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The ownership principle and the EU development statement on Africa

Florent Sebban

Florent Sebban is a policy advisor to European Solidarity Towards Equal Participation of People (Eurostep), a network of European NGOs working towards world peace, justice and equality

AS VOICES against the unilateral and unfair world order are increasingly being heard across the globe, one may wonder whether Europe is, or will soon be, in a position to play a constructive role in setting the basis for a world free of injustice, in which all human rights are promoted, women are empowered, and the environment is protected. One may wonder whether Europeans will be putting their historic responsibility towards the African continent at the heart of their relations with the rest of the world.

These questions are not easy to answer, particularly as there seem to be so many question marks on the future of the European project. Indeed, while economic co-operation among Europeans in the past 60 years has allowed them to stop wars between big powers on their own continent, its citizens are now expecting more than a common market. The role that Europe should play in the world is therefore at the centre of discussions on the future of the EU (Eurostep nd).

Turning Europe into a socially and environmentally responsible continent, willing to use its power and resources to make the world fairer, seems to be a key expectation among its citizens. Indeed, the impressive citizens' response to the South Asian tsunami, the huge mobilisation in almost all European countries around the Global Call for Action Against Poverty in 2005, and most opinion polls (European Commission 2005) underline very clearly the importance given by EU citizens to the fight against global injustices.

As a consequence, European leaders understood the need to turn Europe into a champion of North-South solidarity to get support from their citizens. They responded by making new commitments on aid and debt relief in advance of the millennium summit in the first half of 2005. They have also agreed on a special focus on aid to Africa.

Can Europe make a difference?

However, there seems to be little progress on the millennium development goals (MDGs), particularly in Africa. International politics continue to be decided in the north, to serve northern interests. One can therefore wonder whether Europe will really deliver on its commitments to make the world fairer by helping Africa reach the MDGs.

There are high expectations in Europe and in Africa, and in other parts of the world, of Europe transforming the promises it made in 2005 into concrete actions that will contribute to social justice and sustainable development. Failure to deliver will increase mistrust in the European project, and public policies in general, among European citizens. It might also bring further insecurity, as the poor in Africa and elsewhere will not wait quietly for ever.

The policy framework for EU co-operation with Africa has changed following the September 2005 world summit, with the adoption of a new joint statement on development

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policy – the European Consensus on Development (European Parliament et al 2005) – and a specific strategy for Africa (Council of the European Union 2005).

This policy brief therefore aims at assessing whether these new documents set the right framework to rebalance the partnership between the EU and Africa, so that significant progress can be reached on the MDGs in the coming years.

A new consensus on development policy

The previous statement on the development policy of the European Community (EC) had been adopted in 2000. The new commissioner for development co-operation, Louis Michel, launched a review of this statement to take the 2005 situation better into account. He identified the need for a new statement to strengthen the emphasis on the MDGs (absent from the 2000 statement), and to reflect the new focus on security since 11 September 2001. This new statement is the European Consensus on Development, which will now guide Europe's relations with developing countries. In the case of Africa, it will serve as one of the key policy bases to define the priorities of EC aid under the tenth European Development Fund (EDF). What are its key elements?

Co-ordinating action

While the previous statement was limited to the development policy of the European Commission, the European Consensus includes principles that apply to both the commission's aid programmes and the bilateral programmes of the 25 EU member states. This is a step forward, which will hopefully lead to closer co-ordination in the field for the benefit of recipient countries. In addition to the general principles applying to the European Commission and the member states, the European Consensus defines the detailed sectors on which the commission programme will focus.

Broadening coverage

The European Consensus covers all developing countries according to the latest list adopted by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This is a very important clarification, which should contribute to moving the EU away from its short-term foreign-policy interests in its relations with specific countries in Asia and Latin America, or in its neighbourhood. This means that any approach to the African continent will have to be guided by the development principles set in the European Consensus.

Strengthening poverty eradication

The new statement reaffirms that the overarching objective of EU development policy is the 'eradication of poverty in the context of sustainable development, including pursuit of the MDGs'. While issues of security are often brought to the table, either by EU heads of states or within the European Commission, this affirmation brings clarity to the issue of what the EU offers to developing countries. This overarching objective means that all the activities undertaken by both the member states and the commission in developing countries should, in theory, contribute to the eradication of poverty. While we are far from this situation in practice, the European Consensus will strengthen the position of those advocating for a stronger focus on the MDGs in Africa.

Good governance, for whom?

