African Perceptions of the European Union: Assessing the Work of the EU in the Field of Democracy Promotion and Peacekeeping

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Abstract

In recent years, the relationship between the European Union and Africa has undergone significant changes at the political and the economic levels. Trade reforms have taken place, and peacekeeping cooperation and political dialogue have increased. The African continent has become a test bed to assess the EU's ambitions as global player. Drawing on data on the African Union (AU), Kenya and South Africa, this paper provides a general overview of the thoughts of African political leaders and opinion formers on the EU's peacekeeping and democracy promotion initiatives.

The EU is generally perceived as a progressive international player in the fields of peacekeeping and democracy promotion. Nonetheless, the failure of negotiations on an Economic Partnership Agreement is likely to affect the long-term credibility of the EU's promotion of peace and democracy. Political conditionality, such as the human rights and democracy clauses included in trade agreements, might increasingly be disputed by African governments eager to exploit China's competitive and 'unconditional' trade deals.

Summary of Recommendations

In this context, the EU should strengthen the consistency between trade and democracy promotion policies in order to reward good performance, and promote regional integration among countries with good democratic records. It is likely that positive measures to support democratic advancement and good governance will prove much more viable than negative measures relying on sanctions and conditionality. A number of specific recommendations arise from the analysis:

- Strengthen cooperation with African institutions and individual countries on conflict resolution and peacekeeping.

- Improve the focus on positive measures, such as democracy assistance and other mechanisms, to reward good performance.

- Support regional integration processes among countries with the best democratic track record in order to strengthen their economies and developmental goals.

- Build a partnership for democratic advancement with other external actors operating in Africa – especially the USA and China.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the relationship between Europe and Africa has experienced significant changes in terms of both policy and the main actors involved. In 2000, the Cotonou Agreement put an end to 25 years of preferential agreements through the Lomé Conventions and paved the way for market liberalization through Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs). Political and economic relations have also been influenced by the creation of the African Union (AU) in 2002, which has allowed for more regular interaction between the two regions, especially in the field of institution-building, democracy promotion and the protection of human rights. Since 2003, the European Union (EU) has launched a series of peacekeeping missions under the auspices of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). Most of these missions have targeted African countries. Military contingents have been made available to prevent conflict and protect human rights, and the EU has increased the level of financial resources allocated to peacekeeping initiatives in Africa.

These events have marked a general intensification of political, economic and diplomatic relations between the two continents. Arguably, African countries are the most relevant test bed for the EU's ambitions in the areas of peacekeeping and democracy promotion outside the European continent.

Relying on primary data collected by two research projects, this paper provides an overview of African perceptions of the EU's role in these two fields.[1] Section 2 provides an overview of EU policies on peacekeeping and democracy promotion in Africa. Section 3 discusses how the EU's role is perceived at the AU level, relying on official documents, press releases and a set of face-to-face interviews.[2] Section 4 analyses two country-specific cases, Kenya and South Africa, using public opinion surveys, interviews and media reviews conducted in 2007 and 2008.[3] Section 5 draws some conclusions and makes some policy recommendations for the EU.

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[1] The first project, coordinated by Martin Holland and Natalia Chaban at the National Centre for Research on Europe (University of Canterbury, New Zealand), included two case studies on Kenya and South Africa. The second project, coordinated by Sonia Lucarelli and Lorenzo Fioramonti (University of Bologna, Italy) and funded by the network of excellence GARNET and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, included a case study on the African Union. The author of this paper acknowledges the contribution of Patrick Kimunguyi (who conducted the fieldwork in Kenya) and Daniela Sicurelli (who compiled a report on the African Union).

[2] A full report on the AU was compiled by Daniela Sicurelli (University of Trento) and will be available at http://www.garnet-eu.org in the first half of 2009.

[3] Data sets are available on request at <http://www.euperceptions.canterbury.ac.nz>.

