POLICY PAPER

How Should the EU Rethink the Relations with Africa?

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Background

The relations between African countries and the European Union rely on an old story, beginning not only with the colonialism, hence, this old linkage has shaped the relations and created narratives still present in literature and media.[1] The connection between Europe and Africa has been described as asymmetric and based on the dichotomy of rich and poor.[2]

Therefore, relations between Europe and Africa and between the EU and African Union (AU) has always been at the core of the EU foreign policy and interest. A starting point has been the Lomé Convention (1975), which aimed to maintain a link with the former colonies and to create a new economic order. [3] It has been followed by the Cotonou Convention, ratified in 2000, its main objective was to reformulate the partnership between the parties involved and to focus more on development.

This agreement has expired in 2020, and in 2021 a new text has been ratified to ensure a new framework to this vital partnership for the EU external relations; in fact, the post-Cotonou negotiations are one of the focal points for the EU Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS). [4]

These treaties represent the legal and political basis for the cooperation between Africa and Europe, thus, they led to other international agreements, funding mechanisms and policies. [5] Nonetheless, historical, cultural factors and geographical proximity have affected and still affect diplomatic, economic, cultural and political relations between the two entities. [6]

Every five years, the newly appointed EU Commission, specifically the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Vice President of the Commission (HR/VP) drafts and proposes a strategy for the EU foreign politics, in which the Africa Union (AU) and the partnership with African countries play a major role. [7]

Furthermore, the HR/VP and the Commission can propose and implement agreements, plans, fundings and initiatives according to the current political situation and the Commission's aims. In the last two years, the effect of COVID 19 pandemic and the economic consequences have led to new tools and solutions.

Regarding the relations with Africa, the European Union has adopted different strategies to ensure security, development, human rights and governance. These plans have been based on different approaches, which have been modified and adapted during the years, accordingly with new events in both continents, political balance, and geopolitical dynamics. [8]

The most prominent approach is the comprehensive one, composed of five partnerships, including trade, energy, human rights and mobility. The last strategy proposed by the HR/VP Josep Borrell is named "towards a comprehensive strategy with Africa". It aims to boost economic relations, create jobs in both continents and deepen the partnership. [9]

Moreover, academic literature is full of research on EU-Africa relations and several studies have analysed weaknesses and strengths of the EU-Africa cooperation, some of them are very critical concerning the cooperation between the EU and AU, whereas others express positive thoughts about the relations built during the years. [10] The partnership between Africa and Europe involves several levels of government, fields of action and the interconnection between them is complex. Thus, many critique focus on the European attitude towards the partnership, describing it as a paternalistic one, while others criticize the security side of the European strategy, as weak and inconsistent. [11]

In this paper the focus will be on the security dimension and how Africa and the EU can cooperate to face new threats and instability, but also how they can create an equal partnership. The objective is to highlight what could be new inputs to the current situation and what can be a further development for the relations between AU and the EU.

The paper does not deal with bilateral relations between EU Member States and AU Member States, nevertheless, bilateral relations are relevant, particularly for former colonial powers and for the former colonies.

Current State of Play

The legal framework of the relations between the EU and Africa is clearly the Cotonou Agreement, which has expired, re-negotiated and approved in 2021.[12]

A more concrete starting point for a long-term project between the EU and AU is represented by the Cairo Declaration (2000), constituting the formal political channel and providing a new strategic dimension to the partnership. [13] Due to tremendous changes in international politics and geopolitical balance, in 2007, the Joint Africa-EU Strategy was drafted, the main goal was to implement a long-term project based on cooperation and overcome the dichotomy of donor and recipient. [14]

Referring to the final step, it is possible to identify the multiannual roadmaps and action plans, updated each AU-EU Summit. The new documents identify the areas of action and joint priorities, depending on the current global situation and political stability in both continents. [15] More precisely, the EU Commission, represented by the HR/VP Borrell, has presented a Joint Communication "Towards a comprehensive strategy with Africa", approved by the Council. [16]

The sixth Africa-EU Summit has been postponed due the COVID 19 pandemic. Formal ministerial meetings take place during last quarter of 2021 and will lead to the next EU-Africa Summit scheduled for early 2022. [17] The new comprehensive strategy has many common points with the Joint Strategy, it boosts the idea of respective interests and responsibility between equal partners. It is built on five pillars, including energy, digital transformation, growth and jobs, peace and governance, lastly migration and mobility. [18]

