



Africa and the EU: Perspectives and Prospects

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Abstract

The principle of joint development cooperation efforts to be undertaken by European Community (EC) member states, and the possibility for former colonies to be associated with the EC, were already recognized in the Treaty of Rome as signed in 1957. The initial thrust of development policy was on preserving privileged trading relations – henceforth to be shared among all EC member states – and on jointly funded capital assistance to develop the former colonial territories. The motivation and ethos of EC policy towards Africa remained largely linked with the colonial model for decades, with efforts being steered from Brussels. The thrust was only gradually adapted, aided by successive phases of EC enlargement and the end of the Cold War.

The past has left a heavy legacy on European Union-Africa relations. On the European Union (EU) side, development cooperation flowed largely from the colonial link and was assisted and/or burdened by its attitudes and expectations, including privileged trade relations and somewhat paternalistic approaches to development. On the African side, mixed feelings about the colonial past, as well as the often bitter experience of moving towards independence, left a strong anti-colonial reflex. It has taken many years, as well as moving to a partnership approach, to overcome mutual suspicions.

EU-Africa relations have gradually adapted to reflect a widening scope of mutual concerns. Plenty of challenges remain, including overcoming the European tendency to expect Africans to accept ‘made-in-Brussels’ solutions and African reluctance to address sensitive issues (in particular regarding governance and human rights) on which they fear becoming subject to oversight from EU sources. African integration processes, and EU support for them, should play a major role in propelling the development of Africa and in moving EU-Africa relations to a more productive and consensual phase.

Summary of Recommendations

EU representatives should talk to many people and create communication lines to various government bodies, as well as to civil society. Political dialogue should not be limited to formal exchanges. A high degree of informality is more likely to yield results.

Integration among African states, both at the continental level and through smaller Regional Economic Communities, can play an important role in strengthening intra-African trade and development. The EU must continue efforts to support Africa with building multilateral structures to open up trade and investment, and ensure that African interests can benefit at least as much as European interests.

Conditions should be attractive enough for funds generated within Africa to be reinvested, rather than repatriated to their foreign headquarters. Improving conditions for investing in Africa should also cut down on capital flight, and would increase the incentive for funds generated by local investors to remain in the local economies. Good governance is directly linked to increasing domestic investment, both public and private.

Democratic governance and respect for human rights are key elements in preventing the escalation of internal grievances. Conflict prevention must include paying attention to equitable representation for all segments of African societies.

Enhancing the impact of the EU's presence in Africa in order to assist further democratization and good governance will require effective coordination of the EU presence – from planning to implementation – between the European Development Fund and national inputs.

The EU should be less inhibited about giving recognition to democratic leaders who respect the limitations on their terms in office and deal with opposition in a responsible manner.

An EU consensus on how to act jointly is critical, especially given the increase in the number of EU member states, in order to ensure that all resources available from EU sources be deployed in a concerted manner.

How can the EU insist on respect for democratic principles if other African partners (such as China) impose no such conditions? Rather than sacrificing its values, the EU could engage in dialogue with Africa's other partners in order to agree a consistent approach to African problems.

Intensification of the political dialogue offers the most realistic prospect for encouraging democratization processes. The European Commission should actively pursue contacts with a variety of government bodies, from the working level to the cabinet. Opposition parties also need to be involved.

A high-level panel that includes both EU and African representatives could be mandated to promote democratization, and provided with the means to sponsor activities in the human rights and democracy areas.

1. A Perspective on EU Development Policy and Democratization

The early days of the European Community's (EC) approach to Africa were closely linked with the end of the colonial era. Not only did the two developments coincide, there was also the hope that the newly formed EC framework could steer the former colonial bond into a new and mutually beneficial arrangement.

In an EC with six original members, it was the former colonial powers that were most present on the development side. France in particular insisted that an Association Agreement be included in the Treaty of Rome, in order to accommodate some of its overseas territories. This arrangement eventually included 18 former French colonies and Somalia. The French lead also applied to the internal administrative structures that were set up to manage joint efforts undertaken through EC channels; development services operated almost exclusively in French.

The creation of the European Development Fund (the first EDF ran from 1958 to 1963, subsequent EDFs also cover five-year periods) underscored that EC member states were prepared to undertake joint responsibility for development efforts in former African colonies.