2. Building Peace and Democracy: An overview of EU Policies in Africa

Relations between the EU and Africa have traditionally been conducted through two regional groupings: the African countries that are part of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group and the African countries of the Mediterranean. However, at the turn of the new millennium, the EU launched a new strategy to strengthen dialogue with the continent as a whole, which was further reinforced by the creation of the AU in 2002.

At the first EU-Africa summit in 2000, the EU adopted a 'plan of action' focusing on a number of areas, particularly regional and economic integration in Africa, respect for human rights and democratic principles, peacebuilding and conflict prevention and the fight against poverty. The EU developed a new Africa strategy in 2005, paving the way for the adoption of an EU-Africa strategic partnership in 2007.

EU involvement in peacebuilding, democracy support and human rights promotion in Africa has increased over time. In 1996–1999, the EU allocated approximately EUR 115 million to support election assistance and observation, more than half of which was spent in Africa (about EUR 71 million). Under the Ninth European Development Fund (EDF), EUR 13.5 billion was devoted to development policies in the ACP countries. This amount was increased to about EUR 23 billion for the 10th EDF (2008–2013).

Since the establishment of the Common Foreign Security Policy in the early 1990s and the adoption of the ESDP in 2003, the number of EU-led conflict prevention and peacekeeping operations in Africa has also grown in number and scope. Civilian and military missions were carried out in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 2003–2006, and in Sudan in 2005. In 2008, a military mission was deployed along the border between Chad, the Central African Republic and Sudan in order to curb cross-border violence exacerbated by the humanitarian crisis in Darfur. An Africa Peace Facility has been operating since 2004. This instrument allows the EU to allocate resources under the EDF to peacebuilding and democracy promotion operations carried out under the auspices of the AU or the relevant African regional economic communities. Thus far, these operations have taken place in Sudan (Darfur) and Somalia.

Since 2000, the EU has conducted nine election observation missions in sub-Saharan Africa. During the same period, the number of instances in which the EU has imposed economic and diplomatic sanctions against African governments with poor democratic records has increased. In general, these negative measures have been multilateral in character, in that they have been adopted in accordance with broader UN initiatives. The number of EU initiatives to promote human rights in Africa has grown quite substantially since the first timid policies to curb South Africa's apartheid in the mid-1980s. Currently, EU policies in the field of human rights promotion focus on a broad range of issues, which include the campaign for the abolition of the death penalty, child protection rights, the empowerment of women, the rights and empowerment of indigenous people, the promotion of international criminal law and the fight against human trafficking and torture.

The Cotonou Agreement between the EU and the ACP group introduced major changes to trade relations between Europe and Africa, bringing to a close the preferential scheme guaranteed by the various Lomè conventions since the 1970s. In 2007, the EU intensified negotiations with individual countries in sub-Saharan Africa, with a view to adopting EPAs. Disagreements escalated in the second half of 2007, however, and the negotiating process fell short of expectations. A number of African countries pulled out altogether, while some smaller countries signed interim agreements with the EU. While most of the controversy was focused on the volume and pace of liberalization, a number of criticisms also highlighted the detrimental effects that the EPAs would have on intra-African trade, and the unavoidable negative impacts this would have on the mode and scope of regional integration in Africa.

The EU-Africa summit in Lisbon in 2007 was intended to improve the relationship between the two continents but instead proved to be a catalyst for tensions. EU member states were forced by their African counterparts to lift the travel ban on Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe in order to allow him to attend the meeting (Castle 2006). This created significant turmoil within the EU (the British prime minister threatened to not participate), and contributed to sidelining discussions on democracy promotion and human rights. The economic and political crisis in Zimbabwe was intentionally removed from the agenda, as was the Sudanese Government's responsibility for the human rights violations perpetrated in Darfur. In the end, the summit revealed the limited capacity of EU member states to exert credible pressure on African states to find common solutions to the political and social crises ravaging the continent. While formally sealing the adoption of the EU-Africa strategic partnership, the summit also attested to the incapacity of EU and African leaders to agree on long-term, multilateral trade reform.

