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The Lesson of Lampedusa – Why the EU and Africa Need a Strategic Partnership

By Christine Hackenesch & Svea Koch,
*German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*

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The Lesson of Lampedusa – Why the EU and Africa Need a Strategic Partnership

Bonn, 28 October 2013. The boat tragedy off the coast of Lampedusa has once again brought Africa to the attention of the European media with shocking news. In response, some are pressing for more development aid to reduce the pressure on people to emigrate from their home countries and thereby to reduce the flow of refugees. German Federal Minister of the Interior Friedrich recently called for economic discussions to be taken up with Africa to improve the living conditions on the continent. Others are calling for more effective protection of the external borders of the EU, not least to scare away future immigrants.

It is clear that the flow of immigrants cannot be hindered by simple means or selective political initiatives. What is needed instead is a comprehensive cooperation with African countries. The events of Lampedusa are a sad reminder of how important the relations between the EU and African countries are and that Europe and Africa have a whole series of common interests.

A strategic partnership between Africa and the EU is more important than ever but receives little public attention

The fact that there is already a comprehensive strategic partnership between the EU and African countries, at least on paper, is barely taken into account in the current discussion. European and African governments concluded the 'Joint Africa-EU Strategy' in Lisbon in 2007 with the aim of strengthening the relations between both continents. In addition to development cooperation, the strategy advocated closer collaboration "at eye level" in areas such as peace and security, the promotion of democracy and human rights, in the fight against climate change and in the field of migration.

Six years later the enthusiasm has abated on both sides and now there is prevailing dissatisfaction with the status quo of the implementation of the partnership. A low amount of political will on the

part of the European member states to support the partnership and differences of opinion regarding politically sensitive topics such as the unresolved issue of economic partnership agreements are placing a long-term strain on relations.

The fact that the Joint Africa-EU Strategy barely plays any role in the current debate over solutions to the problem of refugees shows how strongly the partnership is viewed as 'an issue for Brussels' by the member states and the public. Nevertheless, we can hope that there will now be more awareness of the necessity of this partnership, even among German politicians, and that there will be increased efforts on the European and African sides to revive the strategic partnership.

First subtle signs of this are visible. In early October the President of Senegal Macky Sall travelled to Strasbourg at the invitation of the President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz. During his speech he reminded the members of the European Parliament of the significance of the strategic partnership and the shared fate of both continents. He named three topics that are of key importance for Africa: peace and security, the stabilisation of democratic governance and trade and investments. These areas also (but naturally not by themselves) contribute to solving migration problems. There is indeed already cooperation in these areas but they have had varying levels of success.

Three key topics for the partnership: peace, democracy and trade

'Peace and security', for example, is already one of the key areas of the strategic partnership. The EU has developed comprehensive strategies for the Sahel region and the Horn of Africa that are intended to better harmonize development, foreign and security policy. This coalescence of different policy areas can only function properly if a joint European solution is favoured over national strategies or national solo efforts.

The support of 'democratic governance' is already a key objective of African-European relations, yet the strategic partnership in this area has resulted in insufficient political dynamics so far. The argument that Africans themselves are responsible for unstable regimes on their continent is only partly correct. It is obviously difficult for the EU to develop an effective cooperation for democracy and human rights, particularly with authoritarian countries. Yet, on the other hand the EU and its member states must also make use of the democracy promotion instruments they have developed in a more coherent way. The interests of raw material supply as well as economic, security and even development policy often collide with the goal of supporting democratic governance. Pointing fingers at Africa does not eliminate Europe's obligation to act responsibly.

Last but not least, the negotiations on free trade agreements (Economic Partnership Agreements-EPAs) between the EU and Africa are disputed and have had a negative effect on relations. It is not

only in the interest of Africans but also Europeans to be more flexible and to conclude the negotiations in a way that has a positive outcome for both sides. After all, African states have gained other options in the meantime. While Europeans have not shown much willingness to make concessions to African governments on the EPAs, China has risen to become Africa's second most important trade partner.

All of this may sound complicated but it is precisely this complexity of Africa-Europe relations that is often hardly discussed. The next Africa-EU summit, which will be held in Brussels in April of next year, can set the course for the future of these relations. The tragedy of Lampedusa shows that Europeans and Africans have many shared interests. In this respect the tragedy may have produced one good thing, at least: It provided the opportunity to generate more widespread political support within Europe for the further development of the Africa-Europe strategic partnership.



Christine Hackenesch
*Deutsches Institut für
Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*



Svea Koch
*Deutsches Institut für
Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*