



Perceptions of the EU's Approach to Democracy Building in Africa

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Abstract

This paper examines African perceptions of the European Union's (EU's) role in democracy building on the continent. The EU is undoubtedly one of the largest global providers of development assistance to Africa and other parts of the developing world, and has made significant efforts to support democracy-building in African states since the Cold War ended. Its policies and actions have had a great impact on governance processes at the continental level through the African Union and the New Partnership for Africa's Development, at the subcontinental level through regional economic communities such as the East African Community, the Economic Community of Western African States, and the Southern African Development Community, and at the national level through direct dealings with various African governments, parliaments, political parties, and civil society groups.

Africans' perceptions on the EU's role vary widely, depending on variables such as geographical region, countries' stability and level of democratic development, and individuals' gender and level of education. EU efforts are often seen as a mixed blessing; arguably, support for democracy building would be enhanced by a broader focus that took social-economic and development needs into account.

Summary of Recommendations

The European Union should adopt a whole-of-society approach instead of addressing narrower issues or sectors of society separately. It should avoid picking political winners and instead pay as much attention to systemic factors as to individuals. It should give equal attention to governmental and nongovernmental sectors, and its strategies should take into account the relation between democracy building and socio-economic development. Finally, it should utilize democratic processes to address problems in the following areas, which would embed democracy at the grassroots level: public institutions, health care, agriculture, and transport and other critical infrastructure.

1. Introduction

In the past two decades, the European Union (EU) has played an important role in helping Africa to deal with its development and democracy-building challenges. However, African states and their European partners have not always appeared to be reading from the same page. The relationship between Africa and Europe, often an unequal one – whether it involved interactions between ancient Egyptians and Greeks, the slave trade, or the European colonization of Africa – has frequently been redefined to suit the prevailing international norms of governance. Unsurprisingly, the weaker partner has often been suspicious of the intentions, strategies and actions of the dominant partner. The current EU policies and actions in support of democracy building in Africa reflect the prevailing global norms of governance. African states and organizations have found the relationship with the EU beneficial, but many have also remained suspicious of some EU actions and approaches.

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It is generally acknowledged that democracy is the right of all societies and states. Governments all over the world, irrespective of their historical traditions, have been made to understand that they have an obligation to build democracy and create an environment in which their people can

exercise civil and political rights freely. It is partly for this reason that Thomas Franck said human rights and democracy have become ‘a normative rule of the international system’ and argued that democracy ‘is on the way to becoming a global entitlement, one that increasingly will be promoted and protected by collective international processes’ (Franck 1992: p.46).

The aim of this paper is to examine Africans’ perceptions of how the EU has influenced the role of the state in democracy building. It is not based on structured interviews or formal opinion surveys but on informal conversations with policy-makers and on statements made by, or attributed, to African leaders.

2. Challenges and Opportunities for Democracy Building in Africa

The African continent is ideologically, racially, ethnically, politically, socially, economically and geographically diverse. This diversity is both an advantage and a disadvantage. While one part of the continent may be stagnating due to economic and political problems, other parts may be moving forward. On the other hand, a policy prescription for one part of the continent may not be suitable for other parts. There are few if any one-size-fits-all solutions for Africa.

Despite their diversity, Africans face similar social, political, technological, economic, and health care challenges. For example, many African states experience similar problems in relation to the roles and independence of the media, parliament and the judiciary. In newly democratizing states, for example, voters may appear to have a choice between competing political parties, but some of these choices are not meaningful because many political parties are small and have no clear programme or action plan. In many countries, democratic institutions are weak or undeveloped, gender equality has not been achieved, and many people lack access to clean water, formal education,

affordable health care, adequate shelter, and food. This lack of access is essentially a governance issue. Thus, the relationship between democracy building and development is crucial on the continent.

While the EU has made tremendous efforts since the end of the Cold War to help build democracy and strengthen the capacity of African states, some African policy-makers have said that it has not done so consistently. This perception of inconsistency has often clouded the partnership between Africa and the EU.

Some African policy-makers have argued that the EU has focused too much on governance issues and given too little attention to social and economic development. The democracy and development objectives are seen as linked and, in some cases, symbiotic. Others even say that EU assistance is likely to be more effective if it focuses on building public institutions, improving transport networks, nurturing competitive industries, creating affordable health and education facilities, negotiating fair trade deals, and facilitating access to science and technology. Such projects by themselves might have little or no effect on democracy building. However, if they were designed to enhance gender equality, provide opportunities for human empowerment and participatory democracy, and encourage transparency and public accountability, they could serve as key building blocks for democracy on the continent.

It appears the main challenges and opportunities for democracy building in Africa are connected to the development of public institutions and provision of services: health care, transport and communications, water and electricity supplies. By addressing these areas, the EU and its African partners can also build democracy, enhance public institutions, alleviate poverty, and generate the development that will, in turn, underpin and sustain democracy on the continent.

By far the most important challenge, and opportunity, in democracy building in Africa relates to public institutions. Unless governance institutions – such as parliaments, courts and political parties – are independent and free from corruption, democracy cannot take root. In addition, unless these public institutions are reformed, effective infrastructure development can probably not take place. So, despite what some African leaders have claimed regarding the choice between governance and infrastructure, it is clear that effective and accountable governance is a prerequisite for infrastructure development on the continent. The EU needs to make this connection clear to its African partners.