3. Assessing the EU's Peacekeeping and Democracy Promotion: Evidence from the African Union

In general, leaders and officials at the AU share positive views of the EU's contribution to peacekeeping and democracy promotion in Africa. The EU is described as a 'preferential partner', mainly due to its long-standing commitment to conflict resolution and institution-building in the former colonies. At the same time, however, such preferential status is being increasingly challenged, mainly due to the suspicion that the EU is imposing its own understanding of democratic principles on African peoples and cultures.

Admittedly, the EU has long developed an approach to foreign policy based primarily, although not exclusively, on civilian means and structural stabilization processes, mainly due to its organic difficulty in reaching consensus on the use of military power. This approach seems to find broad acceptance at the AU level. The Africa-EU strategic partnership adopted in December 2007 presents a shared

view of peacebuilding and pushes the idea of supporting peace through long-term development and democratization policies. According to this document, 'Africa and Europe understand the importance of peace and security as preconditions for political, economic and social development', which allow the two continents to lay 'the foundation for successful cooperation based on the need to promote holistic approaches to security, encompassing conflict prevention and long-term peacebuilding' (African Union and European Union 2007).

First and foremost, AU officials depict the EU as a model of achieving peace through integration. During the transition from the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to the AU in 2002, Said Djinnit, then OAU Assistant Secretary General in charge of Political Affairs, described the EU as a key reference point for the AU:

> "I strongly believe that an effective African Union should be built on a solid ground and on a set of shared values in the areas of security, stability, development and cooperation. The EU construction has been possible only when the European countries agreed on common values to sustain their common endeavour" (Djinnit 2002).

The AU Commissioner for Economic Affairs, Maxwell M. Mkwezalamba, believes that 'in view of the significant progress made by the EU in similar endeavours, the AU stands to draw valuable lessons from the European experience' (Mkwezalamba 2007).

African leaders do not subscribe to the European approach of integration through pooling sovereignty. Although the establishment of the AU has meant a significant step forward from the purely intergovernmental OAU, the instruments and processes adopted by the former are a far cry from those of the EU.

Notwithstanding these favourable attitudes to the EU as a model of peace through integration, a number of analysts point out that African leaders do not subscribe to the European approach of integration through pooling sovereignty (Olivier and Fioramonti 2007). Although the establishment of the AU has meant a significant step forward from the purely intergovernmental OAU, the instruments and processes adopted by the former are a far cry from those of the EU. According to a Mauritian diplomat in Brussels, 'African leaders and the public in fact do not share the willingness of Europeans for a political union' (quoted in Sicurelli 2008: 10).

In the field of peacekeeping, the Africa Peace Facility (APF) receives significant support at the AU level. According to Ouma Alpha Konare, former chairperson of the AU Commission, the APF 'is remarkable', particularly in so far as it trusts 'the leadership of the African Union as regards its management to defend both the interests of the regional communities and the African countries' (African Union 2004a). Said Djinnit, speaking as the AU Commissioner for Peace and Security, believed the APF to be 'crucial' to guaranteeing the deployment and sustainability of the various AU peacekeeping missions (Reuters 2006). This view is confirmed by the AU Ministerial Troika,[4] which expressed its 'appreciation' of EU support to the AU mission in Sudan in 2007, and by the AU PSC, which described the financial support provided by the EU

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[4] The AU Troika participating in the Accra meeting in 2007 was: the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Ghana and current chairperson of the AU Executive Council; the Minister of Trade of the Republic of Congo; the AU Commissioner for Economic Affairs and, finally, the AU Commissioner for Peace and Security. They were joined by the Minister of State and Foreign Affairs of Portugal, as the Representative of the European Union Presidency.

to the peace process in Somalia as 'badly needed' (African Union 2004b).

