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Inge Kaul

Want to Take the Africa-EU-Partnership to the Next Level? Press the Reset Button¹

On March 9, 2020, the European Commission (EC) and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) presented a joint communication to the European Parliament and Council entitled “Toward a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa.”² According to EC President Ursula von der Leyen, this strategy is the roadmap to bring the partnership between the African Union (AU) and European Union (EU) “to the next level.”³ However, the EC President specified neither how she characterizes the current partnership level nor how the envisioned next level differs from the present one. Would it be in terms of goals and objectives, partnering modalities, implementation strategies, or all of that?

A NEW AFRICA-EU PARTNERSHIP?

The aim of this paper is to search for clues about what might be new and different about AU-EU partnering at the next level. However, should one bother probing this issue now when the world confronts unprecedented challenges from Covid-19 requiring everyone’s urgent and fullest attention? I argue “yes.”

The reason is that the Covid-19 pandemic has heightened policymakers’ and the general public’s realization that challenges to the global public good such as Covid-19 could potentially affect anyone of us, wherever we live, north or south. Often, they also require all of us to take corrective action. As a result, the willingness to engage in international cooperation is spiking. Major humanitarian assistance efforts have already been launched, debt relief has been granted and other short and longer-term response measures are underway, with further ones being considered and likely to follow soon. However, to achieve their intended effects, these measures must fit local and national circumstances. This, in turn, calls for close consultation and cooperation between the recipient country or region and its external partners.

African policymakers clearly hope for a cooperative approach to exploring and devising international response initiatives, even now – or especially now – during these times of crisis when their countries are highly dependent

on external support and policy effectiveness is of utmost importance. In a virtual meeting convened by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission (AUC) Moussa Faki Mahamat recently stressed that Africa asks “for equity based on solidarity, not as a concept of gestures of sympathy, but collective global action.”⁴

Therefore, it is timely to ask whether the partnership relation envisioned in the proposed new EC/VP strategy document corresponds to the AUC Chairperson’s notion of international cooperation. The ensuing discussion shows, it does not. It leaves uncorrected the weaknesses that have thus far characterized AU-EU partnering, namely asymmetry between partners and elusive results.

Accordingly, I recommend that, at their next summit, AU and EU leaders may want to consider the following course of action: (i) to initiate a partnership reset and, to this end, ask the AUC and EC to prepare, based on extensive consultations within and between the two unions, a jointly drafted document on AU-EU partnering in the post-Covid-19 world to be submitted for leaders’ consideration and decision-making at an extraordinary summit, perhaps to be convened in 2022; and (ii) to identify an interim partnership program focused on matters needing urgent attention in order to minimize the crisis effects on Africa, Europe, and the world economy.

In developing this argument, I begin by presenting an overview of the nature of AU-EU partnering to date. Next, I examine the strategy document released on March 9, 2020. In light of the findings that emerge, I then make the case for a partnership reset and outline the key features of a true next-level partnering – “cooperation on equal footing.”⁵

THE FUNCTIONING OF AU-EU PARTNERSHIPS TO DATE

Africa and the EU are major partners in trade, investment, and international cooperation.⁶ The focus in this paper is on international cooperation activities



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¹ The author thanks Maximilian Jarrett for his comments and observations on this paper.

² <https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/priorities/eu-africa>.

³ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/press-corner/detail/en/IP_20_373/.

⁴ <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20200417/chairpersons-remarks-imf-wb-mobilising-africa-teleconference-17-april-2020>.

⁵ At the outset, it should be noted that this paper deals only with the new AU-EU partnership, leaving aside the negotiations between the Africa, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) Group and the EU on a successor to the Cotonou Agreement being conducted in parallel. See <https://www.euractiv.de/section/eu-aussenpolitik/news/cotonou-nachfolgeabkommen-eu-uneins-bei-migration/>.

⁶ For more information, see <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-africa/>.

undertaken within the context of the AU-EU partnership framework. These activities, past and current, are being assessed in terms of their compliance with the principles, goals, and other stipulations set forth in official partnership documents. For empirical evidence I draw on the literature on AU-EU partnering, including scholarly studies, official AU and EU documents and reports, as well as other materials.

