



The European Union and the Pan-African Parliament: Adding Value to the Partnership

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Abstract

European Union (EU)-Africa relations share a long history, but these assumed a new pan-African dimension after the transformation of the Organization of African Unity into the African Union (AU). Since then AU institutions have become critical avenues through which the EU has sought to strengthen its formal relationship with Africa. Among these institutions is the continental assembly – the Pan-African Parliament (PAP). The PAP was provided for in the 1991 Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community, and was launched in March 2004. Its vision is to provide a platform for African peoples to be involved in decision making on their common problems. As a representative organ, the PAP, in principle, aims to engineer a continental political dispensation that encompasses democratic principles of popular participation. Its creation can be interpreted as an attempt to promote democracy within the AU and its member states.

Since its inception, the PAP has sought to broaden and deepen its relations with other actors in the international community, particularly the EU. At a time when the PAP is working on transforming itself into a body with full legislative powers, partnerships with institutions such as the EU could be important, for example, in sharing experiences and lessons learned. In addition to receiving considerable financial and technical support, the PAP has sought to nurture and bolster relations with the EU and its institutions. Despite such initiatives and the support from the EU and other institutions, the PAP remains weak and its practical value has not been felt much beyond the Brussels-Midrand axis. The continental assembly may have shown signs of becoming an impartial institution, especially in the area of election observation, but it faces serious institutional challenges and capacity-related obstacles in making itself relevant and responsive to the goals of governance and democracy building in Africa. The PAP has the potential to act as a positive agent of change in Africa but whether its partnership and cooperation with the EU have contributed to democracy building in Africa, and how this relationship might be managed better remain open to question.

The paper examines these issues and outlines ways in which the EU-PAP relationship could be made more meaningful. The research, analysis and conclusions are based on critical reflection rather than empirical data. By exploring the EU's partnership with the PAP and how its policies and actions on democracy building are received and perceived by the PAP, and by extension Africans, the paper highlights where there might be scope for improving the EU's work in Africa.

Summary of Recommendations

The European Union (EU) should: support institutional partnerships with state and non-state actors in order to share experience and effort; focus on reviewing implementation to ensure that good intentions are translated into appropriate action; and find creative ways to follow up on the commitments made by both parties. It should carry out assessments of the impact of the democracy assistance programmes undertaken in partnership with the PAP; enhance internal coherence between EU-level policies and actions and those of its member states; and ensure that technical support and financial assistance are not scattered but focused on specific processes that help the PAP's innovation. It is important for the EU to develop a better understanding of the relationship between democracy building and other dynamics in Africa such as poverty – the inherent problems and contradictions of which could undermine the democratic project. Finally, the EU should cultivate applied research into the benefits associated with EU-PAP relations in order to build a concrete evidential basis to inform future policymaking and decision making.

1. Introduction: The Pan-African Parliament

The Pan-African Parliament (PAP) was established in March 2004 under article 17 of the AU's Constitutive Act. The PAP is composed of the presidency, bureau members who represent the five regions of Africa and 10 committees, which work on specific issues. Among the objectives of the PAP are to promote democracy, good governance and human rights in AU member states. The PAP has to some extent displayed a level of independence from African governments and a degree of commitment to fighting for democracy. This has been evident, for example, in a number of the election observation missions conducted.

Fact box 1: PAP Election Observation Missions

The PAP's mission to Kenya in 2007 adopted a highly critical report, which concluded that the disputed presidential elections had failed the will of the people and the tenets of democracy. The PAP subsequently asked the AU heads of state and government to establish a protocol that would deal with future cases of vote rigging 'in the same manner it deals with military coups in Africa' (Pan-African Parliament; 2007).

The PAP also took a relatively strong stand on Zimbabwe's 2008 presidential elections by detailing electoral abuses and levelling accusations against the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF).

The continental assembly aims to evolve by 2011 into a fully fledged parliament with legislative powers and with members who are elected by universal suffrage. Currently, the PAP only has consultative and advisory roles and there are concerns about its capacity and overall performance during its five-year existence. Its contribution to Africa's collective agenda has not been robust. The continental assembly has only limited formal powers and remains organizationally weak. The position of the PAP in relation to other AU organs and regional bodies remains ambiguous. Furthermore, the PAP does not reflect the features of a democratic parliament. Although it aims to introduce direct representation in the future, it remains to be seen whether this is feasible. Coordinating elections in 53 countries will be both complex and expensive.