In spite of this general appreciation, some officials have raised concerns about the APF, criticizing the fact that the EU finances this instrument through the EDF which is formally targeted at pro-development initiatives in the ACP countries. As AU Commissioner Djinnit remarked: "the commitment of European funding initially earmarked for development to finance peacekeeping operations raised ethical and moral problems" (Djinnit 2007).

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EU initiatives on the promotion of democracy and human rights have attracted general approval among African leaders. Back in 1994, the Council of the OAU considered the EU a major partner in democracy promotion in South Africa (Organization of African Unity 1994). More recently, according to the AU Political Affairs Directorate, the EU and the AU have collaborated on the creation of a number of institutions and centres to promote governance, democracy and human rights 'as the cornerstones of Africa's renaissance' (Shawul 2005).

Nonetheless, conditionality measures in the field of human rights promotion and democratic governance have attracted harsh criticism from representatives of Africa's civil society. According to the Chair of the Cluster session for the Consultation of African Civil Society Organizations, Professor Adebayo Olukoshi, Africans must be co-definers of conditionality measures as 'there is no basis for Africa to accept conditions that are predetermined by others' (African Union 2007).

The fact that EU conditionality has not been warming hearts among African political elites became dramatically evident during the Africa-EU summit in December 2007, due to the participation of Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe. On the one hand, AU member states participating in the meeting shared the EU's concern about crucial cases of bad governance, including the case of human rights violations in Zimbabwe (Kotsopoulos and Sidiropoulos 2007). On the other hand, the 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 (from Africa) should attend the Summit or not' (Konaré 2007). 'Let's be honest', Konare added, 'there are problems of governance, but Africans themselves have to sort these out, to tackle them head on' (Doyle 2007). These statements reveal a growing discomfort at the AU level with the negative measures of democracy promotion, including

conditionality and sanctions, echoing a sentiment common among many ruling elites across the African continent.

4. Perceptions of the EU in Kenya and South Africa

Kenya and South Africa are two major powerhouses in sub-Saharan Africa and present particularly useful insights into an understanding of how the EU is perceived throughout the continent. Extensive fieldwork was conducted in these two countries in 2006–2007, which allowed for systematic collection of data on public opinion, political opinion and the opinions of business elites, civil society organizations and the main newspapers. The impact of EU policies on human rights and democracy is assessed as quite significant by public opinion in South Africa (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Sectors in which EU Policies have the Most Impact According to South African Citizens