After the wave of independence that covered most of Africa around 1960, it was necessary to rethink the link between the EC and the former colonies. However, the resulting agreement – the Yaoundé Convention, signed with the EC in 1963 – was still geared towards the same group of former French-colony countries (minus Guinea-Conakry). The Convention essentially established the contractual format that was to be followed in all subsequent agreements between the EC and its overseas partners. Initially the emphasis was on free trade, meaning preferential access for EC products sold to Africa and vice versa. In addition, a financial assistance package (EDF 2 and EDF 3) accompanied each of the Yaoundé Conventions, the second one signed in 1969.

Following some timid efforts to associate Anglophone countries in arrangements with the EC, the enlargement with the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark in January 1973 provided the impetus for an extension of European development policy to Commonwealth countries in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific (ACP). By the summer of 1973, negotiations had opened with a group of 45 states representing these three regions. This led to the signing of the Lomé Convention in 1975, in which trade was again a prominent feature. ACP states were granted preferential and non-reciprocal access to EC markets, and were offered higher-than-world prices for commodities including sugar and bananas. Financial instruments such as Stabex (compensation for price fluctuations on world markets) and Sysmin (to stabilize and encourage the minerals sector) were intended to demonstrate the EC commitment to the orderly development of the former colonies.

These benefits were granted across the board during the Cold War: countries aligned with either side received equal benefits. Cooperation remained centred on trade and development assistance. In the preparations for Lomé III (1985-90), however, the mention of ‘the importance of human dignity’ was inserted (no consensus having been found to refer to ‘human rights’) as the first expression of concern about democracy-related issues.

Things were to change further with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, which put an end to the Cold War rivalry that had split Africa ideologically, and had fuelled many conflicts. Simultaneously, the Treaty on European Union (signed in Maastricht in December 1991) transformed the European Community into the European Union (EU), which had a clear political dimension. These developments meant that the main obstacles to the insertion of political elements into development policy had disappeared.

The lack of progress on the development front and the poor state of governance in many ACP countries, led the by then-12 EC member states to hold firm on inserting clauses dealing with human rights in Lomé IV. In the 1995 revision of this agreement, often termed Lomé IVbis, ‘essential elements’ of the convention are listed as including respect for human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law. Good governance is listed in Lomé IVbis as ‘a particular aim of cooperation operations’. In the subsequent Cotonou Agreement, good governance is referred to as ‘a fundamental element’. It is defined

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as ‘the transparent and accountable management of human, natural, economic and financial resources for the purposes of equitable and sustainable development’. However, to soften the impact of this insertion, it was also agreed that ‘only serious cases of corruption, including acts of bribery leading to such corruption constitute a violation of that element’.

The Cotonou Agreement (which was signed in 2000 and covers a 20-year period with revisions every five years, the first of which was completed in 2005) placed more emphasis

on civil society and the private sector, and also extended the political dialogue with ACP states to include peace and conflict issues.

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regimes. For the African side, the main goal often was to appease the EU enough to convince them to keep up the flow of assistance money and not to impose punitive measures. The eagerness of ex-colonial powers to cement close ties with their former territories, working closely with the regimes of these states regardless of their degree of commitment to democracy, gave a rather hollow ring to the calls for participatory democracy.

While the United States (US) was motivated largely by Cold War considerations, its rhetoric in favour of Western-style democracy was arguably more convincing in bringing its protégés closer to, at least complying with, the external formalities of democratic government. This underlines the EU’s political weakness and the ineffectiveness of its call for democratization as part of its development policy during much of the operation of the EDF.

2. A Priority for the EU and for Africans?

The formal introduction of political elements in the EU-ACP relationship provided an opportunity to shift the centre of gravity away from technical and financial instruments. If indeed the relationship was to become an instrument of the EU’s overall foreign policy, such a development was mandatory.

From the mid-1990s, the adoption of Lomé IVbis (signed in Mauritius in November 1995) offered an opportunity to insert conditionalities – spelled out as ‘essential elements’, being respect for human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law – into the texts that governed the administration of the European Development Fund. However, this was not widely welcomed by the European Commission services involved

with development, as it was perceived as complicating the disbursement of funds and possibly straining relations with partner governments.

The conditionality provisions have been applied only patchily since they were formally introduced. However, the requirement to carry on a political dialogue has been further specified and refined in the 2000 Cotonou Agreement and its 2005 revision (Article 8), and is now seen as an important step in the EDF process. There remain, however, great variations in the degree of vigour with which individual heads of delegation pursue the dialogue or link it to further steps in the cooperation process.