The EU ought to make every effort to support the enhancement of governance institutions at the continental, regional, state and local levels. African governments and organizations have devoted numerous documents and seminars to ways to improve governance and build democracy, but the political will to do so is often lacking. The African Union's (AU's) Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, for example, provides African states with guidelines on how to establish and maintain a democratic system, but many states have apparently ignored it.

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The Charter, adopted in early 2007, elaborates the elements of democracy contained in the Constitutive Act of the African Union.¹ It seeks to encourage the eradication of corruption, embed a culture of peace, and establish an enabling environment for democratic consolidation, including the institutionalization of opposition political parties. It also aims to promote the separation of powers and checks and balances, representative government through free and fair elections, and civilian control of the security sector. It represents an opportunity for Africans to utilize their own documents to improve governance, but few states appear willing to implement it without prompting from outside. The challenge for the EU is to provide leadership on this issue without appearing overbearing.

Improving health care can promote participatory democracy by improving human security and empowering individuals. Just as the question of health care reform has generated considerable political heat in the United States, especially since 2009, health care in Africa is both a development issue and a democracy-building issue. EU support to African states for improving health care can provide an opportunity to link democracy building to socio-economic development. The Constitutive Act of the African Union pledges that the AU will work 'with relevant international partners in the eradication of preventable diseases and the promotion of good health on the continent'(African Union 2000, Article 3n). Basic health promotion is a prerequisite for democracy, sustained economic growth, education, procreation, and development. Indicators of development include improved life expectancy, reduced infant mortality rates, and access to proper sanitation.

EU and African states can address together the HIV/AIDS pandemic, women and children's health issues, and common but devastating diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, asthma, and intestinal parasites. However, to do so, they would need to invest in health and especially in the training and retention of doctors, nurses, and other health specialists. Most importantly, they would need to devise democratic strategies through which governments, civil society organizations, and international partners could work together to deliver high quality and affordable health services. Such an approach would establish a key building block for democracy.

Like health care, agriculture is vital for human security, political empowerment, and democracy building. The production of food and cash crops is also potentially important for poverty alleviation, sustainable development and foreign exchange earnings. A large portion of Africa's international trade is based on agriculture and forestry products. However, the lack of democracy has enabled corruption and misguided policies, which have often resulted in agricultural failure, chronic famine and devastating soil erosion. The challenge for the EU, African states and Africa's other international partners is to explore ways of utilizing democratic processes to overcome some of the common obstacles to success in agriculture, especially the restriction of farming to particular periods of the year.

Those engaged in democracy building should invest more in agriculture and ensure that agricultural producers are empowered both to feed the populace and to produce cash crops for exports. They should also help foster an environment in which African scientists, in collaboration with international partners, experiment with crops that can

¹ see Articles 3g, 3h, 4m and 4n.

be farmed in arid areas. Moreover, given the low levels of protein in the diets of many African families, the EU and African policy-makers should consider the possibility of supporting African scientists to experiment with protein-rich crops such as rice, millet, and maize. Agriculture, one of the most important activities on the continent, is an area in which the EU and its African partners can work together to strengthen democracy.

Agricultural commodities must be transported from one point to another on roads, railways, aircraft or ships – thus, to be successful, agriculture requires transport and communications networks and other infrastructure. Over the centuries, transport and communications have played key roles in transforming societies. Unfortunately, due to bad governance, and especially corruption, cronyism, and nepotism, as well as lack of knowledge, much of Africa has extremely poor transport infrastructure, antiquated energy and water supply facilities, and limited access to information and communications technology. This increases the cost of commodities, reduces economic competitiveness, discourages foreign investment, and holds back human emancipation and empowerment. Transport and communications networks can have various uses, but they should be geared towards transforming rural areas, stimulating agricultural production, promoting gender equality, encouraging small and medium-size enterprises, attracting foreign investment, and aiding regional integration. It is through such measures that the EU and African states can construct genuine platforms for democracy, state building and human empowerment.

3. EU's Policies and Actions

The EU has enunciated policies and undertaken a number of actions since the end of the Cold War that have been designed to help African states and organizations improve their governance institutions. The EU takes the view that while in Europe and other developed countries the state's role is to ensure the protection of its citizens, some states in Africa, such as Somalia, are incapable of carrying out this role. In other states, such as Zimbabwe, the state has used its power to threaten the security of its own citizens.

The EU also proceeds from the view that while in Europe and other developed countries the state is there to uphold the rule of law, in some parts of Africa, the state violates the rule of law, undermines human rights and disregards democratic processes.

Recent EU policies towards Africa have been expressed in publications such as *The Africa–European Union Strategic Partnership* (European Commission and African Union Commission 2007), which calls for cooperation in many areas, including governance, development and security. Through this framework, the EU has sought to promote the African peer review mechanism administered by the New Partnership for Africa's Development, support the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, and engage Africa in a series of dialogues. Other important policy documents that guide the EU–African partnership include the European Commission's *Furthering Human Rights and Democracy across the Globe* (2007) and *Towards an EU Response to Situations of Fragility – Engaging in Difficult Environments for Sustainable Development, Stability and Peace* (2007).

