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MISCONCEPTIONS AND AMBIGUITIES IN THE AFRICA-EU RELATIONS

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Photo: EU Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid, West Africa, September 2009.

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The world is changing indeed very fast in these days. The next decade will for sure force us to face challenges that will impact strongly on the way we live and on the way we relate to each other. As before in history, technology will come as a solution for complex problems and political institutions and leaders will be accused of losing ground with reality and the needs of people -as it is already happening today. Relations between the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU) will be impacted by change and perceptions of change, not only by the impact of the Brexit or the rise of nationalisms, but by other reasons, some of them bred for sure in African soil.

In relationship, business as usual has a strong appeal and will be there, together with non-welcome threats or unforeseen opportunities. Against this background, one can always debate about "realistic" measures and procedures to try to ameliorate current situations – this has always been the preferred approach of public and private constituencies involved in development aid. I would call this the "what to do" approach. However, it will also be necessary to try to understand reasons and trends that may impact on sectoral, regional scenarios – this I will call the "why" approach. Exploring the futures of the governance of EU-AU relations appeals, obviously, to both set of approaches, for they are intertwined.

In the following reflexion I will deal mostly with the "why" approach in two sets of questions, dealing with misconception and ambiguities. May Africa be treated as One? Why is the mindset of the European-Africa relationship a problem

May Africa be treated as One?

Europe-Africa (including EU-AU) relationship is weighted differently in Africa and in Europe.

In Europe, most public opinions and politicians look at Africa mainly through security or humanitarian eyes – as a source of migration, violent jihadism, trafficking or a place of human suffering that appeals to charities and aid. The economic side, regardless of its importance for business circles is not a strong issue.

This stereotype, and stereotypes have a life of their own, is in itself a reason why Africa is often regarded as One.

Furthermore, there is a consistent will and narrative of many African political, economic or academic leaders and opinion-makers who defend African unity as a long-term goal - and narratives may, in the course of time, translate into political facts. Africa as One also fits the convenience of the African Union Commission (AUC), for reasons of regional legitimacy and of negotiating power, as it reinforces African common positions in multilateral fora.

Notwithstanding its political and practical convenience, treating Africa as One does not fit very well with historical, economic or geopolitical facts. Let's have a look at some examples.

North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt) has a very distinct demographic and societal evolution, very much linked to Mediterranean and to various empires' expansions alongside ancient, modern and contemporary times. Geopolitically, the Maghreb is very much linked to Southern Europe and the Mashriq and is an entrance door to migration, which very much affects the political scenario in the EU today.

Northeast Africa, meaning countries that border the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, but also Ethiopia) are intertwined with the Arabian Peninsula and they border the 3rd more important choke point for container and tanker ships – the Bab-El Mandeb / Suez Canal. Besides, Djibouti is home to a strong military presence of France, the US and other non-African countries in the region, for reasons concerned not only with the choke points and the war in Yemen, but also with jihadism in the Sahelian region.

Sahel is seen from Europe as a source of human trafficking and a threat of jihadism affecting Europe. France has a huge presence of military in this region and AREVA, the French public energy company, has its two most important Uranium mines in Niger. For sure the Sahelian security problems are firstly felt, like in the other zones, by countries and local populations, that suffer from desertification and humanitarian disasters – the huge impact of security problems and water scarcity in the Lake Chad region offers a very compelling example.

West Africa, including Angola and the coastline Central African countries is, after North and Northern Africa the region where relations with European countries began sooner.

Photo: EU Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid in Bangui, Central Africa Republic, January 2014. © EU/ECHO/Jean-Pierre Mustin

In this region, the Gulf of Guinea is also a security concern for African and European countries, again because of trafficking, piracy and the existence of important mineral and energetic reserves and facilities, as well as pipelines that link to Libya and Algeria and extend into Italy and into Spain.

The coastline countries in the Eastern Indian Ocean, namely Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania and the North of Mozambique are part of a set of diverse geopolitical and geo-economic concerns, as these countries are suffering from Islamist radicalization. They are also part of a geostrategic region for the expansion of China towards the West – they are clearly mapped in the sea road lines, a par with the North-Eastern countries bordering the Gulf of Aden and the Bab-El-Mandeb.