Interestingly, while the various literature contributions cover a wide range of issues, there are two recurrent themes of direct relevance to the discussion in this section: asymmetry between partners and elusive partnership results.

Asymmetry between Partners

Since the first AU-EU summit in Cairo in 2000, summit declarations and related documents, such as the roadmaps for summit follow-up, routinely included (re)commitments to the principles of a relationship of equals and shared ownership. However, analysts (in Africa and Europe) continue to note that these words have yet to be translated into matching changes in partner relations and in real joint agency for agenda-setting, strategizing, and decision-making on other partnership aspects. This, although, African partners have repeatedly conveyed their willingness and readiness to exercise stronger agency. The AU's *Agenda 2063* is a clear case in point.⁷

No doubt, several factors have contributed to the persistence of asymmetric partner relationships, including institutional lock-in and path dependency that, as institutional economists have shown, frequently impede organizational change. Among the more context-specific factors is the strong emphasis placed on the rollout of values and norms in EU activities. Another variable is the difference between the unions' institutional capacities. In comparison to the AUC, the EC is more established, better resourced, and thus in a stronger position to act proactively and, importantly, put its money to where its interests are. Seemingly, it may also unilaterally decide to change allocations, as happened, for example, in the field of migration governance, where funding priorities were shifted from development to restricting migration flows and border control, and recently when existing allocations were moved to augment the funds available for activities related to Covid-19.⁸ Neither the need nor the desirability of these reallocations is necessarily being questioned here, but the pattern of decision-making.

Adding to the impression of EU dominance is also that the majority of partnership activities happen in Africa and partnership documents rarely, if at all, refer to initiatives that concern change in EU policy that

currently has negative spillover effects on Africa; for example, its support for European agriculture that acts as a barrier to African development (Mitchell and Baker 2019), or its policies for the control of illicit financial flows from Africa into the EU, which still allow large capital outflows from Africa posing central challenges to the continent's development financing (Signé et al. 2020).

Hence, it is not too surprising that the EU's behavior is sometimes perceived as resembling that of a principal in a principal-agent relation rather than that of a peer in a joint-agency relationship and, as analysts note, gives rise to African partners' perceptions of asymmetry.

However, Africa has achieved significant progress in human and institutional capacity building and has developed its own ideas about Africa's future and the development path to reach it (Lopes and Kararach 2020). Moreover, a growing number of external public and private actors are vying to access Africa's expanding markets and natural resources, widening the circle and choice of external partners to cooperate with.

Assuming that the aim is to strengthen future AU-EU partnering and to make it work efficiently and effectively, the lack of enthusiasm on the African side analysts felt they could sometimes observe (Pharatihatihe and Vanheukelom 2019, EC-Eval 2017) should perhaps be interpreted as signaling that the closing of the gap between the rhetoric of equal partnering and the still asymmetric practice of partnering cannot be delayed for much longer. The Covid-19 pandemic is unlikely to revert the global trend toward multipolarity – notably that toward multipolarity in human capabilities and exercise of policymaking agency.

Elusive Results

The AU-EU summit declarations and their accompanying roadmaps usually indicate four to five broad topics around which the partners intend to cooperate. These so-called “strategic priorities” have not changed much over time. Understandably so, because they concern long-term challenges, in other words, “moving targets” likely to remain on national and international policy agendas for years, even decades, possibly with some new accents and readjustment when policy realities or accents change. For instance, the 5th Summit Declaration (AU-EU 2017) mentions as priority areas: investing in people, education, science, technology, and skills development; strengthening resilience, peace, security, and governance; migration and mobility; mobilizing investments in Africa's structural transformation, including job creation. In fact, these “priorities” are just descriptions of economic sectors and policy functions, listed in a relatively arbitrary way. Put differently, for quite some time, AU-EU partnering

⁷ See <https://au.int/en/agenda2063/overview/>.

⁸ For spending on migration, see Valero (2018), and for corona-related reallocation of funds, see https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_604 and Chadwick (2020).

has been functioning without a systematic overall framework.

