with dealing with recalcitrant states, and in fact prefer not to use the stick of sanctions – except in the cases of

unconstitutional changes of power, where states have been suspended from the AU.

Zimbabwe is perhaps the most notable case and one which highlights the divergence of approaches. It is also one which emphasises the inconsistency of the European approach. While the EU has sanctions against President Robert Mugabe, it has none against Khartoum, and there was no real debate about whether President al-Bashir should participate in the summit. (I will return to Zimbabwe below.)

Furthermore, many African officials believe that if the Joint Strategy is truly about entrenching a real partnership, there should also be frank discussions of human rights violations in Europe, especially against many migrants from Africa, as well as on the practice of extraordinary renditions. There is a strong perception therefore that Europe's emphasis on values is littered with double standards and underlying hidden agendas. However, this does not make the concerns about human rights abuses in Africa any less relevant – whether they are raised by opposition parties, civil society or indeed European states. European approaches need to ensure that there is a consistent approach to human rights violations and that their inputs also take into consideration more fully any initiatives and mechanisms initiated by African institutions.

Partnership and mutual accountability

The word 'partnership' appears in many of the documents on the relationship between the two continents in the last decade, although the practice has been very mixed. However, with the negotiation of a joint strategy and the recognition that the EU and Africa have common interests on many global issues such as migration, environmental change, and the future of multilateral institutions, there is renewed hope that a true partnership will indeed begin to develop. Both sides will benefit greatly from working together on a host of these issues at the multilateral level.

A true partnership necessitates first and foremost that both sides internalise what this

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means. From the African angle, it means breaking out of the old reactive and sometimes passive mindset, which focused excessively on the donor-recipient relationship. Europe needs to take greater cognisance of the perceptions outlined above, recognising too that it is not easy to remove them overnight. A mindset change is also essential in Europe. Viewing the relationship through the eyes of a donor, when that has defined much of the history of engagement and with many countries continues to do so even now, is particularly difficult and inimical to the development of a true partnership.

Thus the challenge in achieving a true partnership is how to break out of the aid-relationship syndrome. This includes recognising that learning is a two-way relationship and that home-grown initiatives, such as the African Peer Review Mechanism, should be supported and its outcomes integrated into the EU's own approach to assessing governance in Africa. This can happen while retaining the APRM as an African-owned initiative.

In breaking out of the aid relationship, Africans should also pay more attention to the areas where they can effect change with minimal resources ('low-hanging fruits') and that can contribute to unleashing the productive potential within their economies. The various initiatives of the EU in this regard, such as the Infrastructure Fund, provide a useful vehicle to realise some of these.

An equally important aspect of partnership is that of mutual accountability. This also forms an important element of the Joint Strategy. Its proper application will also require a good dose of the shift in mindset on both sides. How this is effected will also depend largely on the processes in place and how both parties use them.

The paper will now highlight two issues that present challenges to the relationship and to the Summit.

Human rights, good governance and Zimbabwe

One of the concerns facing both Africa and the EU is the possibility that the Zimbabwe situation may end up hijacking the Summit agenda. All parties have agreed that this should be avoided, but this is easier said than done.

Two things are clear: Robert Mugabe will use the opportunity to score points against his hosts; and the EU will need to make the point about respect for human rights, human dignity and democracy. Both these points have the potential to derail the discussions. (This is all the more likely as President Mbeki will not be able to report on a done deal by the time of the Summit, although this had been his hope. Mbeki's mediation will also now need to be considered against the background of his own domestic problems. How the ANC elections in Polokwane later this month pan out will have a crucial impact on how his own mediation evolves in Zimbabwe. It is possible that policy paralysis may emerge if President Mbeki loses the presidential race in the party and there is an attempt to go to early elections. Either way, it is likely that the next seven months – by which time the Zimbabwe elections will have been held – will be a period of greater internal focus by the SA Presidency.)

I will elaborate a little on the second point, as the first point speaks for itself. The Joint Strategy is underpinned by the values of democracy, human rights and good governance, which are also pillars of the Strategy. These are commonly shared at the rhetorical level, but in the case of Zimbabwe the EU has adopted targeted sanctions against key government leaders. If the political symbolism of this is to carry any weight, it requires some discussion of developments in Zimbabwe in the last year, and in particular since the start of the SADC mediation. The EU should ask – in the spirit of the political partnership that is espoused in the Joint Strategy – for South Africa and SADC to provide an assessment of the progress made to date, as well as to explain why, in the face of the mediation, violence and re-

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striction of political activity is escalating and how SADC intends to deal with this, given that it raises questions about Zanu-PF's (especially the Mugabe faction) commitment to the mediation.¹

The EU should emphasise that provided substantive (rather than ornamental) progress is made in certain key areas, it is willing to help the reconstruction effort sooner rather than later. But the progress in Zimbabwe must be substantive and there should be some commonly agreed markers upon which to assess progress. (There is concern that the progress to date in the SADC mediation has not seen a marked change in the social, economic and political environment on the ground. The ZANU-PF government is proceeding apace both with its legislative agenda as well as with its objective to emasculate all opposition.)

