

African Union – European Union relations: untapped opportunity or unsolvable predicament?

A look at the development of the relations between Europe and Africa in recent years

Introduction

Africa as a continent has long been closely connected to European history and it owes a lot of its current political and economic position to Europe. Today, when Africa is mentioned, it is mostly about conflict, human rights issues and, even more in recent events, migration. Many African migrants are making the journey for a better life in Europe on a road beset by hardship and personal tragedies. This has been an issue for many years and the European Union has been searching for a solution to the influx and has reached out to African governments to deal with the issues related to migration. The outcome was the “EU-Africa” summits, starting in 2000, aimed at tackling those problems. Since then six more summits have been held.¹ However, the question remains: are the diplomatic talks successful and does the funding bring about change? This paper will focus on the strategies, the *European Union (EU)* has set into motion and what cooperation exists with the *African Union (AU)*.

AU-EU Summit development

The fourth “EU-Africa” summit took place in 2014 in Brussels with the broad theme of “Investing in People, Prosperity and Peace”. As the name suggests, the main topics were the sustainable development of stable African governments and how to tackle all those issues that would hinder it, such as terrorism, war, unemployment, insufficient education, energy shortages and inaccessibility to clean water resources.² A plan was constructed, running alongside the principles of the “Joint African-EU Strategy”,³ to follow until the next summit in 2017. It included solutions like offering African students more mobility in Europe and how the EU could invest in the continent to help alleviate these issues. Moreover, the consequences of mass migration

became a separate concern: a topic that would only gain urgency as time went on.⁴

November 2017 hosted the fifth “AU-EU summit” in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire. All 55 African states, along with 16 EU member states attended. It was unique because it was the first one to acknowledge the AU as a unity. The theme of the summit was “Investing in the Youth for a Sustainable Future”.⁵ The reasoning behind the theme was that 60% of Africans are under the age of 25 and there is a need for a strategy to keep the younger generation employed in the future.⁶ Unfortunately, the civil society was entirely excluded from the summit and had no say in the outcome as their arranged speaking time was vetoed last minute.⁷

Given the news reports from Libya about the considerable number of stranded migrants and the added threat of human trafficking, modern slavery and other poor conditions, the topic of migration was inevitable. Many European leaders acknowledged its importance and declared their willingness to deal with the situation. It quickly overshadowed the discussions at the summit.⁸ A joint statement on the migration crisis in Libya was made, which proposed solutions to voluntary returns of migrants to their respective home countries as well as assistance in other forms of transit to escort them from Libya.⁹ That said, the joint stance has been criticized for being too ineffective with only a small number of migrants being escorted home.¹⁰

Alongside the joint statement on migration, came the joint declaration on the goals of the summit and the framework within which they work together. The goals themselves differ little from previous summits.¹¹ Due to this, the declaration has been broadly criticised for not offering any substantial strategies apart from promises of future changes and aspirations.¹²

These AU-EU summits are important if the EU hopes to turn the tide on the relations that it currently holds. What is promising is the fact that the EU has already committed to invest €40 billion over the 2014-2020 period to achieve the goals of the summits.¹³ It will help, but it’s not the only proposed solution that has been implemented in the last decades.

The European solution

In the year 2000, the EU signed the Cotonou agreement with the *Africa, Caribbean & Pacific (ACP)* countries. The agreement covers the development, political, trade and economic cooperation with these countries for a period of twenty years. The part of the agreement that focuses on trade and economic cooperation was only supposed to remain until 2007, so for the last ten years, the EU has worked extensively to start *Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs)* with the ACP countries.¹⁴

Once ratified, the EPAs replace any previous trade agreement the EU has with individual countries and regions in Africa. According to the EU, they are set out to continue protecting human rights and sustainable development as was signed in the Cotonou Agreement. It requires nations to fulfil the obligations otherwise trade will be suspended. But only if all other diplomatic measures fail.¹⁵

The EPAs are split into regions, all based on existing multilateral development groups and trade unions for better integration within the local market. Dividing the continent into regions makes it easier to tailor the contract to the economic needs and provide secured markets for locally produced goods to Europe. The trade agreements also serve to open markets for everyone in the region to stimulate trade and economic growth, on the same level as the ACP countries gain access to the