Thus, it is not surprising to find that assessments of partnership outcomes frequently use terms like “marginal,” “fractured,” or “lacking in coherence.” These qualifications do not imply that partnership initiatives failed to deliver altogether. In fact, they delivered inputs (e.g., money and experts) and produced outputs (e.g., students trained, policy dialogues held, or budget support provided). What is unclear is to what tangible results all this adds up to. What effects and impact result from the numerous policy dialogues and training activities that were conducted for purposes of value and/or rollout in quite several quite diverse policy fields? What is the result of the partnership activities aimed at institutional capacity-building undertaken in a range of different policy areas?

Necessity of Stronger Cooperative Links and Strategic Framework

Considering the existence of *Agenda 2063* and its detailed First Ten-Year Implementation Framework,⁹ one would expect to see strong cooperative links between the EC and the AUC as the continental focal point for agenda implementation. In fact, such commission-to-commission links exist. For example, the EU provides budget support for the AUC and funding for some *Agenda 2063* projects, including the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). However, although of critical importance to institution-building, the tool of budget support is known generally to be associated with difficult-to-trace effects. Thus, the European Court of Auditors (ECA 2018, 2) also found that “the EU’s support for the APSA has had a poor effect.” Of course, this could in addition be due to the complexity and intractability of the peace and security challenge itself.

In fact, EU assistance has been extended to a number of African institutions with a continent-wide mandate, ranging from earth observation in the case of AfriGEOSS to capacity-building for disease control as in the case of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, an achievement of major importance now for the fight against Covid-19.¹⁰

This brings us back to the missing strategic framework of AU-EU partnering, which not only makes the summing up of individual activities difficult but allows the concurrent pursuit of contradictory initiatives. To illustrate, the EU supports the *Agenda 2063* flagship program on fostering African integration by establishing a continental free trade area. At the same time, it actively reaches out to individual African countries to negotiate special

economic partnership arrangements (EPAs),¹¹ which could undermine Africa’s continental integration. So far, most countries, which were approached, have shown reluctance to enter into such agreements. Of course, from an African perspective and the EU’s claim to aim at promoting Africa’s development, the EPA drive looks contradictory. However, when viewed from a European perspective, it can be seen as a well-targeted initiative aimed at moving toward the stated EU vision of an EU-AU-wide free trade zone.¹²

Similar contradictions appear to exist between the interventions aimed at “fostering investments, growth, and jobs” and those dealing with “policy dialogue and economic norm rollout.” Statistics show increasing levels of private investment in Africa have been accompanied by increasing inequality, limited job creation, and poverty reduction, as well as slow progress in terms of Africa’s moving up the value chain (see Clementi et al. 2019). Investments mobilized with EU’s and EU member states’ support seem to have done little to break this pattern (see Kappel and Reisen 2019). They thus call into question the notion that trade does more for development than aid. That could be so, provided, as past experience has shown, that the underlying growth model and the existing market-embedding policy frameworks guide private investments toward fostering inclusive and sustainable endogenous development. To create such coherence would require careful project selection and design so that publicly mobilized and guaranteed investments do not (if all goes well) just bring about any type of growth but growth that translates into inclusive and sustainable endogenous development. This precondition was, in the case of assistance facilitated by the EU and EU member states, evidently also not met.

Finally, what about mutuality of benefit? Certainly, many individual actors (e.g., persons, governmental entities, firms, and others) have in one way or the other benefitted from partnership activities. However, partnership documents and related policy statements tend to offer, if any, then only rather general ideas about the benefits the unions could derive from their partnering. Europe appears to be motivated by a mixture of publicly pronounced geopolitical, economic, and security considerations, aimed at maintaining and strengthening its position in the global order. Africa’s motivations for partnering with the EU seem to be more development-oriented. Therefore, in reflecting on AU-EU partnering and assessing it from a development perspective, some African analysts wonder whether, on the whole, the partnership facilitated or hindered Africa’s endogenous development.

⁹ For more information, see <https://www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au/agenda2063-first10yearimplementation.pdf/>.