We could continue to other regions, such as the South Africa's economic zone of influence or the Central Africa and the Great Lakes regions, but the major idea to stress is that European countries and the European Commission (EC) do not treat in practical terms Africa as One, as they look at particular interests in diverse regions and countries and they give more importance to security, political and economic interests than they do to development or humanitarian aid. Whatever the importance analysts give to it, development aid is not always a priority to European leaderships, public opinions or major private sectors. In other words, the EC Development Directorate (DEVCO) and national aid agencies do not give us a complete picture of some major interests of the EU or of the European countries as well – and I believe we could say the same about the AUC, the Regional Economic Organisations or African national cooperation institutions as well.

In Africa perceptions are changing as well and are changing fast. The entrance of new players, mainly of China, a powerful trade partner and a provider of new funding, is helping to change the way African elites, businessmen and public opinion in major cities begin to look at aid, trade and finance. Furthermore, the rise of urban middle and upper classes is pushing towards a rebirth of political and economics thought and to a revisiting of the role of States and Markets in growth and development as well as in social cohesion and peace.

Given the institutional weaknesses of African countries and social, linguistic, ethnic or religious diversity, in the absence of shared factors that contribute to social cohesion and peace, it is up to the States to build national identities, superimposed on other pre-existing or concomitant identities.

This analysis was not, however, reflected in the implementation of "less state better state" measures, which followed a straight criterion of economic rationality and financial equilibrium since the 1980s, as a remedy (afterwards branded as "the Washington Consensus") to cure external indebtedness and to promote market-driven growth.

Back then, stabilisation measures imposed by lenders and donors resulted in a drastic reduction of budgetary spending, which led to paralysis of state investments, massive dismissal of civil servants and partial collapse of public services. In parallel, aid was provided for education, health, public transport or food production, in order to alleviate unemployment and social conflicts and to allow time for the maturation of structural reforms and the replacement of public services by private ones. To combat corruption practices and inefficiencies, donors, including EU donors, have often bypassed states, channelling aid through private entities, charities and NGOs. These policies accelerated the weakening and delegitimization of States, becoming one of the most negative examples of post-colonial foreign aid in Africa, and contributing to the collapse of sovereignty, civil wars and the disintegration of social cohesion in the first half of the 1990s.

Severe austerity measures were justified as a way of controlling state spending, given the growth of debt and pernicious inflation. However, the closure or privatization of public enterprises and services, made on the assumption that the private sector, itself fragile, would be a more efficient manager, disregarded a basic lesson of all economic theories: there are no free markets in the absence of capable States to regulate economic transactions, to guarantee the safety of persons and property, or to ensure the functioning of courts. Until today we see, in various azimuths, analysis justifying privatizations as anti-statist measures, when, in fact, the enemy of (free) market is monopoly, even when the monopoly is a public one.

It is undeniable that politicians, military and civil servants were invested as proprietors, increasing the size and importance of the private sector. However, as there is no magic solution to transmute a bureaucrat into an entrepreneur, the appropriation of public goods and services by this new brand of private owners kept personal links with people in government, to guarantee protection, privileged information or favouritism in public tenders. In short, nepotism and corruption do not disappear with privatization measures, they may be found in both authoritarian and democratic states.

This is not an argument against privatization, is an argument against weakening public institutions – actually, markets do not perform well when States are feeble and ineffective. Furthermore, States are needed to keep a minimum level of social cohesion and to nurture national identities, which are strategic to domestic peace. Fortunately, this is an understanding that seems to be doing its way in Africa, Europe and elsewhere.

However, some critical change is yet to happen in the mindset of the European-African, EU-AU relationship.

Why is the mindset of the relationship a problem?

Despite the scale of cooperation, involving tens of thousands of people in Europe and several millions in Africa, why do politicians, business people, journalists, civil society and academics remain so critical of aid despite successive changes in agreements and practices - including the evolution of a sometimes ridiculously semantic of "co-co" cacophonies?

I would argue that part of the answer lies on a persistent tentative to present aid as being cooperation between equals.

Let's have a deeper look at the way this relationship has been forged and why it should change. Picking up the evolution of the relations since post-colonialism, from Yaoundé, Lomé, and Cotonou to the Joint Africa EU-Strategy (JAES), a pattern is found: actions and projects are almost always designed for and executed in Africa; Europe performs its role in the partnership as a provider of funds (and "good practices").

