

Assessing Africa-Europe relations in the post-Cotonou horizon

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The Europe Africa needs in the 21st century

Nicolás Berlanga Martínez

It is difficult to identify the exact origin of the statement that says: "Agreements are made to be broken". When referring to Africa and Europe, things seem much simpler: the major agreements between the European Union (EU) and African countries represent a declaration of core principles. Most of them represent a positive culture that promotes concerted responses to today's main challenges in international relations (what we call "multilateralism"). But "the devil is in the details", and the details are normally negotiated after the big principles are decided. They also evolve over time.

In this regard, the Cotonou Agreement from the early 21st century constituted the most progressive common agenda forged between two continents at the time, perhaps unsurpassed by any document to date. The new follow-up agreement, which has been negotiated, but not yet signed and ratified, draws heavily from this text. It also reflects the geostrategic changes that have taken place in recent decades, introducing subtle differences into the parties' values and interests. It remains, however, a balanced and positive document that leaves sufficient scope for negotiating the major issues in what will doubtlessly be a complex implementation process.

Though cursory, it should be noted that predicting what will occur on the African continent in the next five or ten years is a complex endeavour: Will neighbours in the Maghreb find common ground for agreements? Will North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa tighten their relations? To what extent will jihadism infect the lives of the people in the Sahel region and the Gulf of Guinea? Will Nigeria finally succeed in representing one single country, or will its geographical, ethnic and social inequalities mire the nation in conflict? How will the transitions be handled in autocratic Central African countries governed by ageing leaders? Will the transition in Sudan prosper? Will Ethiopian leaders learn to reconcile their differences through dialogue? Will Somalia find the stability its entrepreneurs need to give people hope? Can South Africa and Southern African nations transmit a culture of inclusive development that brings hope and example to the rest of the continent?

Without mentioning the ongoing technological revolution, the booming youth population that is inundating African societies, and an urbanisation trend which threatens the environment, the provision of decent basic social services and the post-COVID world which adds yet another health priority to those that already exist, etc.

Contrary to popular belief, addressing sensitive issues and differences through dialogue creates a common space in which all parties may coexist

Europe has also changed since the signing of the Cotonou Agreement. Its members now include Eastern and Baltic states, and the United Kingdom is no longer part of the club. European institutions continue to encounter the same difficulties when drafting agreements, compounded by the challenges of the present: the joint management of migratory flows; stemming the consequences of the two major economic crises, the sub-prime market crash and the pandemic; the rise of protectionist sentiment in political discussion, in which the neighbours to the south are regarded with suspicion, etc.

In this context, the lengthy negotiations required to strike an agreement result in stability between partners, contrary to popular belief. Addressing sensitive issues and differences through dialogue creates a common space in which all parties may coexist. Can you name another of Africa's major partners that goes to such lengths, as well as transparently and on the record? Beyond the declarations that follow bilateral summits, the glitzy

announcements made in the face of difficulties, the numbers promised in major projects, etc., the economic, social and cultural affinity in the relations between Africa and the EU opens up spaces which make it possible to build policies between the two continents.

Even in the delicate terrain of migration, beneath the doom and gloom headlines, the cooperative spirit of most of our States and societies trumps the fearmongering and repudiation of the few. Particularly in the period since 2015, there has been a series of conversations and initiatives (the Rabat Process and Khartoum Process, the Joint Valletta Action Plan, the Trust Fund for Africa, etc.) that have escaped the front pages, ever prone to short-term hysteria, and have provided solutions (albeit, partial) to a complex phenomenon fraught with, inter alia, governance problems, inequality, misinformation, illicit trafficking, exploitation and populism. All the while without neglecting the daily tragedies unfolding in the Mediterranean, in Libya, on the Atlantic seaboard along the coast of the Canary Islands. As well as on the mass repatriations of African citizens from Gulf countries and Israel, and the pockets of racism against foreigners in Africa's Southern Cone.

The major agreements between Africa and Europe also lay bare the weaknesses. In this regard, a light must be shone on the internal shortcomings of both sides. The EU shows the challenges of reaching a consensus when decisions, more instrumental than sovereignty-related, require the unanimity of all Member States. The attractive model of regional integration that we represent cracks in the face of repeated differences. On the other hand, Africa's scales have been tilted, perhaps excessively so, towards the individual interests of the States, as opposed to the pressing need for regional and continental ownership through its institutions: the Regional Economic Communities and the African Union. Both Europe and Africa are forced to observe Euro-African agreements through the prism of other partners beyond both sides of the Mediterranean; partners that either impose their own circumstances or tweak values and interests through specific conditions. The most glaring examples include the fixed-gear developmental model from the East and the security-based model from the other side of the Atlantic. While both prove attractive to certain African leaders, they clearly involve less ambition than attempts to give civil society a voice, combat gender inequality and promote respect for the environment as Euro-African dialogue does.