¹⁰ For an overview of the projects, see <https://www.africa-eu-partnership.org/en/financial-support-partnership-programme/pan-african-programme>.

¹¹ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c973c81f-4bc5-11ea-8aa5-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-search/>.

¹² <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/eu-co-sibiu-stronger-global-actor.pdf>.

Considering the mixed and divergent motivations of the partners, the vagueness of the stated priority areas, and the missing partnership framework, the mutuality of benefit is perhaps a moot point – unnecessarily so, I would argue, because a more effective partnership could potentially have served both sides better in meeting their respective self-interests.

In sum, in addition to the previously mentioned deficiency, namely the gap between the partner-equality rhetoric and the partner-asymmetry reality, the preceding review reveals a second deficiency of past and current AU-EU partnering: elusive results and, consequently, elusive mutuality of benefit.

THE PROPOSED NEW COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY WITH AFRICA

In light of the foregoing discussion, it can be assumed that, at a minimum, a new partnership proposal would aim at correcting current shortcomings and entail more joint agency in the formulation of a new partnership proposal and pay greater attention to devising a coherent result-oriented partnership framework. As a careful perusal of the new document shows, it does neither.

As its predecessors did, the document presents a mere list of policy fields in which the EU might wish to engage with Africa. Most topics also figured in previous partnership agreements, now couched in slightly different terms and presented in a different order.

As regards joint agency, the document was presented to African partners at the 10th Commission-to-Commission meeting on February 27, 2020 in Addis Ababa, without prior consultation and only 10 days before it was submitted to the European Parliament and Council for their consideration. It seems the African partners merely added notes to the document.¹³ Where is the principle of partner equality in that? Nevertheless, neither the preparatory process nor the document's substance offer indications that future AU-EU partnerships will significantly be different from past and ongoing ones.

Notably, the document was issued in early March 2020. This was before the disruptive effects of the Covid-19 pandemic became more evident and better understood in terms of their potential reach and ramifications; and, likewise, before the recognition of “we are all in it together” began to settle in and policymakers began to explore and launch short and longer-term response measures.

For all these reasons and because extraordinary times require extraordinary solutions (as frequently

emphasized these days), now is certainly the time to press the reset button and begin a new era of AU-EU partnering.

GETTING READY TO PRESS THE RESET BUTTON

Before delving into how AU-EU partnering could function in the future, it is equally important to discuss how Covid-19 has already changed international cooperation and might further transform it in the post-pandemic era.

International Cooperation and Covid-19

A concept widely used lately is “global public goods” (GPGs). In a virtual meeting for the launch of the *Access to Covid-19 Tool Accelerator (ACT)* and convened by the World Health Organization (WHO) on April 24, 2020, political leaders, heads of international organizations, and philanthropies stated, “Covid-19 medical tools should be considered ‘global public goods’ and should be affordable, safe, effective, easily administered, and universally available for everyone, everywhere.”

The medical tools mentioned in this quote are essentially private goods – goods that are rival in consumption and not too difficult to be made excludable. This concept also holds true for any Covid-19 vaccine that may be discovered. These vaccines will be patented and taken out of the public domain, thereby restricting their access from the general public. After the vaccine has been injected into a human body, it will no longer be available for anyone else. This makes vaccine a private good: rival in consumption and excludable. Therefore, a deliberate and decisive political decision backed up by requisite money – a bulk-purchase campaign – is needed to make the vaccine, as well as other medical equipment global-public in consumption, namely, available for all.¹⁴

As long as there is no vaccine, the best way of prevention is to make protective clothing, masks, soap, water, and other needed items available free of charge or at affordable costs – paid for out of humanitarian or development assistance funds. The motivation for “donors” could be solidarity, rational self-interest, or both.

I predict that soon after a vaccine is on the market, the concept of GPGs will again be seldom used; scarce development assistance money will, perhaps initially, be used to buy vaccines for the poor; current support for suspension or cancellation of developing-country debt will wane; and since also many poorer people in richer countries will have suffered during the acute crisis years, there will be less public support for extending acts of solidarity and compas-

¹³ See https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_317/ and <https://au.int/en/speeches/20200227/statement-he-moussa-faki-mahamat-chairperson-african-union-commission-on-au-eu/>.