In the wake of the introduction of Lomé IVbis, Commission development staff attempted to define ways of measuring respect for the 'essential elements' as well as good governance. These were usually seen as a sequence of steps that would allow assessing progress toward achieving these goals, rather than establishing firm quantitative measures.

In practice, it has been difficult to operationalize the democratization priorities, and to induce staff in Directorate General for Development and in Delegations to incorporate them in their daily activities. Such work was alien to the EC approach to development of the 1970s and '80s. Furthermore, political work by EC delegations often was (and in some cases still is) frowned upon by the representatives of some member states who resent intrusions into the prerogatives of statehood by those whose main task they see as dispensing commonly funded assistance.

The Cotonou Agreement has increased the expectations for heads of delegations to actively pursue the political dimension of the EU-ACP relationship, in particular through the political dialogue outlined in Article 8. Nevertheless, the degree of vigour with which the matter is being handled still forms a bone of contention, with some heads of delegations being seen as too slack (and therefore needing reminders and instructions from Brussels), while others need to be reigned in lest they indulge in a degree of scrutiny which embarrasses the Brussels hierarchy.

The political dialogue mandated by the Cotonou Agreement is mostly implemented at EU heads of mission level, rather than through the EC delegations alone. While this may strengthen the weight of the joint message being delivered, the larger format also allows ACP government leaders to conduct more formal sessions, responding to previously submitted written questions and not engaging in actual dialogue.

In order to be effective, political dialogues need to be well prepared through informal activities at various levels. EU representatives should talk to many people and create communication lines to various government bodies, as well as to civil society. Political dialogue should not be limited to formal exchanges. On the contrary, formal settings seem to encourage people to talk past each other. A high degree of informality, using direct language, is more likely to yield results.

Nevertheless, the overall impact of the dialogue is still modest, with the 'conditionality' aspect being downplayed and few actual instances of EU assistance having been cut in

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response to non-observation of the political clauses of the EU-ACP agreements. More commonly, there have been some adjustments within the existing envelopes, in order to reduce the governments' ability to make political hay from dispensing EU funds. It appears that there has been reluctance from the EU to intervene forcefully, as this could complicate relations with governments of some ACP states, and might endanger the long-term goal of assisting the development of societies.

The fact that little use has been made of the sanctions procedure also stems from the fear that sanctions might trigger results that are unintended or even opposite. If cooperation is interrupted over allegations of serious breaches of human rights or a reversal in the democratization process, the political dialogue with the host government is likely to be halted. As a result, it will be more difficult for the EU to wield influence in order to improve the situation. Furthermore, sanctions often hurt the more vulnerable groups in society. The tendency has therefore been to try to continue helping the population while circumventing the government. Any attempt to impose punitive measures should be targeted toward individuals responsible for the breaches in human rights and the democratic process.

In the eyes of African partners, criteria relating to their performance with respect to human rights and good governance have been seen as reducing the predictability of aid flows. While the rhetoric has emphasized partnership and joint management, many Africans fear that – based on the Lomé and Cotonou agreements – the EU might appropriate for itself the right to undertake intrusive steps, thereby limiting the ability of ACP states to direct their own development efforts.

3. Aid Versus Commerce

There is little doubt that trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa have greater potential for transforming African societies, and for propelling them into the middle-income class of states, than foreign aid ever could. Aid perpetuates dependency. Aid also allows African governments to maintain a preponderant role in allocating the extra resources provided from outside, thus strengthening the *dirigiste* tendencies of many of them.

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While virtually all African governments proclaim their support for freely operating markets, most maintain a network of restrictions that impede the optimal operation of free market mechanisms. These restrictions – especially when they apply to the areas of telecommunications and the movement of goods – have grave consequences for development. Many governments favour continued monopoly situations for state companies, in spite of their

inefficiency, not least because this situation allows appointments to be doled out to political friends and party supporters.

With respect to trade, a central tenet has been – since the early days of EC development policy – the gradual opening of the EU market on a non-reciprocal basis. By itself, this could be seen as an accommodating gesture on behalf of EU member states, thus guaranteeing ACP producers more generous prices for commodities such as sugar,

cotton and bananas than they could have fetched on the world market. In return, the EU sought to maintain its privileged position in African markets. Many Africans fear that such an approach will condemn them to a perpetual status of supplying minerals and some foodstuffs, while remaining a dumping ground for agricultural surpluses as well as industrial goods originating in the EU.