One PAP strategy has been to seek to diversify the sources of its financial resources. This is based on the assumption that the PAP needs to end its dependence on external financial support if it is to become independent. Professor Bruno Békolo-Ebé argues that the fact that the PAP budget is dependent on foreign donors raises questions over the level of commitment of African actors and the long term viability of the whole continental assembly enterprise (cited in Navarro, 2008). He adds that 'it also raises the question of the independence of the institution and its ability to develop its own views'.

It is not clear what legislative powers the PAP seeks vis-a-vis regional and national parliaments. Currently, the PAP is regarded by some as a superfluous debating club (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2007) and, like the majority of African national legislatures, the continental assembly lacks sufficient influence over the executive – the AU Executive Council and the Commission of the AU.

Moreover, while the PAP is supposed to be central to Africa's integration agenda, in practice it is not involved and nor is it facilitated by the AU to play this role. Given that the PAP does not have sufficient funds to carry out its functions, it is relevant to ask whether it can play the role of a positive change agent when it is aware that such a role may not necessarily go down well with other AU institutions and Heads of State. If this institution is to provide an arena for African representatives to make a significant contribution to democracy building in Africa, then these weaknesses must be addressed.

It is against this background that the establishment of relations with actors such as the European Union is seen as beneficial. In addition to the financial support, it allows the PAP to take stock of EU experiences and to benefit directly and indirectly from the linkages and from working relations with the European Commission and the European Parliament. In contrast to the usual dynamic of international relations, the PAP can be the winner and not the loser in its partnership with the EU.

The Links between the Pan-African Parliament and National Parliaments in Africa

The PAP has established relations with the European Parliament and other regional parliaments around the world. There are also close links between the PAP and national parliaments on the African continent.

National parliaments are only as strong and effective as the political environment in which they operate. To contribute to democracy, the political environment should allow them

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to be representative, accountable, transparent, inclusive, participatory and responsive to the aspirations and expectations of citizens in carrying out their functions. Many African countries have weak legislatures that can hardly be classified as democratic. Since it is these national parliaments that currently provide the basis of the continental legislative structure, it is important that these national legislatures are also strengthened, made more effective and based on democratic practices, values and principles. The EU has been actively supporting national parliaments in sub-Saharan Africa in the areas of democracy building and the strengthening of legislative processes, especially in countries that have adopted multi-party politics since the beginning of the 1990s. Whether this support has enhanced the quality of democracy in Africa is an area that deserves further research.

2. Relations between the European Union and the Pan-African Parliament

The EU has had a long and multifaceted relationship with Africa. The EU and its individual member states are the largest contributors of various forms of financial and technical development assistance to Africa. The EU is seen by the AU and its institutions as an inspiration and a successful model of transnational and regional integration. AU organs such as the PAP were created with inspiration drawn from the EU. The PAP professes a number of principles that the EU values and which guide the EU's own cooperation policy. These include a commitment to democracy building, human rights, and the promotion of good governance and the rule of law. This has increased the EU's support for the PAP.

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The partnership and cooperation between the EU and Africa is perceived as a relationship between equal partners, with obligations of mutual accountability. This idea has, in the recent past, been prominent in pronouncements on EU-Africa relations. The concept is central to the Joint EU-Africa Strategy – an initiative aimed at providing a framework for long-term, systematic and integrated cooperation. The ultimate aim is to forge a stronger partnership that builds on the identities and renewed institutions of the two continents (The Africa-EU Strategic Partnership, 2007).

The joint strategy was adopted at the EU-Africa Summit in Lisbon in December 2007. The European Parliament and the PAP were asked to develop a political vision and practical approaches based on mutual respect, common interests and the principle of ownership. The two regional parliaments meet on several levels, including in the Joint Expert Groups. The two parliaments are supposed to monitor the implementation of the joint strategic partnership and its' First Action Plan (2008–2010) through the PAP's ad hoc committee for relations with the European Parliament and the European Parliament's ad hoc delegation for relations with the PAP. The PAP and the European Parliament also interact in inter-parliamentary delegations, the first of which took place in 2008 at the ninth ordinary session of the PAP.

EU-PAP relations are built on a combination of policies and action. This suggests that there is a need for the two continents and their institutions to establish a basis that goes beyond the provision of technical assistance and financial support towards agreements and policy frameworks that emphasize partnerships and cooperation.

Despite the work towards a shared vision and collective priorities, in concrete terms, the relationship between the EU and Africa has not transcended the traditional ‘donor-recipient’ relationship. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the two parties need each other. Adebolu observes that ‘history teaches that one cannot prosper without the other or at the very least, the growth and development of one is hindered when it ignores the other’ (Adebolu, 2007). While both sides acknowledge this lesson, the need remains for more imaginative and focused processes that can generate long-term, systematic and integrated cooperation and contribute to improving the lives of ordinary citizens on both continents.