European market. The EU perceives the EPA as a tool, not a necessity. The prerogative of overseeing the progression of the EPA is still in the hands of the local governments.¹⁶

The EU also commits to regulations regarding (EU) export to prevent a high influx of cheap products and European farming subsidies to the local African markets, and not to halt local industrialization, in African countries. Should a local industry be under any threat by European exports, there are tools in the EPA to limit the export of that industry. Additionally, African products would have precedence, and the previous export focus of the ACP countries would be continuously supported along with fostering and safeguarding of new export potentials. This is largely designed in the interest of the ACP countries. From a European perspective, the gain is the eventual liberalisation of 80% of the export tariffs to the ACP countries over 25 years; a win-win situation.¹⁷

Why haven't the EPAs been implemented?

The biggest issue currently is that the EPAs have so far not gone into full effect. The countries of the five African regions have either not signed or ratified the economic partnerships agreements and by the look of things, not all intend to do so either in the EPAs current form. In place of the official EPA, a provisional application has been issued with the African states that stand behind the agreements. It serves as a watered-down version of the original deal.¹⁸

The largest appeal of the EPAs for the African states would arguably be the unlimited duty-free access to the European Single Market. It would be of great economic benefit for any underdeveloped country to take advantage of this since it stimulates growth. The problem is that it is already functioning in Africa in the form of the "Everything but Arms" act signed in 2012 by the EU. It grants underdeveloped countries free access to the markets for all products apart from weaponry. This takes away a lot of the urgency for some African countries to sign a new trade deal with the EU.¹⁹

In addition to the lack of urgency, some countries have warned against this deal entirely. Tanzania and Nigeria are two of the countries that have spoken against the EPA the most and the arguments were the same. The Tanzanian Parliament has previously stated in 2016 that the EPAs are "[...] detrimental to the country's economy".²⁰ Experts argue that today's limited European import might increase dramatically.²¹ Kenya has been working tirelessly to change Tanzania's position as they are more dependent on this partnership for their exports, but the government in Dodoma has declared they will not change their current stance until the EPA has been tried over an extended period.²² The Tanzanian president Magufuli even went as far as to proclaim it a "form of colonialism".²³

Similarly, the Nigerian president, Buhari has expressed concerns for the EPA stating that signing it would damage their industries and hamper the industrialisation process of the country. Since Nigeria has a young population and a high demand for employment the government is unwilling to sign anything that would jeopardize their production.²⁴ This is despite the urge of European officials and Nigeria's neighbours, to do so. They argue that the condensed prices of African goods would help them in their effort to industrialise and compete with other markets. The lowered import prices of necessary machinery would also help build bolstering industries and the promise that Nigerian produced goods would not be exported from Europe provides necessary market protection.²⁵

There is also the general concern of possible consequences from not joining the agreement. The EU provides most of the development aid to Africa,²⁶ and if this aid was to be limited, it would put a lot of economic pressure on the regions. Another concern is that neighbouring nations who did sign would appear more attractive to foreign investors due to their markets offering more opportunities.²⁷

Dr Olu Fasan, a Nigerian political economist, has criticized Nigeria's decision. He

claims that no country has ever industrialized without a market to sell their goods. Europe is Nigeria's biggest trading partner and as such, it would only make sense to open the market to stimulate even further trading. Even the danger of the lowered tariffs is by such a small margin, that it would not make sense to worry about the large influx of European goods. In short, the concerns are unfounded and not beneficial for the ECOWAS.²⁸

The concern for the influx of European goods and exploitation is unfortunate and stems from previous international relations. China has been very active in Sub-Saharan Africa in the last decade and has made several investments in many countries across the continent. They are particularly prominent among less democratic states as they do not demand any reforms regarding the humanitarian rights for their investments. Some of the infrastructural investments by China in Africa have been unreliable. In 2009 newly constructed roads in Zambia were washed away by rains, since 2010 an Angola based hospital is in disuse over the fear of collapse, and in 2017 a Chinese constructed bridge in Kenya broke down within two weeks after inspection and these are not isolated incidents.²⁹ Other causes for concern are the indebteding of nations by lending money for the building of projects that have limited use, such as sports arenas that the countries cannot afford to pay the upkeep for.³⁰ China made extensive trade deals with the African nations, increasing trade with a tenfold from China's perspective, but did not give Africans any guaranteed entry into the Chinese market. In the process they flooded the markets with mass-produced goods, ruining industries like the textile industry, which now has been discontinued in many areas of the continent that used to employ tens of thousands. Although the Chinese invest in the current industries, their investments also bring Chinese workers with them. Over a million Chinese workers have migrated to Africa already. Those industries that do employ African workers generally have poor working conditions, low salaries and insufficient safety precautions.³¹