¹⁴ See https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/transcripts/transcript-who-actlaunch-24apr2020.pdf?sfvrsn=45977318_2.

sion, not to mention promotion of equity, beyond national borders.¹⁵

AU-EU Partnership Response Options

International cooperation could thus come under severe pressure in the post-Covid-19 era. Then how to make it work despite these constraints?

The key is to modernize the partnering modalities toward practicing (not just talking about) “partnering on equal footing.” This would imply: (1) respecting each other’s policymaking sovereignty, including divergence between partners’ preferences and priorities; (2) agreeing on clearly defined goals and targets, expected effects and impact, as well as partners’ respective basic commitments; (3) establishing rules of procedure and partnership governance arrangements, including procedures for joint decision-making, monitoring, and review. If these three conditions were met, there would be a good chance that mutuality of benefit would result.

Important, however, is to note that both partners would do their own calculations of the desired or expected financial and non-financial returns from partnering. These calculations of returns from partnering need to be distinguished from the cost/benefit analyses of particular partnership projects (e.g., for road construction or migration control). They would be rather rough and not necessarily public estimates of the political, economic, and other types of both the primary benefits and the co-benefits each partner expects to derive from the act of partnering. Partners’ willingness to stay engaged will indicate whether or not the expected benefits outweigh the transaction costs involved.

As conceptualized here, “partnering on an equal footing” is essentially an exchange (or trade) between public actors in public-policy products (e.g., funding exchanged against the asset of political goodwill, or promises of delivering “green growth” or “enhanced gender equality” exchanged against development funding). And, just as is the case in private-good markets, the challenge in these public-policy-product markets would be to get the “price” right – not to take the partner’s willingness to cooperate for granted but to devise attractive bargains.

In order to reflect on both the evolving global realities and their implications for international cooperation in general and AU-EU partnering in particular, extensive consultations will be required among all concerned on both sides and between the unions. This will surely take time.

Undoubtedly, there are pressing issues that require urgent attention and joint action as soon as possible. Therefore, at the next AU-EU summit event, leaders might consider pursuing, say, over the

next two years, two closely interlinked lines of partnering:

LINE 1 – Formulating a draft joint partnership program for the post-Covid-19 world: The AUC and EC could be requested to organize consultations on future AU-EU partnership within and between the two unions and jointly formulate a draft future partnership program to be submitted for consideration and decision-making by the leaders, perhaps at an extraordinary summit in 2022.

LINE 2 – Identifying policy challenges demanding partners’ immediate attention: Among the issues of pressing shared concern could be, for example, exploring areas of consensus on global policy challenges such as: a new issuance of special drawing rights; making use of the flexibilities foreseen in the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights; the implications of emerging shifts in global supply routes; needed changes in migration governance; and, of course, stimulating “green” growth.

Needless to say, both lines of partnering would benefit from close feedback links between them. And to start the new partnership era on equal footing, meetings could be co-chaired and background papers co-produced henceforth.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the past and current patterns of AU-EU partnering were examined to gather clues for how the union partnership will be taken to the “next level” in the coming years, as recently announced by the EC President. In brief, I conclude that a partnership reset is overdue. The global transformations in the pre-Covid-19 era, namely, the rising trend toward multipolarity and deepening policy interdependence among countries, will continue in the post-Covid-19 years. On top of that, more pressing challenges will inevitably emerge and will be more complex. On this account, policy effectiveness will exceptionally matter. For the future AU-EU partnership to work more effectively, a change in partnering modalities is required, namely, “partnering on equal footing,” defined here as partnering that is sovereignty-compatible and result-oriented with established procedures of decision-making, monitoring, and review. For the consideration of AU and EU leaders, two concrete reform steps were presented to be undertaken in parallel so that urgent challenges of shared concern can expeditiously be addressed through partnership initiatives. This can be attained while the two commissions undertake consultations on and jointly formulate their next partnership program at an extraordinary summit, perhaps to be held in 2022.

¹⁵ On the special provision challenges of GPGs, see, among others, Kaul (2017).

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