Source: http://www.euperceptions.canterbury.ac.nz
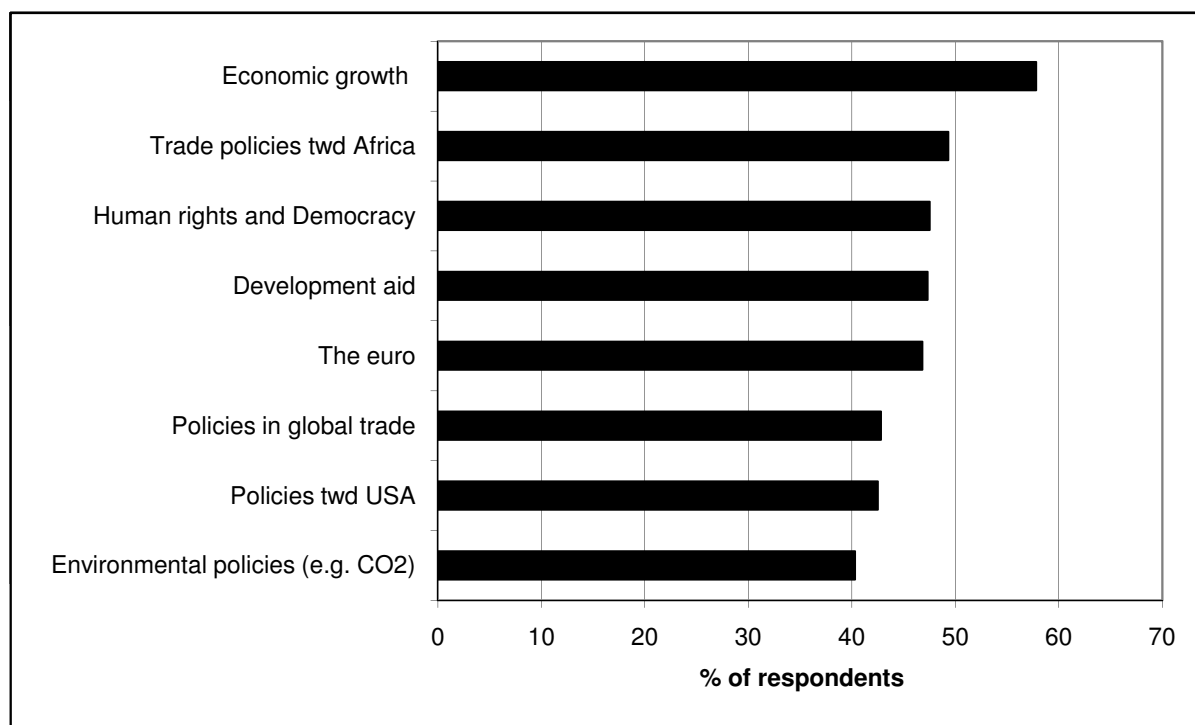
Almost half the respondents (48%) to a 2008 survey conducted of the urban population of three major cities in South Africa (Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban) identified human rights and democracy promotion as the two sectors where the impact of EU policies has been most significant. Although the impact of the EU is perceived to be much stronger in explicitly economic areas, such as economic growth (58%) and trade with the African continent (49%), it

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is nonetheless remarkable that the role played by the EU in promoting democracy and human rights is in third place. In this regard, it is important to remember that the EU invested significant resources to support the South African transition to democracy in the early 1990s, and it continued to invest in the consolidation process through institution-building programmes and funds to civil society organizations. Interestingly, respondents to the survey clearly distinguished between the role played by the EU in supporting human rights and democracy in South Africa and the broader impact on national development (47%).

In Kenya, national elites show appreciation of the role played by the EU in peacekeeping and democracy building. Figure 2 shows that more than 40 per cent of the respondents to a series of face-to-face interviews believe that the EU is an international leader in peacekeeping, human rights promotion and democracy building. Kenyan political representatives are by far the most enthusiastic about the role played by the EU in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Although most respondents refer to the role played by the EU in the Great Lakes region and in Somalia, some are also positively impressed by the mediation role played by European officials during the post-election crisis and the political violence that ravaged the country at the beginning of 2008. In particular, the visit paid to Kenya by EU Development Commissioner Louis Michel in January 2008 was seen as evidence of the EU's commitment to supporting peace in the country. One government representative 'was personally happy to hear Louis Michel talk about peace in Kenya. I finally found a credible voice within the EU, although I never thought about it that way.'

Figure 2. Percentage of Respondents who Believe that the EU is a Global Leader in Peacekeeping and Democracy Promotion