The relationship was always unidirectional, about what the Europeans can do for the Africans in Africa – after all the money comes from the European Development Fund (EDF), funded by European budgets. What the Africans can do for Europe in Europe is not even whispered, and it has been alien to the rationale of the relationship. My point is not to suggest the oddity of an industrially developed country or region asking for financial help from a developing one, it is about the mindset this has brought to the conventions, agreements, actions and projects.

Living in Europe and having also lived and worked half of my life in Africa, I know this is enshrined in the way people, and I mean good will people, think and behave: “what can I do to help and earn some money in the process” – and this is valid for both European and African experts and companies. It is, indeed, very hard to find examples in which both sides engage in actions to be carried on in European soil or even in actions designed to serve common interests and mutual benefits in other geographies.

What I am implying here is that the EU-Africa relationship has been captured by the rationale of development aid. Wrapping aid in a narrative of cooperation / partnership of equals, praising the benefits of empowerment, ownership and alignment with domestic priorities, may be named “good practices”, but the provision of money comes from one of the parties, with all the regulations, conditionalities and other strings attached.

Another important consideration is about political behaviour. EU relates differently with other non-sub-Saharan and other Africa, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) regions and countries. A prime-minister of a non-ACP country is received by its counterpart in most EU countries or by the President of the EC or the President of the EU Council; diversely, a prime-minister of an ACP country coming to speak about partnership related questions will most probably be received by the Minister in charge of Development Cooperation or by the Development Commissioner at the EC. Besides, some African (ACP) countries benefit from Special Relationships, “escaping” out of the basket of less economically developed, less institutionally effective or less strategic countries – following the practice of graduating countries according to their per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP). These practices and differences of treatment fuel unease and grievance. Would things happen differently if funding came from a different financial instrument, composed of diverse contributions from all countries, European and African, managed by a representative Board? May be, but it did not happen.

There was a moment when I thought this mindset could begin to be challenged - after the Summit of African and European Heads of States and Governments held in 2007 in Lisbon. Then, one could read in The Lisbon Declaration “…we are resolved to build a new strategic political partnership for the future, overcoming the traditional donor-recipient relationship and building on common values and goals in our pursuit of peace and stability, democracy and rule of law, progress and development.

Photo: Signing of the African Continental Free Trade Area, March 2018.
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We will develop this partnership of equals, based on the effective engagement of our societies, in order to achieve significant results in our fundamental commitments". These intentions, if translated into concrete action might have contributed to change the nature of the relationship. But that has not happened, and actions proceeded, as usual, with the preparation and approval of an Action Plan designed to "… address and advance all identified objectives on all the strategic priorities, with a wider view of supporting African countries in their efforts to attain all Millennium Development Goals". Aid ideology took over with full support of both sides – the European and the African.

And let's be realistic, there is a sizeable quantity of African and European politicians, public officials, managers, consultants, service providers, NGOs, charities involved in development aid that do not bother proceeding with business as usual. An eloquent example is the way post-Cotonou negotiations are being dealt by both parties. On the ACP side, it is obvious the preference for keeping the current organisational framework as it is, to allow some degree of political control of the Partnership and of the funds by the ACP secretariat; on the EU side, a greater regionalisation of the agreement is preferred and proposed (a view shared by the AUC, for reasons alike those of the ACP Secretariat), because being regional facilitates putting together the JAES and the African part of the future Agreement.

Let me concentrate a little longer in the regional question. There is a huge difference between regional economic cooperation (always needed) and regional economic integration, notwithstanding the fact that the difference is often blurred. The priority given to regional economic integration since Lomé II by the EU and since the very creation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) by some African leaderships is one of the most curious wrongdoings and misunderstandings in Africa and has given rise to innumerable plans and countless African regional economic integration organisations, especially since the late 1970s.

This is not to say that regional economic integration cannot occur in the future, provide there are domestic economies to be integrated. However, turning regional economic integration into a priority has done more harm than good. And why?

Because, keeping it simple, there is no regional economic integration without production of exchangeable and competitive goods and services – and for this to occur domestic markets must grow. External trade of African countries has remained between 2% and 3% of the world total since independence, with exports continually based on mineral and agricultural products. Intra-African trade is also very small, between 1% and 2% in Central and North Africa and from 8% to 10% in the CFA West Africa region. The only exception to this trend is the South Africa's zone of influence but only because its economy functions as a regional hub - withdrawing South Africa from the equation, trade between Namibia, Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia is substantially lower than that of the countries of West Africa. This is not to say that African countries cannot or should not facilitate intra-trade to foster business and economic growth. The recently signed African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) intends to be an example of that – provide tradeable goods and infrastructure develop.