Certainly, the pandemic and the consequent crises have led to important changes in political stability and it culminated with new plans and funding mechanisms to deal with economic and health issues inside and outside European borders. The main and new approach to face the current crisis and potential threats caused by the COVID 19 pandemic is the Team Europe Initiative (TEI) to support Africa's recovery from the economic damage. [19]

The TEI is based on two pillars, the first one involves financial needs to face the pandemic costs, whereas the second calls for a long-term growth, engaging the young and dynamic African economy and small businesses. The TEI, presented by the President of the EU Commission Von der Leyen, is not only a policy to boost the economy, but it can also be perceived as a theoretical approach to a new way to cooperate for development and growth. As a matter of fact, the conceptualization of the term Team Europe has been expanded, moving behind the bilateral short-term plan.[20]

Another crucial characteristic of this approach is the core concept of Member States as a unique actor involved in an external action, it appears that this focus on a United Europe is a tentative to overcome the tractions between supranational institutions and intergovernmental ones. [21]

One critique, coming from scholars and observers, is the national agenda of each EU Member States and specific interests. In fact, many European countries have national plans in some areas of Africa and for the EU it is very difficult to have a unique and credible voice as an international actor. [22] For instance, for France the stability in the Sahel is fundamental, so that it has conducted independently two military missions in the region.[23]

What is relevant to underline is the multi-level nature of the relations, including a global dimension, a bilateral negotiation and the national level. One additional relevant feature of this analysis is the complementarity between agreements, strategies and plans, meaning that one does not exclude the other and the political discussions do not deny the legal framework and vice versa.[24]

A criticism emerging from independent organisations and researchers is the lack of local population and rural communities' involvement where many of the projects are developed. The need for a people-centred approach is evident since the failure of some EU initiatives, in particular concerning civilian and military missions in African countries. [25]

It is possible to define this feature as the Human Security approach, its core concept is "freedom from fear, freedom from want", meaning not only the national security dimension but also an individual feature of security. The concept includes different fields of actions such as poverty, employment and climate change.[26] Mary Kaldor, researcher and pioneer of prominent international relations theories, drafted three reports for the EU Commission, in which she presented the concept of human security as "freedom for individuals from basic insecurities caused by gross human rights violations". [27]

It would be necessary to study if the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions have achieved this goal or if the focus on people's needs must be further developed. Divergent opinions have emerged on this topic, nonetheless critical thinking is needed to understand positive and negative aspects.

It could be argued that conventions, strategies and projects have always a strong basis on the importance of fundamental rights, sustainable development and peace.[28] The effort made by the EU is evident and the comprehensive strategy, together with other approaches such as the security-development nexus and the internal-external nexus, have proved to be vital for the African development, including social cohesion, new infrastructures and education. [29] Concrete progress has been made, data and research can confirm the positive trend, namely school enrolment and life expectancy at birth increased. [30]

The EU Training Mission in the Central African Republic illustrates a peculiar case, according to a study based on interviews with EU officers, military personnel, researchers and local stakeholders such as NGOs and civil society. In that respect, one vital factor has been the failure of local population's involvement in the mission's activities and aims. The role of local stakeholders is crucial to have a concrete impact on rural communities and to reach the most isolated and weakest groups.

The perception and the awareness of the citizens is important for the mission's success and to avoid a top-down imposition of reforms. Furthermore, the immersion of European officers and trainers is fundamental to understand and adapt the activities to the specificities of the environment, for this reason the turnover of Europeans should be equilibrated to their immersion to the local context and to build mutual trust with other stakeholders on the field. [31]

These missions are an essential part of the European External Action Service and represent a fundamental tool for the improvement of political stability, the promotion of human rights, good governance and the improvement of life conditions.

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Nevertheless, some issues have emerged, listening to the needs of the local citizens, the relevance in international politics of the bilateral relations between Member States of both Unions and national agendas can overlap or conflict with the EU agenda and objectives.

The relations between Africa and the EU involve a number of pillars and actors, as well as several fields of the relations such as economic, political and humanitarian. It would be very difficult if not impossible to define and present all of them, it would also be complex to show all the funding mechanisms at the basis of this partnership.

It would also be possible to analyse the relations from different viewpoints and it seems possible to use different analytical lenses. Some authors in literature have used traditional international theories, such as realism. On the other hand, it can be appropriate to use broader and inclusive approaches. Since the last strategy presented by the HR/VP is entirely based on a comprehensive strategy, meaning a full approach from human rights to trade; it appears evident that other approaches can be more suitable.[32]

In this case, the Human Security approach appears to be one of the most suitable theory and viewpoint to interpret cooperation between the EU and AU, also the Team Europe Approach can be considered as a positive emerging approach, it can represent a new starting point and a new tool for crisis management and conflict prevention.

