

HOW TO AVOID THE AID TRAP IN THE AU-EU STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP?

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Handshake between Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairman of the African Union Commission (AUC), on the right, and Ursula von der Leyen | Photo courtesy of Etienne Ansotte, European Union, 2019, via EC – Audiovisual Service.

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COVID-19 has had far-reaching effects all over the world, the most visible of which on the world economy and public health. Could it also have an impact on Europe-Africa relations? With an EU-AU summit scheduled for late 2020, the pandemic will undoubtedly play a central role in it. Can the two continents avoid the usual aid mindset and move on to a more strategic one? Fernando Jorge Cardoso reflects on the nature of Europe-Africa relations since 2000 and how separating aid from strategy could help relaunch this relationship.

A mindset reduced to aid

In their first meeting held in 2000 in Cairo, African and European heads of state and government approved an EU-Africa partnership, which was followed by a Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES), signed in Lisbon in 2007. Both had the participation of the whole of Africa, including the Northern countries.

The JAES was supposed to help change the paradigm of relations based on aid, by defining common goals and interests that both parties should pursue jointly in bilateral actions and promote in the international arena. Apparently, the relevant players on both continents had realised the importance of taking a leap forward and putting an end to a relationship based on a donor-recipient mindset.

But soon after the first action plan for the operationalisation of the strategy was approved, business as usual took the stage:

lists of themes and projects to be financed by the European Commission and member states, actions to be implemented in African countries and regions – in other words, aid disguised as strategy. It is true that security cooperation was boosted and that some common positions on global issues were accomplished by the partners, but they were marginal in the relationship.

A summit defined by a pandemic

The agenda of the next summit, scheduled for October 2020, will inevitably focus on the pandemic and its impact. In Africa, the public health effects of COVID-19 are occurring in parallel with the economic ones, which were only aggravated as governments understandably declared confinement and took other emergency measures. The decrease in demand for raw materials has had an overwhelming impact on African exports. The sharp fall in oil prices has contradictory impacts, affecting positively African oil importing countries but negatively oil-exporting ones, like Nigeria.

The sudden economic downturn and the likely acceleration of the pandemic in Africa in the course of this year call for a global response, in a time when donors are suffering similar problems. This creates an unfavourable environment for the provision of aid – as the example of Italy revealed with the initial lack of solidarity from their EU partners. At any rate, some aid is a necessity and will flow, and the EU should strongly support solidarity towards Africa, for this will be also seen as a mark of

credibility for any further geopolitical alliance.

A strategy beyond aid?

The fact that Africa and Europe's number one priority is to fight the pandemic and its consequences does not take away the need to reflect on the type of future relationship ahead of the next summit. For this to happen, it is necessary to clarify that the aid mindset and related procedures should not continue to dominate the joint strategy. There is no sound reason to disguise or rebrand aid – Europe and Japan received grants from the US after the Second World War, and that was considered and called aid.

One should stop the awkward habit of referring to EU development cooperation with Africa as 'partnership between equals' when it is in fact a relationship in which one party receives the money and the other party gives it (and, understandably, controls the rules of the funding – after all it is their taxpayers' money). By doing so, African, and European leaders would give a strong answer to the recurring accusations of paternalistic practices and would stop the proliferation of supposedly nice wordings to rebrand aid.

Establishing a clear separation between aid and strategy does not mean that Europeans and Africans can't operate in tandem under an AU-EU alliance – but with diverse rules

and objectives. A common instrument to fund the joint strategy should be created and all countries of the African and the European Union should participate in it, according to an agreed formula, in which the exercise of vote combines the size of contributions with solidarity values (in other words, delinking voting power from the amount of contributions).

An initiative of this type cannot be discussed properly during the 2020 summit, given the obvious need to focus on the pandemic and its implications, as well as on other issues already scheduled. However, two things could be done. First, leaders could draw up a statement declaring the EU and AU's intention to relaunch a strategic relationship based on common interests, separated from aid issues. And second, they could create a joint working group to prepare a proposal after the summit, clarifying what strategic issues of common interest are, such as climate change, energy transition, trade, peace and security, and migration – and suggesting the modalities of a common funding instrument.

If both the EU and the AU are serious about turning a donor-recipient relationship into a partnership based on mutual interests, as well as about building an alliance, both players will also have to distinguish what is aid from what is strategy, changing old habits and mindsets and adapting the overall funding structure.

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