Well-meaning and even cleverly constructed attempts to loosen up the trade and investment sphere, like the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) concept, draw resistance from the African side, which feels it has not been sufficiently consulted. While the EU admittedly has not been sensitive enough in dealing with African resistance, it must be said that many arguments used by Africans and their anti-globalization allies are protectionist and mercantilist in nature. As such, governments resisting freer trade may hurt their own consumers and businesses by keeping costs higher than they could be in a more competitive environment.

Europeans should be prepared to be more flexible, considering and negotiating the main obstacles Africans see in the EU approach to opening up trade. Agricultural subsidies remain the largest blocking factor. Dumping surpluses in Africa (by the EU and US) has hurt African economies as well as food security on the continent. If the Obama Administration cuts subsidies, as the president indicated he intended to do, the EU will have to face its own demons and accelerate plans to deconstruct its baroque subsidy system. With respect to manufacturing, the 'everything but arms' approach to opening up the EU market for goods made in Africa is likely to have little impact because the accompanying 'rules of origin' requirements are almost impossible to apply and thereby impede African exports to the EU. Moreover, global cuts in tariffs (and possible price-cutting as a result of the global slowdown) may further hinder industrialization efforts in Africa, in particular by making Chinese goods even cheaper.

Further integration among African states, both at the continental level and through smaller Regional Economic Communities (RECs), can play an important role in strengthening intra-African trade and development. The EU must continue efforts to support Africa with building multilateral structures to open up trade and investment, and ensure that African interests can benefit (and will be seen as benefiting) at least as much as European interests. Integration is a requirement to increase investment, as most African markets are too small to support manufacturing plants. Free-trade arrangements within the RECs, which EPAs or their successor proposals might be able to promote, are therefore a necessity.

Investment should not just be seen as FDI. Conditions should be attractive enough for funds generated within Africa to be reinvested, rather than repatriated to their foreign headquarters. Improving conditions for investing in Africa should also cut down on capital flight, and would increase the incentive for funds generated by local investors to remain in the local economies. The role of corruption in capital flight has to be faced: ill-gotten gains are always safer abroad. Good governance is directly linked to increasing domestic investment, both public and private.

Free movement of labour (including professionals) within African regional and sub-

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regional groupings should provide an impetus to economic growth, and offer at least a partial substitute for South-North migration. Orderly frameworks regarding intra-African migration would provide professional opportunities, and stimulate growth and specialization among African businesses.

Free movement of labour (including professionals) within African regional and sub-regional groupings should provide an impetus to economic growth, and offer at least a partial substitute for South-North migration.

Democratization within states, allowing an orderly expression of opposition within countries, should remove a major obstacle to orderly migration, which in turn can promote regional integration and development.

One obstacle to orderly migration is the tendency by many African states to harbour and support opponents of regimes from neighbouring countries. If representatives of opposition and rebel movements form the most visible part of a neighbour's population, this will act as a brake on building a more constructive presence, such as businesses and professionals from neighbouring states. Democratization within states, allowing an orderly expression of opposition within countries, should remove a major obstacle to orderly migration, which in turn can promote regional integration and development.

The most urgent needs are among neighbouring states. While continent-wide agreements in the field of migration might be the end goal, RECs are now the most appropriate bodies to initiate gradual steps towards opening borders for migrants.

4. Security, Governance and External Players

The chaos that emerged in Africa after 1960 was at least in part due to incomplete de-colonization, as well as to the rather shameless efforts by Cold War adversaries to encourage proxies to do their bidding in the struggle for global domination. By the time the Soviet Union collapsed, however, it was clear that African states were quite adept at creating new conflicts and extending old ones after their ideological basis had evaporated. This tendency was no doubt fed by weapons and rivalries left over from the Cold War era.

Conflicts played havoc with well-meaning efforts by Africans, donors and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to boost the development of the continent. In several African countries which experienced prolonged civil wars, their gross domestic product would be close to double in the absence of such conflicts.

While sharing the same concerns, the EU and US never followed the same approach. The EU supported the idea of strengthening African institutions to provide a more direct input from all African states into efforts to stabilize the continent through multilateral institutions. The EU approach has been only a moderate success, but still holds more promise than the more restrictive road – often based on selective military cooperation – pursued by the US.