Equally, the EU should not flinch from asking hard questions about developments in Sudan, and the regional arc of conflict around it. After all, the crisis there is of greater proportions than what we are seeing in Zimbabwe, and the al-Bashir government continues to be obstructive, both as regards UN resolutions and the Comprehensive Peace Agreement with the South. Of course, the situation in Sudan is equally complex, but the ongoing tragedy there must be placed largely at the feet of the National Congress Party. This is very important, if the EU is to show that it adopts a principled approach to human rights violations, rather than a selective one driven by colonialist hangovers.

Furthermore, as I have mentioned earlier, although African leaders may not always be comfortable taking their fellow leaders to task on such issues, the Summit and the Joint Strategy are about making this relationship relevant to citizens. There will be many in Africa who hope that the EU will be

bold in expressing the responsibility of all leaders to protect all their citizens.

Both Sudan and Zimbabwe must be handled incredibly sensitively because they can in fact completely derail the process. In both cases it may be advisable to work together with a small grouping of African leaders (such as Presidents Yar'Adua and Kufuor and Prime Minister Meles) at the summit to ensure that the agenda remains on course, while these issues are not ignored but handled in a constructive manner.

EPAs, Doha Development Round and WTO

In many African minds the issue of economic development and trade confirms the contradictions in the EU's espoused principles for a partnership with Africa versus the practice. Both the negotiations on Economic Partnership Agreements and the Doha Development Round are highly complex issues. However, in the public perception EPAs are seen as potentially costly for African states, although 'Everything But Arms' will continue to apply to low-income countries. EPAs do not form part of the Strategy, although trade and regional integration is one of its pillars. Yet, they are important aspects of the relationship and their negotiation has created polarisation within Africa. In recent weeks the eastern and southern Africa EPA ended up signing as the EAC, thus excluding Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi, while possibly including Tanzania (which had been negotiating as part of SADC). This makes sense in terms of working to consolidate the EAC, but it has left other countries out in the cold. Within Southern Africa, Namibia and South Africa have also not signed the SADC EPA; the fact that the BLS have, raises questions about the future of SACU in particular². Thus some may regard the EPA negotiations process as

¹ Agreement has been reached on an interim constitution but this has to be introduced via transitional arrangements and MDC demands have not all been met.)

² The SACU agreement stipulates that the member states (SA, Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho and Swaziland) must negotiate trade agreements as a bloc.

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having sown (greater) confusion among Africa's many regional integration schemes.

The EU's (and other Northern countries') position on the Doha Development Round, especially in the area of agricultural export subsidies, has been regarded as a stumbling block to progress and thus as undermining the EU's stated commitment to promoting economic development.

Africans argue that economic development and poverty alleviation/eradication are Africa's main concerns, whereas for Europe it seems that democracy and human rights are the overarching priorities. The Joint Strategy, for example, places agriculture, food security, debt cancellation and ODA, education, health, gender equality and the environment under the fourth pillar of 'Key Development Issues', although for Africa these are the most important elements that require addressing.

As new external actors emerge on the African stage, African countries inevitably draw comparisons with the EU, its member states and other traditional partners, on the focus, the types of conditions attached, the activities funded and the speed with which commitments are met.

On the other side of the coin, however, African states and civil society often consider new potential opportunities more often as threats to what they are used to. This often means that they don't interrogate sufficiently, how for example, EPAs and other negotiations can be used as opportunities to equip African states better to deal with globalisation in the longer term. This requires a more offensive and proactive strategy for African states, but one that is grounded in an assessment of their strengths, weaknesses and where there can create niche markets for themselves.

Concluding remarks

As this is a new way of engaging, the EU will also need to address the instruments and the channels through which this relationship is managed. It is time to think outside of the Lome Convention paradigm of

the ACP. The financing instruments that the EU uses will also have to change. Although the ACP is a useful solidarity tool for the ACP states, we believe that the relationship of the EU with these countries has changed so much that the ACP institutions have become outdated, especially as the joint Strategy sees Africa as a single entity and yet North Africa is not part of the ACP. The EDF through which funds will be released for the Strategy is still an ACP instrument.

But more importantly, if we talk about partnership we need to see the relationship between the two regions carried out not by the Development Directorate, although the EPAs have been jointly negotiated with DG Trade. The relationship with Africa is a key component of Europe's external relations, and the Strategy certainly aims to elevate it to a more holistic engagement.

Going forward, the real challenge of the EU-Africa Summit and the Joint Strategy will how to ensure that the Plan of Action (2008-2010) is put into practice. Both the process and the efficacy of the follow-up mechanisms will be crucial in this regard. A note of caution is necessary though: external engagement with Africa over the last decade has resulted in the proliferation of forums, which has increased the burden on African states and institutions at greater cost than the benefits accruing. Often the bold commitments made enthusiastically are crushed on the rocks of limited resources.

What can one truly expect from Lisbon? Lisbon will be politically symbolic to show to Africa the important light in which the EU views it. Provided cool heads prevail and the meeting is not allowed to descend into political point-scoring, the Summit should signal the start of an all-encompassing relationship with Africa that goes beyond aid. However, if we take a leaf out of the November 2006 Summit in Beijing, what was staggering was not the pledges and commitments emanating from it, but the speed with which many of these were put into action within months of the Summit. The implementing parties of the EU-Africa Joint Strategy should aim to maintain the mo-

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mentum which a Summit of this nature is sure to generate, but to do this in a transparent and accountable manner, which leaves nowhere any cause for doubt as to the commitments of both sides.