Source: http://www.euperceptions.canterbury.ac.nz/
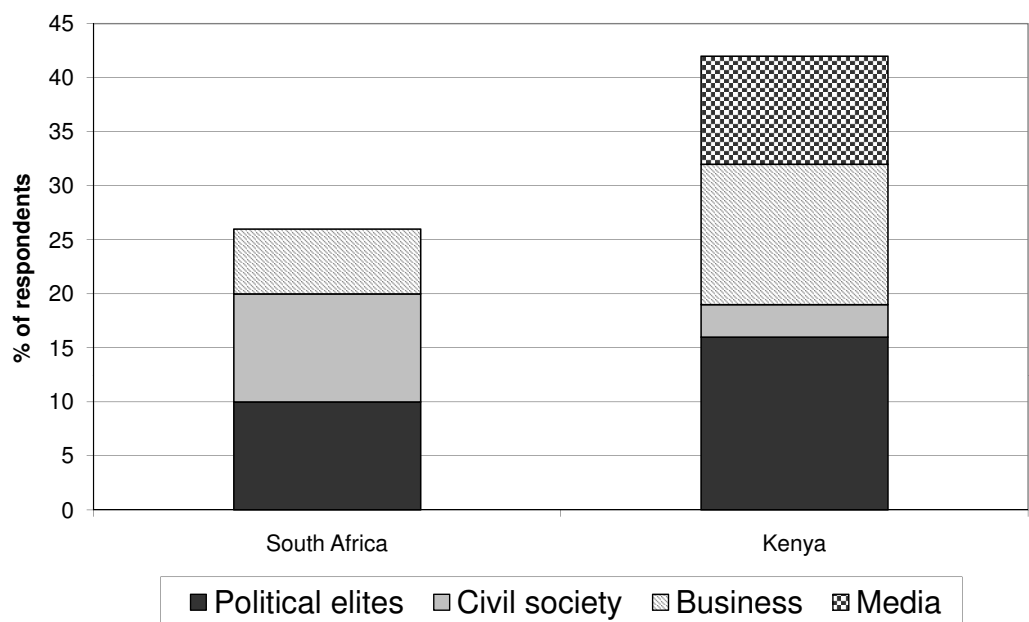
Business representatives and foreign news editors are also aware of the leading role played by the EU in peacekeeping and democracy promotion. In the words of Alex Chamwada, of the Kenyan Television Network, the EU is a leading global actor in supporting democracy as 'they monitor elections, provide and withhold funding and impose sanctions. They are fully involved in supporting democracy and cannot be ignored.'

By contrast, in South Africa, only a quarter of interviewees believe the EU to be a leading actor in peacekeeping and democracy promotion. Among them, political representatives and civil society activists are more inclined to acknowledge the role played by the EU in these fields, while business leaders are less enthusiastic. Interestingly, no news editor subscribed to the idea that the EU is a leading actor in democracy promotion. For them, the EU is still exclusively an economic giant, the sole significant impact of which can be detected in the area of international trade.

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At the political level, the cooperation between the EU and South Africa in situations of conflict and democratic breakdown has been quite unstable. Although the South African Government participated in the first EU military operation in Africa, the Artemis mission in the DRC in 2003, the overall relationship between the EU and South Africa has been negatively affected by the political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe, to which the EU and the South African Government under its former president, Thabo Mbeki, adopted contrasting strategies. The EU has harshly criticized Robert Mugabe's government since the 2001 parliamentary elections, while the South African Government has refrained from stigmatizing the encroachment on human rights and democratic principles that has occurred in Zimbabwe and has adopted a strategy of 'quiet diplomacy', seen by Zimbabwean opposition forces as an endorsement of Mugabe's conduct.

An analysis of the main Kenyan and South African newspapers reveals similar trends (Figure 3). In Kenya, articles dealing with peacekeeping and human rights promotion amount to 40 per cent of all coverage of the EU (23% for peacekeeping and 17% for human rights and democracy promotion, respectively). Most articles deal with the peacekeeping operations in Central Africa and the Horn region. Particular emphasis is given to the conflicts in Somalia and Darfur, where EU resources have been used to fund military operations under the leadership of the AU.

The South African press is comparatively less focused on the EU's role in peacekeeping and democracy promotion, although about 18 per cent of all articles dealt with these issues. Unlike the Kenyan press, South African newspapers give equal coverage to the role played by the EU in peacekeeping and international diplomacy in the rest of the world. Besides Darfur, the DRC and Somalia, South African newspapers cover EU-related news in connection with a number of non-African conflicts, especially in the Middle East (Israel-Palestine and Lebanon) and South East Asia (e.g. Sri Lanka and India-Pakistan). Only 6 per cent of articles refer to the EU's promotion of human rights and democracy in Africa. Most articles discuss the worsening political and social crisis in Zimbabwe and explicitly refer to the sanctions imposed by the EU on that country's government. Finally, some articles deal with the humanitarian crisis in Darfur, while

there is a few focus on the EU election observation mission for the general elections held in Nigeria in 2007.