Challenges and Opportunities for the EU-PAP Partnership

It could be argued that the relationship between the EU and the PAP has taken an important step towards genuine participatory processes but, apart from the financial and technical support offered to the PAP, it has, thus far, not contributed significantly to the creation of a more sustainable elaboration of democratic governance systems on the African continent.

EU-PAP agreements – including those involving financial and technical assistance – do not clearly define the results to be achieved. These democracy support programmes lack coherent mechanisms for assessing and measuring outcomes. Moreover, the partnerships and cooperation with political institutions such as the PAP seem to be incapable of responding to concrete problems, such as the PAP’s organizational deficiencies or its relations with other AU institutions.

The article of the Protocol to the Treaty establishing the African Economic Community which relates to the PAP requires the PAP to work in close cooperation with the parliaments of the Regional Economic Communities and the national parliaments or other deliberative organs of AU member states, but this rarely happens. For all the rhetoric about the PAP being the voice of Africa, the reality is that it has not managed to pursue a people-centred approach that contributes to realizing tangible results for the majority of the population. The EU-PAP partnership would add greater value if it were to exploit the potential of more dynamic and connective agendas to enhance the PAP’s role and visibility in the governance and democratization processes in Africa. The PAP’s partnership with institutions such as the EU could be used to rally the masses behind its activities. The PAP needs to make the voters the active agents of change.

The EU-PAP partnership could also be useful in shaping collective EU-PAP thinking and thus become a tool for translating contrasting perceptions around common concerns into a common language. It would be useful in that it could help to overcome mistrust on issues that would otherwise be perceived in Africa as intrusive and not politically neutral. Dialogue and partnership can serve

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The EU needs to have a better understanding of the relationship between democracy building and other dynamics in Africa such as poverty. While a number of positive democratic experiences have served to reduce the root causes of poverty in Africa, in other cases ‘democratic’ governments have failed to fulfil the expectations placed on accountable governments.

to strengthen the legitimacy of the EU's programmes, including those related to democracy building in Africa. The choice of dialogue involving the two parties has much merit.

The EU also needs to have a better understanding of the relationship between democracy building and other dynamics in Africa such as poverty. While a number of positive democratic experiences have served to reduce the root causes of poverty in Africa, in other cases 'democratic' governments have failed to fulfil the expectations placed on accountable governments. There are inherent problems and contradictions in Africa and the international environment in which it operates that undermine the economic needs and rights of ordinary people. Issues such as the terms of trade and economic dependence, if not addressed, will continue to undermine the democracy project in Africa. A narrow focus on democracy building as the main response will provide only a partial solution to complex problems, and ultimately lead to the same problems recurring.

Broadly speaking, developing the fledgling continental assembly into an effective institution will be a long-term process, just as building democracy is a difficult and painstaking process but one that is worth doing properly. Sustained engagement and new, imaginative uses of combined political, technical, and financial strategies involving both state and non-state actors will be needed to help develop the PAP's capacity and efficiency. Overall, there is great potential to build on the partnership in the area of democracy building but there are numerous challenges to be overcome if it is to lead to more tangible outcomes.

3. Perceptions of the European Union

The PAP has managed to establish significant institutional dialogue with the EU. Overall, the PAP sees the EU as a 'preferential', reliable and useful partner that offers not only financial and technical support but also important lessons on supranationalism. The EU is frequently cited in Africa as an inspiration and model for transnational integration. Some have suggested that the EU prefigures Africa's future – the prospect of an African super state, an envisaged 'United States of Africa' (Turianskyi and Corrigan, 2009). The PAP's officials also share positive views of the EU's contribution to democracy in Africa, especially since the EU is one of the main contributors to funding electoral observation missions.

The value of the EU's support to democracy promotion and the historical linkages with Africa make the EU's connection with Africa a strong one. The EU is perceived in Africa as an economic bloc that uses a 'soft power' approach in its relations with African partners. To some analysts, the EU is seen as adopting a softer, listening approach that is anchored in the sharing of experiences.