After the end of the Cold War, the wish to control conflicts – and in doing so reversing Africa's economic regression – rapidly moved up the ladder of priorities, for the US as well as the EU. While sharing the same concerns, the EU and US never followed the same approach. The US used bilateral links with a few favoured interlocutors to strengthen some governments militarily, in the hope of projecting stability from those poles. The EU, from the mid-1990s on, supported the idea of strengthening African institutions in order to relieve the United Nations (UN), and to provide a more direct input from all African states into efforts to stabilize the continent through multilateral institutions. The contrast

between the ‘realism’ of conservative US administrations can thus be contrasted with the more ‘idealistic’ EU goals for security cooperation. The EU approach has been only a moderate success, but still holds more promise than the more restrictive road – often based on selective military cooperation – pursued by the US.

The EU approach to Africa, as well as the EU’s wider approach to international politics, is founded on the belief that cooperation is necessary and desirable from a double perspective. As the EU sees international affairs basically as a positive-sum game, cooperation is in Europe’s self-interest. Moreover, for the EU, cooperation is part of a wider agenda for peace, justice and equality, where power politics is overtaken by an institutionalized framework to support dialogue and the achievement of values seen as essential, such as democracy and the rule of law.

The African role in mitigating conflicts on the continent has been played rather timidly so far. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) initially limited itself to observer missions (Burundi, Ethiopia-Eritrea border, Democratic Republic of Congo). With a more explicit mandate in the security field, the African Union (AU) has been more ambitious. However, African capabilities ended up being stretched to the limit during the Darfur deployment of the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS), and the African Union Mission to Somalia struggled to gain a foothold. Nevertheless, the fact that – in Darfur – UNAMID (the joint UN-AU mission in Darfur) has been no more successful than AMIS, demonstrates that the main obstacles with respect to an effective deployment have not been limited to AU shortcomings. Other factors, such as the success of the Sudanese government in thwarting the peacekeeping efforts of the international community, together with the reluctance of individual states to offer contributions to the peacekeeping force, probably had a more significant impact.

Most African conflicts primarily result from domestic disputes, rather than being cross-border wars. As such, they often represent failures of governance. Regimes lack the will or the ability to maintain government structures that allow different groups to be properly represented. Marginalized areas and populations often resort to armed resistance since they have not been heard in any other manner. Democratic governance and respect for human rights are therefore key elements in preventing the escalation of internal grievances. Conflict prevention must include paying attention to equitable representation for all segments of African societies.

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While peacekeeping operations in Africa will continue to require outside assistance, it would be hard to see non-Africans carry the bulk of the effort on the ground, or to take the main political responsibility when deployments are required. The EU will no doubt continue to be the main external supporter of capacity building for actions by AU and the RECs.

5. Democratizing on One’s Own Terms?

Democratization is an avowed goal of most African governments, though the form taken by ‘democratic government’ is not exactly standardized along Western norms. Many African governments want to maintain limits on freedom of speech, and keep a hand in managing the media. In spite of calls for an ‘African’ version of democratic

government, this is poorly defined and there is a dearth of criteria by which to judge the equity of non-Western forms of decision-making and popular participation.

Many governments seek to limit the number of actors in the political process, in particular political parties, and control the direction of their policies. Other actors, such as NGOs, are also expected to play neutral roles, restrict themselves to activities outside of the political sphere, and not to become involved in advocacy roles.

There are worrisome signs in many African states that had been thought of as on the road to democratization. Many regimes seem to transform their ruling parties into dominant machines that might tolerate opposition groups in name only, effectively creating 'one-party dominant systems', where the ruling machine (in a way similar to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI) in Mexico through much of the 20th century) will try to perpetuate itself in power for decades.

The ACP structure has provided a framework for formal interaction between the EC and the former colonies since the early 1970s. In this multilateral forum, agreement can be sought between the two groups, with each of them having to coordinate a common position among its own members.

Negotiating agreements between the EU and ACP states as a group to some extent compensates for the weakness of the development partners by giving them an opportunity to form a common front. Some have argued that this was not sufficient compensation for the ACP side, leaving the results lopsided and asymmetrical in favour of the more developed group. However, it is not clear that the interaction among ACP states has always yielded results in support of the long-term interests of their populations. Rather, it would seem that the ACP framework has often been used to defend the interests of African leaders who were more interested in strengthening their regimes than in promoting human rights, democratization or indeed overall standards of development. In general, it would appear that ACP countries, given their number and diversity, often have even greater difficulty in formulating common positions than the EU, leaving it to the EU side to come up with proposals to which the ACP states can respond.

