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The EU's Africa strategy falls short

Based on a skewed analysis, the EU's new Africa strategy fails to take stock of problems its policies have caused

Read the article 'What does Africa want from the EU?', which laments the African Union's lack of strategy.

The European Commission is very ambitious. According to its 9 March 2020 announcement, it aims at a new African strategy built on five partnerships of mutual interests and responsibilities.

However, the analysis of the current situation that is supposed to underpin the EU's proposed 'Strategy with Africa' is surprisingly imprecise. In light of the problems, conflicts and challenges confronting all the countries on the 'twin' continents, the EU's notion of a partnership seems divorced from reality and impracticable.

It starts by lumping all the heterogeneous African regions and states together and continues with the fact that the African Union itself has no common foreign policy and also cannot be compared to the EU with regard to cooperation. Even in the strategy's five areas of work, many questions remain unanswered.

A partnership for a 'green transition'

A partnership for transitioning to a 'green', more ecologically responsible economic model is long overdue. The strategy uses the right keywords, for example, by prioritising innovations to drive the green transition. According to the European Commission, the African continent needs a circular economy to ensure fairness and sustainability in European and African value chains. The food industry must also become safer and more sustainable.

However, in view of the current situation, it is almost cynical to promote close cooperation for recycling on one hand yet not mention that large portions of European electronic waste that continue to be dumped on rubbish tips in Ghana. It will take time for the Waste Electrical and

Electronic Equipment Directive to have a substantial impact. The same goes for sustainable value chains. The Commission fiercely opposed the urgently needed, legally binding due diligence and disclosure obligations for European producers in legislation regarding the responsible sourcing the 'conflict minerals' tin, tantalum, tungsten and gold.

Equally astonishing are the measures proposed for reaching these goals. The Commission wants to support implementation of the 'Nationally Determined Contributions' – the efforts made by each country to implement the Paris climate goals. But the strategy gives no hint of its financial commitment, concrete fields of activity or the specific countries to be helped.

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The Commission also has no precise plan regarding renewable energy initiatives. It would like to enter into an unspecified partnership with Africa to support 'green energy' in line with recommendations of the AU-EU High Level Platform on Sustainable Energy Investments in Africa. The African Development Bank estimates that between € 39 and 62bn are needed annually to expand electricity generation from renewable sources. However, the strategy presents no concrete financing plan.

Another key point is support for sustainable food systems. However, current EU policies towards African states and regions does not seem to be designed to protect smallholder structures – although it is precisely these that promote food security and employment in rural areas and thereby prevent rural exodus.

It is also alarming that sustainability in the agricultural sector is not further defined. The African continent must not develop the same industrialised agriculture that is largely responsible for CO2 emissions in Europe and only financially benefits a few big players. That said, agricultural development on the continent depends on African planning.

A partnership for the digital transformation

The digital transformation of Africa – just like that of the European Union, which is far from finished – is an important goal. By calling for further expanding the digital economy, e-governance, data protection

and opportunities to learn how to best use digital resources, the EU's Africa strategy raises some important points. But it provides no details.

What specific measures are needed to ensure digital inclusion and equality for marginalised groups and women? One major problem is the taxation of mobile financial transactions, which leads to low-income earners in particular being excluded and creates the impression that Internet use is a luxury. The problem is mentioned but no European-African strategy is proposed to solve it.

The individual issues are inadequately linked: One of the most important prerequisites for participating in the digital transformation is having a reliable energy supply, which is not guaranteed in rural areas. This goes unmentioned.

Instead, the Commission acts as if access to e-governance were simply a matter of cooperative actions that are not further explained. This raises the question – also with regard to Germany's own problems implementing e-governance –, if the rapid resolution of this problem throughout Africa is realistic, especially while it remains unclear which investments are necessary.

A partnership for sustainable growth and jobs

The Commission focuses on four possible solutions with regard to 'sustainable growth'. The strategy accords a lot of attention to the mobilisation of private investment. Of course investments, like those for promoting renewable energies, infrastructure and so forth, are important.

At the same time, however, the use of 'blended finance' to mobilise private capital through public guarantees must be scrutinised. A study by the British Overseas Development Institute shows that thus far, much less private capital has been mobilised than was expected. This partly has to do with the risk aversion of private investors, who seek favourable investment climates. However, especially in the least developed countries (LDCs) that most urgently need investments, this does not exist. It is thus necessary to take a more differentiated approach that reduces the risks presented by LDCs.

All in all, the question is whether the public development funds now used in blending instruments, which in any case are negligible, will not be sorely missed elsewhere. It seems presumptuous to believe that particularly in fragile states, the private sector will be the solution for

cases where development assistance has failed.

Praise for EU-African cooperation on 'migration management' is appalling.

The issue of regional and continental economic integration is given great attention. On one hand, implementing the African Continental Free Trade Agreement is presented as not posing any problems – which is outright naïve in light of the value chains in the individual African regions. Even within much smaller units, cross-border exchange is minimal. Two reasons for this are the individual states' dependencies on customs duties for income and poor infrastructure.

The difficulties become obvious when we look at the few existing economic partnership agreements with the EU that aim to develop regional integration but have failed to be implemented for years. The new strategy calls for strengthening these agreements. Yet the agreement with the South African Development Community (SADC) shows that few African states are interested in trade in services, for example. Instead, they want the EU to provide urgent help to develop the infrastructure needed for the African continent's free trade zone.

It is astonishing that some of the most glaring problems of many African countries are only mentioned in passing. These include measures to fight tax evasion by multinational corporations, which the UN Economic Commission for Africa puts at USD 100 billion annually. Nor is there any mention of more debt relief for African countries that have to forgo certain public services and welfare measures because of their debt burdens. Developing sustainability in these countries is impossible at this time.

A partnership for peace and (good) governance

The strategy describes a large number of EU domestic measures – including those for education, health and good governance with respect to democratisation, human rights and empowering women – as European capacity-building tasks. However, the strategy forgets to note that change in these areas requires building up civil society structures. One searches in vain for such specific plans.

Many economic partnership agreements with the various African regions do not have the usual mechanisms for civil society exchanges that are

generally supported by EU agreements. This reveals the minimal value of the instruments that the EU has at its disposal.

A partnership on migration and mobility

The Commission avoids making any precise statements regarding migration and mobility. The EU reaction to the conflicts raging on the African continent – those in the Sahel are not specifically named – consists of increased support for African peacemaking. There is no analysis of the current problems.

With respect to Burkina Faso and other Sahel countries that are rapidly descending into chaos, encouraged by French President Macron, some EU member states are discussing increasing their military activities. Yet it is much more important for the EU to provide development policy activities and funding to civil society and state groups that can work together long-term to implement a peaceful solution – and otherwise primarily focus on African peace and security missions.

Praise for EU-African cooperation on 'migration management' is appalling. Anyone who recalls the inhumane conditions in Libyan internment camps knows that the European value system is trampled on every day.

In short, the EU Commission's first proposal for a new Africa strategy shows the importance it justly attaches to relations with the continent.

Nevertheless the strategy remains vague and does not take into account problems that the EU's misguided policies have partly fuelled. Instead, clear and financially secured targets are needed, along with a more sophisticated view of the individual African countries and honest cooperation with our African partners.



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