Policy Recommendations

Recognize and centralize the role of human security as integrated policy

Human Security has been presented as one of the reference points of the European External Action and as a crucial pillar in the EU-Africa relations. However, it is evident that Human Security, as a theoretical approach and as practical policy, is not in play and has not a real role in shaping the cooperation between the two international actors. Moreover, the concept of human security is not present and very few mentioned in official documents, statements and speeches are not enough to constitute human security as integrated policy, instead of as reference point.

Human security can be a real benchmark to start a new way for cooperation, and even though it seems present in European politicians' and ambassadors' words, it is never mentioned in strategies and mandates. Human security does not concern only the apparent dichotomy of hard security and human rights, and it is not a fancy way to describe fundamental rights, it is much more. It includes agriculture, cultural heritage, gender equality, employment and more; because the state itself can produce insecurity for the population.

In particular, in fragile states and conflictual areas this tendency is always more present. Populations have the right to be protected not only from armed clashes and conflicts between states or groups, but they also have the right to be protected from climate change, famine and poverty and to live a life at the maximum of their capabilities and with the possibility to express themselves. Human Security should be presented as a fundamental starting point for each mission, agreements and mandates.

Base new tools and plans on the Team Europe Approach to overcome disharmony among the EU Institutions and EU Member States

The Team Europe is an initiative, made up of some policies and fundings, but it is also an approach towards cooperation.

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The main point regards the fact that the Human Security approach and the Team Europe Approach are complementary and together can give new form to the cooperation and partnership between the EU and Africa. One does not exclude the other.

One specific characteristic of this approach is the clear willingness to present EU Member States under the EU umbrella as a unique global actor, to have a bigger voice and an impact on the international community, mainly in African countries, in which actors such as China and Turkey have an emerging new role. Thus, the Team Europe conceptualization should lead EU Members States to overcome the impasses created by the intergovernmental institutions and supranational institutions and should prioritize the EU agenda, instead of national political agendas and specific interests.

It is a recent project, initially focused on the COVID 19 pandemic and the quick economic response to the crisis, but it has the potential to become an important pillar in the External Action and cooperation.

Shaping new and correct narratives to rebuild the European perception towards Africa

Narratives represent the core of the development cooperation between EU and Africa. The continuous narrative based on the dichotomy of rich and poor, educated and uneducated or economic possibilities and lack of business possibilities should be reshaped. The African population is the youngest and the most dynamic among all other societies, moreover, many African countries are experiencing impressive economic growth. Despite what European citizens and policy-makers can think and perceive of the African environment, the reality is changing.

These wrong narratives have negatively affected the relations between the two continents. One important aspect is the wrong consideration of Africa as one country, one culture, one tradition. On the contrary, the African Union is composed of 55 states, each of them has hundreds of languages and there are a variety of religions and local traditions, which makes this continent unique.

European policy makers and new generations should deeply study and understand the African richness in terms of culture, innovation and exchange of ideas.

Peer-to-peer relations and partnership of equals

European development cooperation in Africa has been shaped for decades by correct and, mainly, wrong narratives, meaning that ideas, prejudices and attitudes have created a strict, negative and static idea of Africa. Therefore, it is extremely necessary to build a partnership between equals and between two Unions with their values, principles and rules.

The concept of ownership is crucial to understand the relevance of a peer-to-peer attitude. Africa should be able to decide for itself and to take decisions on important issues. The EU can help the process, but African ownership is vital for an equal and fair partnership. Peer to peer means learning from each other, hence EU Institutions and EU citizens surely have something to learn from the AU and its population.

Conclusions

This paper should be seen as a call for a deeper cooperation between AU and the EU, but also to foster mutual respect. It has been demonstrated that the situation is complex and broad, it can be dealt with different solutions and many strategies have tried to address the issues involved. The effort of the EU is evident and concrete, nevertheless, improvements and new steps are necessary.

The recommendations above wish to enrich the vision on EU-Africa relations and are a tentative to provide some solutions for new partnership with AU.

Some improvements are written on paper and on many official documents, useful summits and meetings are organized periodically, but they represent only words and diplomatic practices instead of practical consequences. In that respect, the EU should work to improve its role as a security actor in Africa, but mostly it should prove to engage in effective and efficient civilian and military missions, with a people-centred approach and a peer-to-peer attitude.

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