Looking to the future, there are at least four pillars of our vision for a common destiny that demand a basic consensus between Africans and Europeans.

- In an institutional sense, we Europeans must continue to place our faith in African organisations -perhaps against all prognostics- and in the long-term benefits of important intra-African agreements, like the one that advocates turning the African continent into one massive free-trade zone. It is a well-known fact that many of the borders separating African countries were carved out without prior agreement from the people who defined them; yet now, more than sixty years after independence, efforts must focus not on consolidating borders, but on ways of rendering them irrelevant.
- In matters of peace and security, the people of Africa are asking us for financial

support to deal with their own conflicts. The security situation in the Sahel region is particularly concerning, and not only for the countries involved, but also for us. The entire Horn of Africa is currently in the red, with the healthy exception of Kenya. The banks of Lake Chad and the Central African Republic provide the occasional jolt to remind us just how fragile we are in the face of terrorism and barbarism. Some partners, such as Russia and the Persian Gulf countries, interject themselves into the solution in a poorly transparent, unsustainable and wholly uncooperative manner. African solutions to conflicts in Africa are a litmus test for its leaders: wherever commitment and transparent leadership bolsters the rule of law and legality, the European Union must contribute to solutions.

- There is a firm conviction on both sides of the Mediterranean regarding the need to scale up investment and the creation of jobs. In my opinion, the main impediments to this are the legal uncertainty and the imprudent use of public goods by certain leaders, which go hand in hand with the corrupt practices by some multinationals and partners. The European Union takes time to mobilise its means to meet this challenge, which requires not only money, but also legal reforms, the division of powers and vocational training that delivers the benefits everyone expects.
- And lastly, culture and heritage. Africa cannot be built by turning its back to the past. In Europe, the cultural industry creates more jobs than the automotive industry. The fastest growing African nations are not those with the most natural resources, but those which have made the greatest headway in the service sector. As in the issue of borders, arguments surrounding the restitution of cultural assets may be averted without complications through partnerships, the twinning of initiatives and joint projects which blur the concept of ownership and highlight the mutual, economic and knowledge-based benefits.

In short, the agreement forged between our two continents should reflect our points of convergence, and do so in a process that gives time and space for negotiation and debate. While the signature and ratification process may prove rocky, it is unlikely to change the final outcome, inspired in decades of joint efforts and the increasing intermingling of our societies due not only to immigration, but also an upsurge in exchanges between citizens, which new technologies have only served to reinforce.

What is Africa asking from the European Union?

Viviane Ogou Corbi

It is challenging to respond to what Africa asks the European Union (EU), as there is no such a thing like a politically united Africa who with one voice channels its petitions to the EU. Despite the African Union (AU) adopting the African Common position [1] for the post-2020 negotiations, it cannot speak yet for its 55 member States and its billion citizens as the political union is in the making.

Almost twenty-two years after the signature of the Cotonou Agreements, there has been a reconfiguration of the global order which is heralding a new emancipatory process in Africa. The emergence of new global players—and the fragmentation of the traditional potencies—has offered the continent more options to decide with whom to associate with. As a result, the European Union is promoting a strategic shift in the relations with its neighbours and the sub-Saharan countries visible at the course of the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) states long-lasting negotiations.

Apart from the terms discussed between the officials, there are petitions addressed to the governments of the member states. Also, there exist demands voiced by the civil society, both in the continent and the diaspora, which are—and will continue to be—growing in the public debate. This article will summarise six of the key petitions Africa and its citizens have for Europe.

1. New foundations for the EU-Africa relations

The AU is developing a complex institutional architecture and bridging policymakers to advance towards a united and developed Africa. Despite its funding shortage and constitutional limitations, the Union has achieved three key milestones: agreeing upon its own development agenda, building the structure and action plan for a free trade area, and negotiating the legal axis of the EU-Africa relations. This reflects the objectives of the AU of supporting its member States to leave the donor-recipient relations and be considered an effective mediator and global player while contributing to build the self-development capacity of its member states.

In this process, Africa expects Europe to be a respectful partner and to limit interference in internal affairs. The AU considers that the best manner to advance in peacebuilding, economic development, or technological transition among others, is to build a mature multilateral political dialogue. Therefore, it welcomes the establishment of permanent negotiation spaces to deal with the everyday challenges.

2. Respect for an afro-centred vision of the world

African intellectuals and policymakers want to build institutions, end wars, and activate economies according to an afro-centred vision of the world. Africa wants to build its measure of success and rules, something complex in a globe tailor-made by the West. Africa asks the space to try and err according to its cosmologies, traditions, indigenous knowledge, and history. This is feasible in art, music, or architecture; difficult when referred to justice models, peacemaking, or the centrality of the AU in some crisis; but

highly controversial when it comes to international criminal justice, sexual orientation, identity, and the death penalty. As put by M. Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairperson of the African Union Commission, “Only the recognition and acceptance of these differences, the language of frankness, will allow us to remove the obstacles that may hinder our cooperation” [2].