The specific objectives of European Commission aid, as defined in the second part of the European Consensus, acknowledge the need to contribute to the overall objective of poverty eradication, but they do so while affirming the importance that should be given to good governance in European Commission programmes. This is unfortunate, given the lack of clarity that remains on the term 'good governance'. Indeed, while some would limit it to transparency, accountability vis à vis the citizens, and the independence of the judicial system, the European Commission seems to have a much broader definition than this. The European executive body has drafted a governance profile to assess developing countries' performance. It includes indicators on the economy (market openness, favourable investment climate) and on security (the fight against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction), and it is currently looking at how to include indicators linked to migration. These conditionalities hidden behind the word 'governance' might become real threats to the principles of ownership and partnership also defined in the European Consensus.

Making ownership and participation real

The Cotonou agreement, signed in 2000 among EU and African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) states, defines the key principles of ownership, partnership, and participation as fundamental to the relations between Europe and the ACP states. These principles should materialise into a focus on the equality of the partners, the ownership of the development strategies by the partner country, and the participation of all sectors of the society in these strategies. They allow Europe to provide ACP countries with much more than aid money. They set the basis for a true partnership, in which African countries remain the owners of their development strategies.

Fortunately, these principles have also been included as common principles guiding development activities of EU member states and the European Commission within the European Consensus. However, one should now work very hard to make sure that they do not stay on paper only. Indeed, the ownership principle is a very interesting concept, which is rarely followed by the commission. The focus on the fight against the mention of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the revision of the Cotonou agreement in 2005 despite strong opposition from the ACP states, illustrates how ownership can often remain no more than a nice word on paper. The encouraging strong political weight given to the new European Consensus should help in making ownership a reality. This also applies to the participation of civil society, which has been identified as a key feature of the Cotonou agreement, but without leading to really consistent efforts to include civil society actors in defining the priorities of EC aid in the ACP states. The European Consensus should help the EU deliver on these principles.

Delivery needed on gender equality

Various officials from the European Commission now agree that the inclusion of gender issues in the commission development programmes has been a marked failure. Strategies to eradicate poverty cannot succeed without the effective promotion of gender equality, and this must be reflected in the EU's co-operation with developing countries. The European Consensus defines gender equality as a cross-cutting issue that must be mainstreamed in EU development policies. It goes further than the previous statement by making gender equality one of the key common principles (alongside ownership and participation) that should guide Europe's development activities. This is a step forward that must lead to a change of approach within the European institutions. Europe now needs to deliver on gender equality by ensuring that the policy, programming, implementation, and evaluation stages of its assistance to developing countries consistently and systematically address gender issues. It must recognise the specific vulnerability of women in conflict situations, as well as the unique role they can play as positive agents of change in society.

Aligning policies and development objectives

Making European policies (on agriculture, trade, fisheries, etc) coherent with development objectives, when these policies have an impact on developing countries, is a long-stated principle in European treaties (Maastricht 1992). However, it has never been a reality. For instance, agricultural export subsidies to European farmers continue to allow cheap European products to ruin small farming in the ACP states, thus presenting real obstacles to the achievement of the MDGs in Africa. While the wording on coherence is not worse in the European Consensus than in previous treaties or political statements, one could have hoped for stronger wording to ensure more coherence. Indeed, the European Consensus includes nice words on coherence – but frozen European chickens are still arriving on the markets in Cameroon at a cheaper price than local production can achieve. The wording is therefore disappointing, and one can hope that Europeans will find another way to increase their political will to change the policies that impact on developing countries. Otherwise they will not deliver on the promises made in 2005.

One can conclude that the European Consensus offers interesting improvements to Europe's general approach to development co-operation. Europe's own short-term economic and security priorities, however, can still be felt in certain sections of the statement. It is hence vital to look at other documents that might have an impact on the political framework for co-operation between Europe and its developing partners. In the case of Africa, the newly adopted strategy for Africa is likely to have an influence on what Europe offers to people living in poverty on the African continent.

The new strategy for Africa: Europe first?

The relationship between Europe and Africa has been guided since 2000 by the ACP–EU Cotonou agreement, which provides the official legal framework for interactions between countries in Africa and the EU. Signed by both ACP and EU states, it establishes the basis for a balanced partnership in which ACP states' ownership of their development strategies is a fundamental principle. This agreement will not expire until 2020. As the legal framework it establishes is complemented by the policy framework established in the European Consensus, one can question the value of adding a specific strategy for Africa.

Little ownership: The strategy for Africa has been adopted by European heads of states, following a proposal from the

European Commission. It was not discussed with Africans before its adoption; it is a European strategy for Africa, and not a Europe–Africa strategy. So, while the principle of ownership is mentioned in the strategy, the process that led its adoption already says a lot about the way in which Europeans see the implementation of this principle. Moreover, while ownership is central to the Cotonou agreement, the strategy for Africa is structured around five main themes, identified by Europeans only:

- peace and security;
- human rights and governance;
- development assistance;
- sustainable economic growth, regional integration, and trade; and
- investing in people.

