

d·i·e

Deutsches Institut für
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development
Institute

Obama's Legacy in Africa

By Erik Lundsgaarde,
*German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*

The Current Column

of 21 January 2013

Obama's Legacy in Africa

Bonn, 21 January 2013. Four years ago, observers around the world excitedly watched Barack Obama's first inauguration, sensing that the power transition would provide a departure from the unilateral and overly militarized foreign policy approaches of previous administrations and open a new era of constructive global engagement for the United States. As Obama takes his oath for a second term, expectations about his administration's transformative potential are undoubtedly lower given the slow pace of change in domestic and foreign policy over the last four years.

US Africa policy is one area where the Obama administration has so far shown continuity with previous administrations without leaving a clear legacy of its own. It remains an open question whether US policy toward the continent will simply represent more of the same in Obama's second term or instead resolve longstanding deficits in how the US engages with the region.

US Africa Policy: Before and After Obama

While US-Africa relations continue to have a relatively low priority, Africa's place on the US foreign policy agenda has been rising since the end of the Clinton administration. Reflecting the region's growing importance, the US disbursed nearly \$9 billion in official development assistance (ODA) to Sub-Saharan Africa in 2011, more than five times as much as in 2001. The volume of trade between the US and Sub-Saharan Africa is nearly ten times bigger than its ODA budget. In 2011, trade volume reached \$95 billion, having roughly tripled in size in the space of a decade. The creation of the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2007 demonstrated the strategic importance of the continent for US security policy.

Yet these changes largely reflect decisions taken before President Obama entered office. Rising aid stemmed from Bush administration initiatives such as the Millennium Challenge Corporation and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. The African Growth and Opportunity Act, passed

into law in 2000, has been considered a vehicle for trade increases, though this legislation has to date mainly benefited the resource exports that continue to dominate the Africa-US trade profile. The development of AFRICOM was an extension of Bush era efforts to strengthen counterterrorism initiatives.

In some cases, the Obama administration has added accents to US Africa policy. In 2009, the administration launched a Global Health Initiative to increase the coherence of US government programmes tackling HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other health challenges. The *Feed the Future* initiative started in the same year with a commitment to allocate \$3.5 billion to increase food security in 20 developing countries, 12 of them African. The *Global Climate Change Initiative* provides less than \$1 billion annually on a global scale, including funding for clean energy development and forest protection in Africa. These programmes, none of which focus exclusively on African countries, are listed alongside democracy promotion initiatives, support for military training, and involvement in peace processes in Côte d'Ivoire and Sudan as achievements of US engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa by the administration itself. While the thematic initiatives provide funding to needed areas and address some shortcomings in how American aid is delivered, they are small in scale and contribute to the fragmentation of policy approaches toward African countries.

What next?

The US Strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa published in the summer of 2012 provides clues about possible directions for the second Obama administration's Africa policy. This strategy prioritizes democracy promotion, the expansion of trade and investment, investing in peace and security, and support for economic and social development. The administration's interest in democracy promotion and good governance was emphasized during President Obama's lone trip to

the continent in his first term in July 2009.

For President Obama to move beyond his predecessors' legacies and modernize US Africa policy, three areas for reform are important for his second term. First, the administration must ensure that the civilian dimension of foreign policy toward the region has the highest priority. While AFRICOM's funding remains relatively small, there is a risk that the Pentagon's role will increase given the growing strategic importance of Africa and the limited capacities of other ministries to manage funding. The Obama administration's first term promises to elevate the status of development as a dimension of foreign policy have thus far not translated into concrete actions supporting this goal. As the administration and the Congress move to reduce a bloated defence budget globally, they will also need to equip civilian ministries with resources to fulfil their missions.

Second, President Obama can leave a stronger mark on US Africa policy by increasing its multilateral orientation. On one level, this requires a real effort to cooperate with other external aid providers. It is hard to imagine how US democracy promotion in Africa will succeed, for example, if US and European efforts to achieve similar goals are

not implemented in a complementary manner. On another level, the US needs to actively support sub-regional and continental institutions to promote economic integration and strengthen regional security. At the global level, the administration should increase its commitment to strengthening multilateral institutions including the United Nations.

The promotion of the small-scale Global Climate Change Initiative alongside continued foot dragging in international climate change negotiations is one sign that US Africa policy still displays many inconsistencies. While investments in food security through *Feed the Future* bring attention to an important policy area, this initiative neatly sidesteps deeper reform needs in areas such as food aid policy, the promotion of agricultural trade, or domestic agricultural policy. As a third reform area, the Obama administration should confront the issue of policy coherence in its relations with Africa more squarely in the next four years and develop a consistent strategy for engagement that bundles initiatives together and ensures that the different dimensions of US Africa policy advance a common agenda that is beneficial for African states.



Dr. Erik Lundsgaarde

Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)