Figure 3. Media Coverage of the EU and Peacekeeping and Democracy Promotion
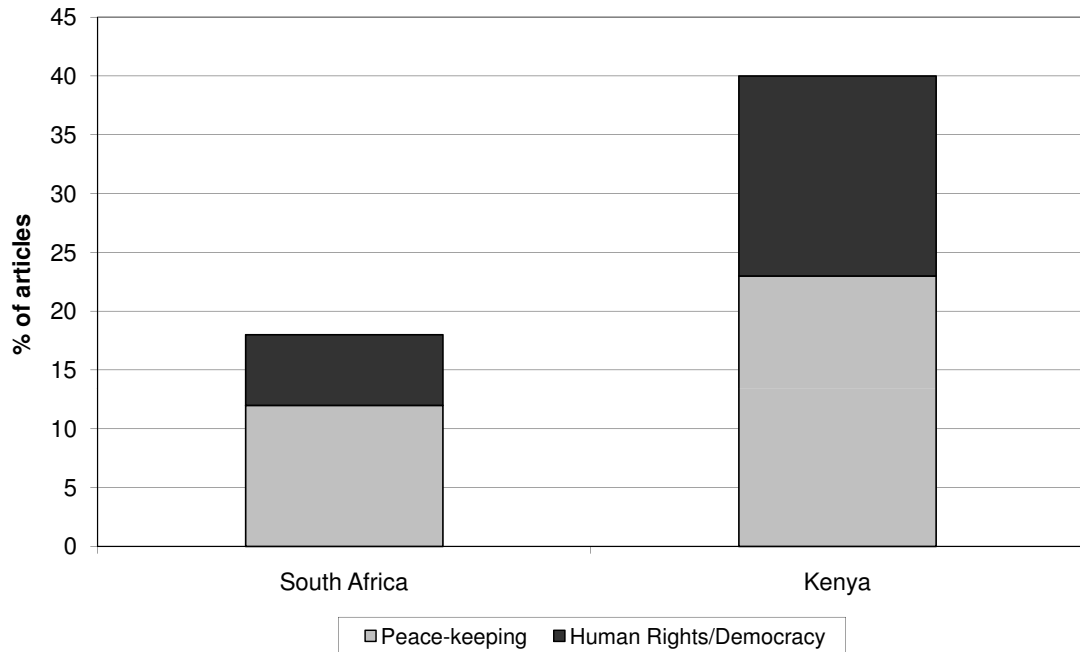
5. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Although knowledge of the EU and its policies is quite limited across public opinion in Africa, national elites are increasingly aware of the limitations the EU faces in the field of peacekeeping, democracy assistance and human rights promotion. In the words of a South African civil society activist, Kumi Naidoo, of the Global Call to Action Against Poverty, 'the EU is less than the sum of its parts. One cannot blame the EU for what the leaders of its governments do.'

There is little doubt that the growing commercial and economic relations between African countries and other regions of the world (mainly China and India) as well as intra-African trade have made African political elites more outspoken against certain EU policies. Arguably, the 2007 EU-Africa Summit marked the completion of a historical process, which has seen African countries shift from a donor-recipient relationship with the EU to a more balanced interaction.