The ACP framework, which is the main forum for interaction between the EU and ACP states, has not been in the vanguard of promoting democratic values. Rather, it has tended to follow the lowest common denominator, often acting as an apologist for laggards and offenders. Dictators have more often than not succeeded in mobilizing support among ACP members, thus resisting pressures from the EU side. The lack of political courage within the ACP framework brings into question its suitability to serve as main conduit for guiding EU-ACP interaction. Nevertheless, as long as the EU maintains its approach to offer common instruments and conditions to all ACP states, there is no real alternative to the ACP framework.

6. Prospects

The partnership theme in EU-Africa cooperation expresses a commitment for mutual respect. By implication, this principle should be extended to political interaction inside African states. Encouraging a culture of democracy is obviously a long-term endeavour, in which the political leadership and the citizens of states should be involved. The media

and their role in influencing public opinion are important factors here. Perhaps the EU should be less inhibited about giving recognition (such as awards or prizes) to democratic leaders who respect the limitations on their terms in office and deal with opposition in a responsible manner.

In an immediate sense, intensification of the political dialogue offers the most realistic prospect for encouraging democratization processes. The European Commission should use the broadest interpretation of the dialogue possible, actively pursuing contacts with a variety of government bodies, from the working level to the cabinet. Opposition parties also need to be involved. The dialogue should not be a once-a-month exercise, but an effort which is being pursued with greater frequency, as personnel assignments allow.

The operation of ACP structures reflects the EU desire to follow partnership as a global approach to foreign policy. Political dialogue with the ACP states is part and parcel of the EU's overall Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP); it demonstrates the nature of the European Union as an international actor.

EU development policy, however, is classified by the Maastricht Treaty as a Community policy area, in contrast to the second pillar and the CFSP, which is handled through intergovernmental procedures. The Maastricht Treaty furthermore states that 'the community and the Member States shall coordinate their policies on development cooperation and shall consult each other on their aid programmes'. Development cooperation is therefore a shared competence between the European Community and the member states. This gives the European Commission a central role in formulating and administering development strategies, which are an inherent part of the EU's external relations. Maastricht furthermore required all of the EU's external actions to be coherent, including its external, security, economic and development policies.

The effectiveness of EU actions with respect to development policy, as in the rest of the foreign policy field, is constrained by the fact that the EU is still a work in progress. This at times causes a gap between expectations and credibility, with EU bodies being unable to deliver either because they fail to reach a timely decision or because the 'decision' had to go through so many compromises that it fails to make much of an impact. This is an ongoing challenge for those who think that building Europe is worthwhile, not just for its own sake, but also because its unique way of projecting 'soft power' could change the way global business is conducted. Enhancing the impact of the EU's presence in Africa in order to assist further democratization and good governance will require effective coordination of the EU presence – from planning to implementation – between the European Development Fund and national inputs.

While progress has been slow, great strides have been made since the compromise on development which was included in the Treaty of Rome. The European Consensus on Development was agreed in 2006 between the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the member states meeting within the Council. It spells out the EU

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vision of development, and the main tenets of development policy to be implemented by the European Community. Its importance lies not so much in the level of detail it contains, but rather in the fact there was agreement on saying so much in a relatively short text of just over 100 paragraphs. The goals outlined in the Consensus are also taken up in the Treaty of Lisbon, signed in 2007, which includes the objective of 'promoting the complementarity and efficiency' of development actions among all EU actors.

Joint EC spending on development, administered through the European Commission (mainly in EDF) represents less than 20 per cent of the combined resources made available for development by the EC and its 27 member states. A consensus on how to act jointly is all the more important, especially given the increase in the number of EU member states, in order to ensure that all resources made available from EU sources be deployed in a concerted manner.

The Africa-EU Strategic Partnership, endorsed at the second Africa-EU Summit held in Lisbon in 2007, outlines an ambitious programme for cooperation in eight priority areas: peace and security; democratic governance and human rights; trade, regional integration and infrastructure; the Millennium Development Goals; energy; climate change; migration, mobility and employment; and science, information society and space. Implementing such an ambitious scheme will be a test both of EU commitment and of the AU's capacity.

