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Years | 1964 – 2014

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Africa-EU Summit: Stronger Political Orientation and Sharper Focus Needed

By Erik Lundsgaarde, Svea Koch
& Julia Leininger,
*German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*

The Current Column

of 31 March 2014

Africa-EU Summit: Stronger Political Orientation and Sharper Focus Needed

Bonn, 31 March 2014. On 2 and 3 April 2014, African and EU Heads of State and Government will meet in Brussels to take stock of achievements in Africa-EU cooperation and to outline priorities for future cooperation. The summit is the fourth event of its kind since 2000, seeking to reframe and elevate the Africa-EU partnership in light of political and economic changes within Africa and shifting global geopolitics. Identifying future priorities for cooperation needs to build on an honest assessment of what has worked in Africa-EU cooperation and what has not. Two key challenges stand in the way of a revitalized partnership. First, there is a risk of an overly ambitious and diversified approach to the partnership that over-stretches available resources and produces limited tangible results. Second, if Africa and the EU avoid addressing politically contentious issues in this forum, they will miss a chance to advance dialogue on obstacles to closer cooperation.

People, Prosperity and Peace – Too Broad and Not Political Enough?

Although the summit agenda emphasizes the themes of 'people', 'prosperity' and 'peace', reflecting support for initiatives in the areas of education, investment, and security on the African continent, delegates will likely endorse an action plan covering a much broader range of issues. There is a risk that in attempting to demonstrate the comprehensiveness of the Africa-EU partnership, a long list of loosely defined aspirations will be presented as a framework for future action. To avoid this, a comprehensive framework should indicate how existing forms of cooperation across issue areas and levels of governance can be coherently linked.

Regardless of the summit outcome, inter-continental cooperation will remain multi-faceted, taking place through EU member state and EU-level development cooperation and political dialogue between the EU and the African Union. Given the variety of development challenges on the African continent, this diversity has a positive side. However, the multiple arenas for cooperation can also lead to a duplication of activities and the divided attention of partners with limited capacities to engage. Few initiatives envisioned in action plans approved during previous summits attracted the personnel or financial commitments needed to make major achievements. More successful initiatives, such as in the area of peace and security, generally built on progress made through existing programmes. Instead of taking on new commitments to develop joint Africa-EU work programmes, European policymakers

should view the EU-Africa summit as a stimulus for thinking seriously about what issues need to be addressed at the level of inter-continental dialogue, what issues should be pursued through alternative cooperation channels, and how cooperation strategies at these different levels can be better aligned and mutually reinforcing.

A sustained high-level political dialogue should serve not only to identify issues of common interest where the EU and Africa can intensify collaboration but also as a forum to address contentious issues. To resolve the main irritants in the Africa-EU relationship – critical issues debated prior to the summit but seemingly neglected on the official agenda – African states and the EU should address these conflicts of interest in the summit's follow-up agenda. People, prosperity and peace are clearly important themes. But the summit agenda only indirectly tackles key political issues related to these priorities that have stirred controversies. With respect to 'people', creating educational and employment opportunities are emphasized rather than addressing how both continents can offer stronger human rights guarantees to citizens and immigrants. The 'prosperity' dimension of the agenda highlights the need to stimulate investment in Africa, but limits attention to how the controversial Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) between Europe and African countries can be concluded in a way that it allays African concerns about their developmental benefits.

Strengthen political dialogue and improve consistency

Reinforcing the commitment to political dialogue as a core element of the Africa-EU partnership implies limiting the proliferation of small-scale initiatives as a summit outcome. In this respect, the fragmentation of the EU-Africa agenda reflects a still unclear division of labour between the EU and its member states in foreign policy. To increase the political value of the partnership, EU institutions and member states need to clearly identify the issues that require a consolidated European approach in order to achieve greater leverage, effectiveness, efficiency, and visibility. A comprehensive strategy for Africa-EU relations needs the buy-in of member states, which should make greater efforts to promote the consistency of their bilateral Africa strategies with the framework agreed upon at the EU level. A fragmented European approach not only reduces the EU's influence, but also overtaxes the limited capacities of partners to pursue cooperation in different issue areas.