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The continent has probably already found the keys to its development and security. Nonetheless, the thousands of initiatives that can catalyse social change across the regions do not have competitive access to EU funding due to their lack of expertise and structure to comply with EU funding requirements. Therefore, most aid funding is directed to big Western NGOs [3] that do not always understand the realities and needs of the communities as good as local organisations. The key to success in peacebuilding is in the local changemakers, as Séverine Auteserre puts it in *The Frontlines of Peace*. Africa is asking Europe to facilitate funding to this small local organisations to solve its problems. In addition, the continent needs support to leave the macro-development paradigms and focus on endogenous development [4].

3. The reduction of asymmetries in trade relations

Critics say that after sixty years of independence, the relations between Europe and Africa have not facilitated the continents’ industrialization. Therefore, Africa wants to diversify its production, its buyers, and its sellers. Africa wants competitive industries and prices, and to offer its own customers a variety of affordable supplies and commodities. Key focus of AU for ACP negotiations were to reduce commodity export dependence and to increase the promotion of local production, as foreseen by the African Continental Free Trade Area agreement. To do so, it is asking Europe to promote investment in diversification, and to assist in the acquittance of the necessary skill sets and the transition towards green digital economies [5]. It also demands the recognition of the asymmetries in their trade relations—built as if they were equal partners when they are not—so to develop an economic alliance aligned with African needs for effective development.

4. Generous migration frameworks

African states call for more generous migration frameworks, with legal pathways and re-admission for failed asylum seekers and economic migrants [6]. The continent’s interests regarding extra-continental migration are not aligned with EU interests. Why? The first reason is that the constituencies of the African governments are the migrants. Agreed

returns are politically difficult for these governments, who can find contestation after signing non-voluntary return agreements. Secondly, migrant remittances add US \$32 billion dollars to their economies, while development assistance only account for US\$50 million [7]. The AU defends returns shall be voluntary [8] and ask the EU not to use development cooperation to negotiate border controls [9].

In addition, African citizens, the African diaspora, and African descendants' demand: respect of the human rights of their communities, decent working conditions, the end of racism and the recognition of the contribution of African migrants to Europe. The African diaspora finds itself unprotected in the countries of destination, working under challenging conditions, being targeted by far-right parties, and finding structural barriers to access opportunities. Africans are also asking for fair and equal treatment for them and their descendants.

5. Climate justice

Africa's contribution to greenhouse emissions is only 4%, yet the socio-economic development, peace and security of the continent is threatened by the climate crisis. Africa asks Europe to recognize its unique needs and circumstances by addressing its responsibilities, especially, cutting emissions and financing climate adaptation and technology transfer, and the application of the accorded mechanisms by the Paris Agreements [10].

6. Recognition, restitution, restoration and reparation

The African civil society and diasporas demand justice and the recognition of all acts of slavery, colonialism, apartheid, and holocaust towards the black population. The key claims are to retribute deprived properties and repair the damage resulting from the development of racist social and economic systems that have positioned African people as inferiors while using them as an engine of Western development with no recognition nor reward. Africans are asking justice for these events and its resultant structural inequalities.

On the positive side, African people have had a key role in human development even though it is not recognised at the compendiums of global history. From the development of universities or the role of African soldiers at the World Wars, to the current contributions to arts or science. New narratives about the continent and their people shall come to refund the relations. New narratives, not only about the past but also about the current African affairs: growing economies, intellectual urban youth, outstanding women entrepreneurs... It is fundamental to inform accurately about Africa and its people to build mental frameworks that permit improving the intercontinental dynamics.

In conclusion: win-win relations

This list is not *numerus clausus* but on the contrary, an open list that could be

disaggregated into the demands of numerous actors and added to other critical topics that do not fit in a thousand words. The weight of history still affects modern relations between continents, so Africa is asking Europe to transform the paradigms that are still driving parts of their interaction, to build win-win relations and advance towards a mature continent-to-continent political dialogue. At the same time, Africa wants to strengthen the most positive parts of their partnership to ensure the best of a natural alliance that can cope with common challenges and jointly contribute to building prosperous, inclusive, and sustainable regions. Definitively, African voices speak up with a shared vision: equalitarian, equitable, respectful, symmetrical, interdependent, and fair relations between African and Europe.

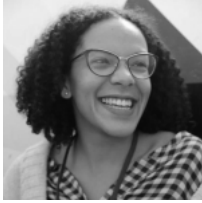
These articles express personal opinions, which under no circumstances may be attributed to the institutions where its authors develop their professional activities.

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