Although the EU remains an important political, diplomatic and economic partner to Africa, the fact that some of Africa's current challenges are rooted in colonialism and decolonization processes cannot be wished away. This is critical because perceptions and misperceptions are informed by these historical factors and, by extension, by some of the continuing practices of European actors, such as multinational corporations. The perception persists in Africa that actors that provide financial assistance act more

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as 'lecturers' on issues of democracy and governance than as respectful partners. There is sometimes a suspicion that the EU is one such actor that imposes its own understanding of democratic principles on African people and cultures. This became dramatically evident at the EU-Africa summit in Lisbon in 2007 when the issue of the participation of Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe became very divisive. On the one hand, some AU member states shared the EU's concern about crucial cases of bad governance, including cases of human rights violations, in Zimbabwe (Kotsopoulos and Sidiropoulos, 2007). On the other hand, the then head of the AU Commission, Alpha Oumar Konaré, expressed a widespread feeling among African leaders when he argued that 'we will not let ourselves be bullied or pressurized regarding who should attend the summit or not' (Konaré, 2007). He added that 'there are problems of governance, but Africans themselves have to sort these out, to tackle them head on'. These statements reveal the sense of discomfort at the AU level about some EU policies and actions on democracy.

By and large, however, the EU is still perceived in Africa and by the PAP, as a progressive international partner. When compared with the United States, the EU is seen as 'the lesser of two evils' for African interests. While the USA is known for its protection of strategic interests and for intervention, the EU is appreciated for its emphasis on the diplomatic means of promoting democracy and human rights. It is, however, plausible that the actions of the Administration of George W. Bush continue to affect perceptions of the USA in Africa. It is important that the EU considers African perceptions and misperceptions because they are sometimes turned into generalizations that affect the reception of the policies and actions of the EU.

4. Policy Proposals: Adding Value to the Partnership

The PAP probably has little chance of maintaining the optimism generated by its launch. Given the challenges and obstacles it faces, it will be difficult for it to demonstrate its utility in the short term. Despite the fact that its overall level of influence is minimal, the institution has the potential to become Africa's interlocutor with the EU. The question remains: how and in what ways can its partnership with the EU be enhanced to add value to the relationship?

Proposals for the Pan-African Parliament

The PAP will need to overcome its reliance on traditional donor-recipient assistance and establish people-centred partnerships that go beyond operational decisions and actions to influencing and shaping democracy building processes on the continent. It should, for instance, seek to give democratic legitimacy to the AU's political action by holding the AU accountable for its decisions or its lack of activity. The political momentum and visibility of the PAP can only be enhanced by political engagement and commitment. To this end, the PAP needs to clearly define its role and responsibilities vis a vis other organs of the AU. This approach requires an assertive role for the PAP that invests particularly in its capacity to act effectively and interact with AU organs. While the PAP currently plays only a consultative and advisory role, the space to function is still large enough to allow it to discuss all the policies of the AU, including international relations. One example would be to take on an oversight function, for instance, by ensuring the ratification of treaties and international conventions by member states. It could do this by advising the AU Commission on developing mechanisms for the follow-up of these

instruments (see Navarro, 2008). Thus far the PAP has not demonstrated its influence in such areas.

The PAP also needs to move to develop its monitoring capacity in order to intervene where democratic principles are not being upheld. In this way, its participation could be critical in effecting change and enhancing democracy and good governance. To this end, the PAP needs to harness the means to become more vibrant and to reach more citizens. It needs to adopt mobilization and sensitization strategies that ensure the issues it raises are not ignored by the AU executive or its other organs. The PAP must build itself into an institution with a stronger organization and the means to run a strong campaign that would attract ordinary citizens to its cause.

Outside the regular dialogue with EU officials, there is often only limited consultation with other actors on the part of the PAP on its partnership and cooperation with the EU. This often leads to a lack of information and ownership of the partnership processes at national and other levels.

Proposals for the European Union

The EU needs to:

- Focus on the challenge of implementation by ensuring that policy documents are translated into activities that help its partners. In most cases there are good intentions but there is not enough appropriate action.
- Find creative ways to follow up on the commitments made by both parties, for instance, by involving civil society actors who can contribute by tracking behaviour, drawing attention to deviations and suggesting ways for improvement.
- Carry out assessments on the impact of democracy assistance programmes undertaken in partnership with the PAP. These are often assumed to have had a positive effect without any kind of assessment. Joint programmes should be designed with indicators to measure and assess outcomes.
- Ensure that technical support and financial assistance are focused on specific processes that help the PAP to innovate, for instance, by using its formally recognized powers to experiment with new ways of engaging with the African public.
- Develop a better understanding of the relationship between democracy building and other dynamics in Africa, such as poverty, the inherent problems and contradictions of which could otherwise undermine the democratic project.
- Assist with profile raising and civil education projects to enhance understanding among African voters of the role of the PAP.
- Support inter-parliamentary exchanges in order to share experiences.

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