The sensitive subject of postcolonialism

The debate about whether China is engaging in colonialism is politically charged and too complex to satisfactorily bring up in this paper. However, some things that can be learned from this are, that the African states didn't examine China's deals as thoroughly as they did with the EPAs. They saw China as an opportunity to free themselves from Western influence, and thus what was committed to paper in those deals mattered less as long as it appeared to be beneficial to the industrialisation of Africa.

The history of the African continent is largely connected to Europe's complex past. It is a reason why Africa is in this disadvantaged and underdeveloped position that is exceedingly difficult to move away from, but this is a topic for another paper. It is, however, in everyone's interest to deal with this imbalance. The need for a change is mutual between Africans and Europeans. Africans don't want to be dependent on aid from the EU and the EU, in turn, doesn't want to act as a bank for African governments. There is also a striking difference in collective GDP between the two unions. The EU makes approximately seven times the amount the AU collectively accumulates, and the disparity makes closing deals as equals significantly harder to achieve. The power dynamic needs to stabilise before any substantial agreement can be made.³²

Furthermore, the fifth AU-EU summit made it clear that the AU had different priorities focusing on the regional economy while the EU rather discussed migration. It's not absurd to focus on the things that affect the union the most, but the summit was an excellent opportunity to meet halfway and that opportunity was never seized.³³ Europe has shown interest in solving Africa's problems before, but unlike then the European Union is now one of the bigger stakeholders in the major migration crisis coming out of Africa. It is in the best interest of the European governments that Africa enjoys a peaceful, stable and prosperous society. The distance to Africa is short and Europe realises that if they are

to address the migration causes and its effects, one of them being the rise of right-wing populism, substantial change needs to occur.³⁴

Will the dynamic change?

There has been a change of attitude since 2014 and this is evident in the title of the recent AU-EU summit of 2017. In the previous years, the African participation has been titled Africa, rather than the AU. This is the case, even though the AU has been the main representative of the summit since the beginning. This change could be the EU recognizing the AU's legitimacy as Africa's representative and its status as an international player, but whether this is more than just a titular change remains to be seen.³⁵

The current Chairperson of the AU, Rwandan President Kagame, has expressed reform interest in containing the many different international trade and partnerships with the 55-member states, to one central representative for the continent, namely that of the Chairperson.³⁶ Whether it is beneficial for the AU is for the member states to decide and whether it is possible given the relative weakness of the AU compared to the EU. But the reform itself could help the whole continent feel stronger united internationally than they would have independently.

Just before the AU-EU summit in November 2017, President Macron made a state visit to Burkina Faso, a country wherein the French president isn't particularly welcome due to the colonial history and sentiment of dependency on the French government. There he held a speech at a university in Ouagadougou, claiming "[he is] from a generation that doesn't come to tell Africans what to do."³⁷ Perhaps that is the answer; to underline the respect for the sovereignty of the African states that still are largely dependent on their historical European connections.

Conclusion

The EU, as well as the rest of Europe, is facing major security risks because of the migration crisis coming from Africa and have realised that it cannot be solved without good standing with the African governments. The AU-EU summits are important tools that can solve the issues the EU is facing and strengthen both continents. However, if Europe wants to build trust with Africa the rhetoric needs to transform into a culturally sensitive and respectful tone. Europe needs to evolve from the bringer of answers to Africa's problems to one that treats the African governments as mature sovereign powers capable of diagnosing and solving their own problems much like Macron did in his statement in Burkina Faso. EU member states may review the aid they are currently sending and direct it to sustainable investments into the African countries development to prevent them from feeding into corruption. A healthy and prosperous Africa means a prosperous Europe that offers trade and development opportunities, border security and finally the halt of the African migration to Europe. The window of opportunity to solve the crisis that Africa and Europe currently face is as small as it is brief, and it is high time for both parts to act proactively.

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