Photo: EU Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid, West Africa, November 2008. © EC/ECHO

Anyway, the recurrent priority for regional economic integration has been a fallacy, with no theoretical or empirical support, with funding flowing to cover expenses for the operation of regional bodies, including salaries of staff and remuneration of consultants. As a matter of fact, investment in infrastructure, institutions and training are the core of development, as the history of EU countries or the experience of emerging economies attest. However, despite the recent reengagement of European companies in public works, it has been evident in recent decades that the EU and its Member States are not bound to finance infrastructure, due to the huge amount of funding involved.

That's why China was very welcome in the beginning of this century, with its massive financing of infrastructures. It does so for the satisfaction of commercial and strategic interests and has no reluctance to imposes conditionalities: Chinese companies should be hired, reimbursement of debts guaranteed - often through direct trade operations or through mineral deposits or fertile land concessions. However, Chinese involvement has three characteristics that make it attractive to African rulers: first, non-interference in domestic policies; second, the huge volume of funds involved; third, investment in infrastructure, which catapults the growth of domestic economies.

It should also be said that Chinese investments are interesting for international and European capital, given that infrastructure ameliorations create business opportunities for third parties - moralistic lessons about dangers of Chinese cooperation turn out to be more ideological than real. Chinese investments in infrastructure are, therefore, assets rather than threats.

Coming back again to the overall relations between Europe and Africa, it is clear that actions and projects continued, along the first two decades of this century, to be mostly implemented in Africa and money continued to come from Europe - no matter the semantical efforts to present providers and recipients of aid as equal partners in development.

Is there anybody that really thinks that the ownership of money disappears because it is disguised with another name? In a figurative language, wrapping a donor-recipient relationship in a peer-to-peer packaging invites customers to constantly resort to the complaints book.

What is the problem to call aid as aid? Why the need to convince others that aid is not linked to interests? Is it because of bad feelings from past colonial practices? I know that on the African side this last argument is very often branded – but let's be honest, it is branded because it pays dividends.

The Chinese aid practices are sometimes referred as being toxic – they lend, they want to be paid back, they want their enterprises to benefit from aid. And so, what? Isn't this the usual way to carry on business deals? Calling aid to what is aid will help erasing from negotiating tables interminable hours to find politically correct names to brand things that do not fit to realities. And let me be clear, I am referring to both parties at the table – Europeans and Africans as well.

Everybody knows that the current trends in Europe foreshadow a greater weight of national priorities and interests in the field of external relations. Initiatives to contain emigration from Africa, fight against terrorist groups and support for environmental protection are a proof of this; this is led by a perception of threats and indicate that relations with Africa are moving to more political and economic levels. The recent EC announcement of a "new Africa-Europe alliance to deepen economic relations and promote investment and employment" clearly points to prioritise trade, not aid. This is a move that may, ultimately, favours a better understanding, on both sides, of the underestimated strategic value of the "beyond aid" EU-AU relationship, in a world of deep political change and technological accelerations.

IMVF Briefs are publications that target a wide audience and present in a concise manner the key features and questions regarding a development-related issue.

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SOBRE O INSTITUTO MARQUÊS DE VALLE FLOR

Criado em 1951 como instituição privada de utilidade pública, o IMVF é uma Fundação para o desenvolvimento e a cooperação, tendo iniciado atividade como ONGD em 1988 em São Tomé e Príncipe. A partir dos anos 90 expandiu a sua ação a outros países, com predominância aos de língua oficial portuguesa e aumentou as áreas de atividade. Já em 2017 voltou a alargar a sua ação a novas geografias em África e na América Latina. O trabalho feito e os resultados alcançados tornaram o IMVF numa entidade de referência nos domínios da cooperação e do desenvolvimento.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE MARQUÊS DE VALLE FLOR

Created in 1951 as a private institution of public utility, IMVF is a foundation for development and cooperation, having started its activity as a NGDO in 1988, in Sao Tome and Principe. From the 90s onward, the Institute have expanded its actions to other countries, mainly Portuguese Speaking Countries and broaden its scope of intervention. In 2017 it widened again its sphere of activities to new geographies in Africa and Latin America as well. The work done and the results obtained have turned IMVF into a key stakeholder in different areas of expertise and intervention such as Cooperation and Development.

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