A recent publication, *Overcoming Fragility in Africa: Forging a New European Approach* (European Commission 2009), provides insights into how the EU seeks to refine its policies towards Africa, focusing on tackling the fragility of states on the continent.

Fragility cuts across various sectors of society: political, legal, social, economic and technological. The EU believes it has to deal with this issue because fragility can have serious consequences, not only for the citizens of fragile states but also for their neighbours and for the international community as a whole.

The EU's agenda for democracy building in Africa is designed to help build public institutions, strengthen state machinery, enhance the structures and processes of regional organizations, including the African Union, and pave the way for human development. In doing so, it recognizes that democracy cannot be imposed from the outside.

In summary, the EU's agenda for democracy building in Africa is designed to help build public institutions, strengthen state machinery, enhance the structures and processes of regional organizations, including the African Union, and pave the way for human development. In doing so, it recognizes that democracy cannot be imposed from the outside. As the International IDEA monograph *Democracy in Development* states: 'This recognition urgently

needs to be translated into true dialogue between peers in a way which is active but not aggressive, critical but not condescending, honest but not humiliating' (International IDEA 2009: 7).

4. Perceptions of the EU in Africa

EU policies and actions have had some influence on African states' democracy-building efforts, but how do Africans perceive this influence? Across this large and diverse continent, perceptions vary widely. Key variables that account for these differences include geographical region; the country's degree of political stability, level of democratic development, and type of government; and individuals' group identity (religious, linguistic or other), gender, and level of education. The perceptions of political leaders in an anarchic state like Somalia differ sharply from those of leaders in a stable and democratic country like Botswana. Even among political parties in relatively stable states, there are differences, which are determined by their geographical bases of support, ethnic composition, ideological orientation, and whether they are in or out of government. Perceptions also sometimes reflect the vested interests of particular groups. As can be expected, there are both positive and negative perceptions.

Positive Perceptions

Many Africans see the EU's values, structure and processes in a positive light. The EU is often seen as an excellent role model for regional integration based on political tolerance, democratic governance, market-based economic development, and technological innovation. African national and regional leaders admire the EU's democratic way of doing business and would like to see the AU evolve into a similar organization.

Another positive perception is that, compared with the United States, the EU appears more willing to engage in dialogue with Africans with a view to understanding the root causes of their poverty and political underdevelopment. Proponents of this view regard the United States as a more overbearing and unilateral actor than the EU.

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Negative Perceptions

The negative perceptions appear to stem partly from Africa's political weakness and lack of global influence. One negative perception is that the EU imposes its will on African states regarding democracy building and governance reforms. The Kenyan prime minister Mr Raila Odinga's remarks during a media interview in Stockholm during the 2009 European Development Days that Kenya needed EU support for infrastructure development rather than governance reflected this perception.

However, several organizations in Kenya criticized these remarks, arguing instead that the EU is not adequately asserting itself on governance reforms. Proponents of this latter point of view argue that the EU and its member states have chosen not to vigorously pursue democratic reforms in Africa for fear of alienating African political leaders and pushing them towards China. They believe that democracy building in Africa has stalled because of this fear.

Some African diplomats and politicians express the view that the term 'partnership', which denotes equality, is inappropriate and tends to camouflage the disparity in power and influence between African states and the EU and its member states. They argue that the terms 'donors' and 'recipients' would reflect this unequal relationship more accurately.

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Another negative perception is that the EU is not as committed to reforming the African state and political process as it is to backing specific electoral candidates, 'picking winners', and that this focus on personalities rather than policies and institutions has held back democracy building in Africa. Critics also say that while the EU regularly asks African states to implement various reforms, including those relating to gender equality, it is too fragmented to pursue democracy building and governance reform consistently.

Others argue that democracy building in Africa requires a whole-of-government approach and that the EU too often focuses on single issues, such as judicial reform, in isolation.

5. Recommendations

The following steps can help the EU reverse the negative perceptions described above and become a more effective force for democracy building in Africa:

1. Take a whole-of-society approach instead of addressing single issues in isolation.
2. Avoid focusing on individual political actors and pay more attention to systemic factors.
3. Devise a strategy that takes into account the connection between democracy and socio-economic development.
4. Use democratic processes to address problems in the following areas, which would embed democracy at the grassroots level: public institutions, health care, agriculture, transport, and critical infrastructure.

Democracy building must go beyond improving the structures, institutions and mechanisms of governance to empower individuals and improve their communities politically, socially and economically. Combining support for democracy building and infrastructure development is consistent with this broader goal.

EU support for democracy building is aimed at improving the structures, institutions and mechanisms of governance. At one level, this is a valid goal. But at a deeper level, democracy building must go beyond this to empower individuals and improve their communities politically, socially and economically. Combining support for democracy building and infrastructure development is consistent with this broader goal. This is why support for democracy needs to address issues of public institutions and provision of basic services such as health care, transport and communications, and similar issues.

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