Little focus on the MDGs: While the MDGs are central to the European Consensus, it is very difficult to find a focus on these objectives in the strategy for Africa. European aid increases to Africa are mentioned in the strategy. However, there is little focus on how that aid will contribute to achieving the MDGs. Furthermore, the current discussions on the tenth European Development Fund (EDF) highlight how European member states are imposing stipulations on the way in which ACP states should use EDF money, initially granted for the fight against poverty and the achievement of sustainable development. Following demands from Europeans, and despite opposition from the ACP states, a significant share of the EDF will be used for non-development expenditures such as the peace facility in Africa, European overseas countries and territories, or adjustment costs to make the economic partnership agreements (EPAs) acceptable to ACP countries. The lack of focus on the MDGs in the strategy for Africa does give some legitimacy to that kind of diversion of aid.

Pushing for trade liberalisation: Despite real opposition to the EPAs, criticism from a number of ACP countries, and the success of the StopEpa campaign (www.stopepa.org), Europeans are using this strategy as one more way to push for the establishment of free-trade areas between the EU and various ACP regions. The reciprocal market access Europeans are demanding through the EPAs is a radical change, compared to the EU's history of preferential trade agreements for ACPs. This defies understanding in the ACP countries and in Europe. The alternatives to EPAs clearly underlined in the Cotonou agreement are not even mentioned in the strategy for Africa, at a time when ACP negotiators are increasingly demanding them. Neo-liberal views within the European Commission and in certain member states might be influencing this strategy to continue imposing EPAs on countries that do not want them, completely neglecting the binding ownership and partnership principles of the Cotonou agreement.

Governance: The focus on good governance in the strategy for Africa is inappropriate, given the fact that the European Commission is increasingly using governance to drive aid away from the MDGs. Indeed, the commission is now bargaining, in the context of the tenth EDF, to grant part of its aid to ACP countries only if they fulfil certain governance criteria. These criteria include increased market liberalisation, and a focus on short-term security measures, such as the fight against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The commission is currently considering adding criteria linked to the repatriation of migrants in Africa. Any new European commitment to governance should aim to rebalance the partnership between the EU and Third World countries, and specifically the partnership between Europe and Africa, to ensure that African concerns are central to this process. Governance problems in Europe and in Africa are too important to be used to promote specific European short-term economic and security interests. The dialogue must include an exchange on European governance issues, for example, in relation to the delivery and coherence of aid. This is not what is proposed in the strategy for Africa.

European leaders therefore seem to be champions at making nice-sounding aid promises, and talking about ownership. However, the process used for adopting the strategy for Africa, and the strategy itself, underline how economic and foreign-policy priorities are often being placed way above social justice and global environmental sustainability. While the European Consensus provides interesting elements for Europe to deliver on its MDG commitments, a great deal remains to be done, and for this, the strategy for Africa will not help.

Supporting development in Africa

The following would contribute to reaffirming Europe's commitment to a fairer world, and to sustainable development on the African continent:

Aid

- providing aid funding to African countries to support their own development and governance model, instead of imposing aid that contributes to Europe's short-term economic and security interests;

- ensuring that the tenth EDF focuses on human and social development, in particular basic education, basic health, HIV/AIDS, sexual and reproductive health, basic water and sanitation, and the environment within a framework that actively promotes gender equality;
- guaranteeing that the priorities of EC aid to ACP countries under the next EDF reflect the views of all segments of ACP societies;
- ensuring that the policy, programming, implementation, and evaluation stages of the EC's assistance to Africa consistently and systematically address gender issues; and
- developing and promoting innovative sources of financing development (for example, taxation mechanisms).

Trade

- rejecting the use of bilateral and regional trade agreements (for example, EPAs) to force sweeping liberalisation measures in exchange for limited market access;
- refusing to make EDF funding conditional on signing an EPA; and
- recognising the right of developing countries to protect their markets.

More balanced partnership

- guaranteeing that the agenda of the Africa–Europe partnership is set jointly, and that nothing is being imposed on African people;
- taking a much more modest approach to the debate on governance, respecting the fact that governance models are specific from country to country, and that the European model is not necessarily the best one; and
- arguing in favour of a stronger representation of African interests within international institutions (UN, World Bank, IMF, and OECD) and in the context of the WTO.

Europe is itself going through a difficult period. It should therefore be respectful in its approach to the partnership with Africa. Europe has lots to learn and Africa lots to teach.

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Institute for Global Dialogue

Block 12, Thornhill Office Park, Bekker Street,
Vorna Valley, Midrand, South Africa
PO Box 32571, Braamfontein 2017, South Africa
Tel +2711 315 1299
Fax +2711 315 2149
Email info@igd.org.za · Web www.igd.org.za

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