

Wolfram Vetter: The EU and Africa on the Way towards a Strategic Partnership

For a long time, development-policy aspects have not been the only reason why the gaze of the global public rested increasingly on Africa. For one thing, the continent's growing importance is reflected in the intensifying contest for influence and resources that is going on between the West and China and other countries, a development in which Europe is directly involved. Moreover, Africa offers opportunities to build strong partnerships based on common interests. Once again, the Europeans are directly involved inasmuch as they are now called upon to question their traditional thinking in terms of giving and taking and begin regarding Africa as an equal partner. Europe met this challenge in its security strategy of 2003 and in the EU-Africa strategy of 2005. What is more, the Africa-EU summit that will be held in Lisbon in December offers an opportunity to advance quite a distance along the chosen path.

Recently, Africa's perspectives have been improving in a number of ways: A new political culture has emerged, and new leaders offer reason for hope. Among the continental institutions that are of some importance in this context we find the African Union (AU), the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). Another positive fact is that the incidence of violent conflicts has been declining for some years. Africans are becoming increasingly aware that they are responsible for their own peace and security. In sub-Saharan Africa, economies are expanding, oil exports are growing, and foreign direct investments are increasing. Very soon, development-aid transfers will no longer form the backbone of Africa's national economies. And indeed, Africa has attractive potentials to offer in many respects. At the same time, Europe's market shares are declining while Asia's influence in the region is growing. To respond adequately, Europe will have to boost its presence in Africa.

Next to positive trends, however, numerous unresolved problems exist, such as massive urbanisation, youth unemployment, poverty-related migration, the unchecked spread of organised crime and drug trafficking, and the lingering fragility of state in some countries on the continent. Climate change is another cause for grave concern, as are its consequences such as declining crop yields, drought and – once again – the migration movements that arise from these conditions. Rampant malnutrition, high infant mortality, defective health systems, and widespread illiteracy are just as alarming as the rapid growth of the population and the spread of diseases like AIDS and malaria.

In many ways, the EU is better equipped than it was some years ago to confront its tasks in Africa and articulate its interests there. Having modernised its understanding of development policy, it now deploys its assistance more efficiently and flexibly. Moreover, foreign and security-policy tools such as political dialogue and diplomacy under the CFSP and ESDP are being used increasingly now, another positive fact. And yet the results are not up to actual requirements, far from it. Relations must be placed on a new political foundation.

The African side took note of the EU-Africa strategy with interest, welcoming its content as well as its comprehensive approach. Meeting in Bamako late in 2005, the troika of EU and African ministers decided to place their partnership on a new strategic foundation. Work on the joint strategy began early in 2007.

Developments soon demonstrated the advantages of the close relationship that exists between the EU Commission and the EU Council Secretariat on the one hand and the AU Commission on the other. It was recognised that close relations between the EU and the AU are in the interest of both, and that true progress depends on the structural and organisational integration of the

partnership. Consequently, a one-week meeting was held in Brussels to set a course for the content of the joint strategy.

Shared vision was an important subject of discussion. To begin with, development-policy goals were to be complemented by others, such as strengthening the political partnership in the search for solutions to common challenges or cooperating on global issues. Furthermore, endeavours were made to match the existing framework conditions and cooperation mechanisms to the new objectives. In other words: The European-African partnership should not remain permanently founded on cooperation agreements based on the assumption that the continent is divided into three parts – the north, sub-Saharan Africa, and southern Africa. Africa's negotiators showed a particular interest in overcoming this fragmentation. Another objective was to integrate non-governmental players, civil societies, and the people living on both continents in the most general meaning of the term.

In the field of peace and security, it was agreed to enhance the dialogue on common and global concerns, crises, and global conflicts, and to increase Africa's capacities in conflict prevention, management, and settlement.

In the area of good governance and human rights, the debate revolved around promoting democratic governance and enforcing democratic principles, the rule of law, and human rights in Africa, Europe, and elsewhere in the world.

Objectives related to trade and regional integration included improving Africa's production capacities, increasing the value of its output, and reducing its dependence on raw-material exports. Physical infrastructure networks are to be strengthened, and regional integration is to be promoted.

Finally, reaching the Millennium Development Goals was given top priority in the development sphere.

To be sure, the objectives that the partners set themselves are extremely ambitious, which is why they developed a detailed institutional architecture to ensure their realisation. Thus, the strategy provides for meetings of the heads of state and government at three-year intervals, joint meetings of sector ministers, meetings of the ministerial troika, and improvements in the cooperation among other relevant players.

However, all this will probably prove inadequate in the face of the scope of the challenges and opportunities that are offering themselves. After all, both Europeans and Africans wish that their partnership should appear as a permanent platform for exchange and cooperation among all interested civil-society parties.

Even now, the joint strategy is certainly more than just a paper. During its development, mutual trust evolved, and learning processes were initiated. For the partnership to be successful, however, the EU must open up and strive for a dialogue among genuine equals. It must appear credible and transparent while formulating and communicating its own interests. It must recognise the leaders on the African side. And it will have to have concepts and instruments to support Africa's endeavours.

Yet there is another important prerequisite for the success of the strategy that is almost beyond the influence of Europe: The AU needs further strengthening, which can only be done if its member governments are ready and willing. There can be no doubt that the AU has achieved

much on behalf of Africa in the few years of its existence. What is more, it facilitates genuine cooperation on the basis of common principles. Highlighting this fact will be one of the tasks of the summit meeting in December.