The EU's approach to Africa has at times been blamed for impeding rather than encouraging pan-African endeavours. In the early days of the EC's relations with Africa, arrangements favouring specific groups of countries set up barriers between those (mainly former French colonies) that were in, and others who felt that they were being neglected. While the current makeup of the ACP group is much more inclusive, the EU has not always been sensitive enough to the need for maintaining pan-African dynamics. In the 1990s, the Brussels bureaucracy had a strong mistrust toward OAU, and favoured working with the RECs, which were seen as having better prospects for promoting integration and development. While the approach has gradually become more balanced, the challenge remains to link the assistance being offered at the continental level with the efforts deployed in support of the RECs. The latter should be viewed as building blocks that contribute to gradual continental integration. Lack of coordination on how to deal with the various RECs and with the AU may lead to partial results that could reinforce the fragmentation of Africa.

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The newfound attention to the continental level has resulted in a flood of programmes being designed in Brussels to support the AU Commission, as well as activities in the framework of the eight thematic partnerships. This will be a true test of the AU Commission's capacities, and of its ability to absorb the massive additional inflows which the EU is making available. There is a real risk that the EU will smother the AU with love.

The EU's efforts to support continental integration are also problematic in another respect. While there is now a genuine commitment by Brussels to forge continental political structures, the EU's approach to dealing with Africa – and the instruments it is making available – often result in fragmenting the continent. The

EU has used different instruments to address the need of sub-Saharan Africa, and those of its more immediate neighbours across the Mediterranean. North Africa is not part of the ACP system. In the context of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (which started with the Barcelona Process in 1995 and was recently re-invigorated by French President Nicolas Sarkozy) and the European Neighbourhood Policy, North African states deal with Brussels through other fora that are perhaps closer to the central concerns (such as security and migration) of many important EU member states. In addition, different – and quite generous – financial instruments are available to six North African states, thus reducing their incentive to work in a pan-African context.

It is not clear whether any new EU initiatives should cover all of Africa, or be limited to sub-Saharan Africa. In practice, it would be difficult to include North Africa, which has its own specific dynamics. If one wanted to present the effort as a continental one, or to involve the AU, however, all African countries should be covered. A high-level panel that includes both EU and African representatives could be mandated to promote democratization, and provided with the means to sponsor activities in the human rights and democracy areas. It would appear preferable to operate outside of the EDF framework, so that funding could be handled more quickly.

In principle, the increasing attention and financial support available to Africa should increase the EU's ability to get Africans to commit themselves to moving forward with the major elements outlined in the documents that seal EU cooperation with African states. It is not clear, however, whether this will in fact be the case. How can the EU insist on respect for democratic principles if other African partners (such as China) impose no such conditions? Rather than sacrificing its values, the EU could engage in dialogue with Africa's other partners in order to agree a consistent approach to African problems. In practice, however, there will always be a competitive side to the partners' approach to Africa, and when there are more players in the field, there is a real risk of the democratic message being watered down.

Some have argued that the EU emphasis on liberalization and some stipulations in the Cotonou Agreement implicitly challenge the power of the state. This, it is argued, is problematic, as successful development efforts require strong states. Such reasoning is flawed, however. State capacities for implementing development programmes do not require suppressing civil society or freedom of speech. On the contrary, the efficiency of the government apparatus will be served through freedom of expression. A free press, and a judiciary that is prepared to defend press freedom, are central for evolving truly dynamic societies, politically and economically. The main avenue toward democratization lies in being free to criticize, while respecting the views of others.

Greater visibility for EU contributions – along 'self-promotion' lines practised by some other donors, including the US, Canada and Japan – could allow the EU to reap more credit from its efforts and commitment.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that current EU structures and instruments have only been marginally successful in promoting democracy and human rights in Africa. If the EU wanted to move these goals higher up the list of priorities, there will be a need to go beyond current structures and initiatives.

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About the Author

Born in Belgium, Dr Marcel Leroy studied political science and international relations at the University of Brussels and at the Johns Hopkins University, where he completed his Ph.D. in 1974. He taught at universities in Canada and in Belgium, attaining the rank of full professor in 1984. He became head of Multilateral and Regional Affairs for NATO's International Secretariat in 1991.

From 1996, Dr Leroy carried out assignments for the European Commission in Brussels, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Moldova. In 2005 he was appointed political advisor to the European Union Special Representative for Sudan. He joined the Africa Programme of the United Nations-mandated University for Peace as senior researcher in 2008, dealing in particular with the impact of environmental and climate change on conflicts in Africa.