In general, the EU is perceived as an important global player. From an economic point of view, the EU is described as a 'giant', which exerts its influence in the field of international trade. The more 'political' elements of its external action are invariably perceived as under-developed, although to varying degrees. In Kenya, for instance, the role played by the EU in peacekeeping and, to a lesser extent, democracy promotion is given wide prominence. By contrast, in South Africa it appears to be less important. Obviously, these perceptions are deeply influenced by local dynamics. South Africa is a major economic and political power in Africa, with a robust institutional set-up and global ambitions. The

impact that EU peacekeeping operations and pro-democracy initiatives can have on the country is quite limited. It is trade and economic policies that dominate South African perceptions of the EU.

At the AU level, the 'political' role of the EU is widely acknowledged and appreciated, although some controversy has arisen with regard to political conditionality and sanctions. Among African political elites there seems to be a growing belief that addressing governance problems on the continent is a responsibility that Africans themselves have to tackle 'head-on', according to their own rules, procedures and principles.

While the USA is known for its strategic interests and intervention, the EU is appreciated for its emphasis on the diplomatic means of conflict resolution and the promotion of democracy and human rights.

There is little doubt that the growing commercial and economic relations between African countries and other regions of the world (mainly China and India) as well as intra-African trade have made African political elites more outspoken against certain EU policies. Arguably, the 2007 EU-Africa Summit marked the completion of a historical process, which has seen African countries shift from a donor-recipient relationship with the EU to a more balanced interaction. The fact that the travel ban on the Zimbabwean president was temporarily lifted at the request of the African countries, generating conflict and disagreement within the EU, is further evidence that the EU's capacity to sanction African governments on the grounds of their poor democratic record has been gradually eroded. Furthermore, the failure of the EPA negotiations is likely to have a long-term impact on the political relationship between the two continents, perhaps eroding the uncontested primacy of Africa-Europe trade relations. In the long run, this might affect the EU's capacity to promote good governance and democracy through trade agreements and development cooperation schemes.

By and large, the EU is still perceived as a progressive international player. 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 strategic interests and intervention, the EU is appreciated for its emphasis on the diplomatic means of conflict resolution and the promotion of democracy and human rights. However, some interviewees pointed out that the extremely low level of approval enjoyed by the Bush Administration in Africa might have made the EU 'look much better than it actually is.'

It is likely that the tensions triggered by the failed EPA negotiations will also have an impact on the long-term credibility of the EU's promotion of peace and democracy. A new framework for trade relations, in which China has been making significant ground in recent years, will inevitably erode the primacy of EU trade in Africa, thereby reducing the effectiveness of the EU's political conditionality. Among other factors, which include growing intra-African trade and South-South cooperation, Chinese trade competition will be increasingly exploited by certain African leaders to secure less stringent trade deals with the EU, in which human rights clauses and governance conditions will be relegated to a minor component. In this context, it is likely that positive measures to support democratic advancement and good governance will prove much more viable than negative measures relying on sanctions and conditionality. In the light of these changes, the EU should make trade policies and democracy promotion policies more consistent, in order to reward good performance with significant incentives and promote regional integration among the countries with the best democratic records. As was

the case with Europe, sub-continental regional integration is still the most promising strategy for sustainable democratization in Africa.

A number of specific recommendations arise from the above analysis:

- Strengthen cooperation with African institutions and individual countries on conflict resolution and peacekeeping. This should include a formal separation between the funds directed to the APF and those targeted at non-military development goals.

- An improved focus on positive measures, such as democracy assistance and other mechanisms, to reward good performance. This should include direct support to indigenous mechanisms to monitor democratic progress and best practices, such as the African Peer Review Mechanism.

- Support regional integration processes among countries with the best democratic track record in order to strengthen their economies and developmental goals. A small group of consolidated democracies with strong economic leverage might become a vanguard for democratic advancement on the rest of the continent. They might also find ways to provide a set of incentives and other appropriate mechanisms for other countries willing to integrate.

- Propose a partnership for democratic advancement with other external actors operating in Africa – especially the USA and China. Coordinated policies rather than competition are more likely to counter anti-democratic reforms and authoritarian outcomes.

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