



Lessons Learned from the 5th AU-EU Summit

Despite the abundance of media coverage, it is increasingly clear that the Summit failed to deliver on several fronts. The relationship between Europe and Africa is historic and unique, but with China, Saudi Arabia and other actors stepping up their political and financial presence on the continent, African leaders may find it easier to make new friends than to keep old ones.

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At the close of 2017, the much anticipated fifth African Union-European Union (AU-EU) Summit in Abidjan brought together over 60 Heads of State from both continents, offering the promise of a renewed AU-EU Partnership. Held every three years since 2000, the Summit has become a staple of the partnership between Africa and Europe, allowing leaders to agree on priorities and develop joint action plans. This year notably marked the very first time that the AU represented African states at the Summit, following Morocco's recent move to rejoin the bloc.

Yet despite the abundance of media coverage, tweets, and photo ops, it is increasingly clear that the Summit failed to deliver on several fronts. Besides a controversial, ad-hoc declaration to address the humanitarian emergency in Libya,¹ leaders agreed to few

¹ African Union- European Union Summit. Joint Statement on the Migration Situation in Libya. 2017. <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31871/33437-pr-libya20statement20283020nov2010.pdf>

commitments in the final declaration. Furthermore, the negotiation process also revealed a concerning level of dysfunction and disaccord that may have lasting ramifications on future relations. This document was only released nearly a week after the Summit, due to a dispute on the language surrounding migration.

Equally concerning was the near blanket ban on civil society organization participation. CSOs were not allowed any accreditation to the Summit, and when several organizations attempted to hold their own parallel summit in Abidjan, police forcibly dispersed them. Furthermore, the one organization that was allotted a two-minute speech in the plenary to present the AU-EU Civil Society declaration was eventually barred from speaking, allegedly at the request of African delegations.²

EU officials, including Commissioner Mimica, have decried the treatment of CSOs at the Summit as regrettable, but their treatment reflects an accurate picture of shrinking space for civil society in many African countries.³ If brazen disregard for civil society participation is widely viewed as acceptable on the highest, most public stage of AU-EU cooperation, it sets a dangerous precedent for authorities to be even more repressive in their national jurisdictions.

Negotiation Hurdles:

While the Summit only took place over the course of two days, and consisted of a packed schedule of side events, plenary hearings, bilateral meetings, the political implications of the Summit's lengthy planning will last much longer. In the months leading up to the Summit, the European External Action Service and the African Union Commission painstakingly negotiated and revised the text, and the difficult process exposed several institutional deficiencies and deep-seated tensions that may jeopardize discussions on a post-Cotonou Agreement.

The tumultuous nature of the negotiations began in the earliest stages of planning. As the bloc hosting the Summit this year, the AU expected a large degree of liberty determining the structure and priorities of the final summit and declaration, whereas the EU expected an equal say. The AU privately expressed their dissatisfaction with the EU's unwillingness to commit new funding to a renewed partnership, which reduced political buy-in from African leaders who felt there was little to gain from the entire process. As negotiations continued, frustration grew on both sides due to missed deadlines and lack of willingness to compromise.

The process revealed a striking divergence in political agendas that prevented leaders from agreeing on shared priorities. AU leaders initially sought to prioritize regional economic integration and put forth a range of programs that could be financially supported by EU leaders. Conversely, the EU pushed for more focus on migration management and made clear that its financial contribution would be made in the form of its new External Investment Plan, which will drive private sector growth through blending and risk-sharing instruments. The negotiations also revealed internal divisions between the African leaders over issues

² Devex. Civil Society Organizations Protest Exclusion from AU-EU Summit. 2017.

<https://www.devex.com/news/civil-society-organizations-protest-exclusion-from-au-eu-summit-91737>

³ <https://twitter.com/MimicaEU/status/937994443130535936>

related to governance and human rights, which the African Union Commission was not able to effectively mediate.

Communique Divisions:

At the Summit, divisions over the communique continued as African and EU leaders pushed to explicitly condemn the slavery situation in Libya, following the publication of a CNN video allegedly showing slaves at auction. The Egyptian, Libyan governments fiercely protested naming Libya by name, and instead called for a general condemnation of slavery. The finalized emergency Joint Statement largely provides for voluntary repatriation of migrants, demonstrating both lack of concern and the absence of a cohesive long-term strategy.

Another issue that drew division between African states was the inclusion of a provision that condemns discrimination against LGBTI persons. According to South African officials, Zimbabwe and Egypt opposed this clause with the explanation that LGBTI people are “not minorities, they are deviants.”⁴

In the end, the final political declaration starkly reflects sharply divided opinions, with the text stripped down to broad agreements to improve general cooperation, without any commitments to concrete projects or financing. Instead, leaders kicked the can further down the road and agreed to *“develop an action plan, within three months of adoption of this declaration, which would involve them holding working level meetings to identify projects and programs within the AU-EU Joint Priority areas of cooperation that both sides agree to implement.”*⁵

Similarly, no deal was struck on a proposed Memorandum of Understanding for peace and security, which was postponed to *“as soon as possible.”* The agreed text reads, *“we recognise the need to strengthen the relationship between the AU and EU and agree on the principle of developing as soon as possible a framework document which will put our partnership on peace and security on a more solid and structured basis.”* With no set time frame to move this forward, this appears to be a missed opportunity to improve coordination and financing to address rising violent extremism and political violence.

The declaration also lacks an accountability mechanism, and rather relies on general commitments to, *“strengthen cooperation,” “build on results,” “increase our efforts,”* and *“develop innovative actions.”* It is clear that without measurable benchmarks or quantifiable targets, these types of promise will do very little to spur meaningful action, or tangibly influence relations between the two continents.

What Equal Partnership?

Unfortunately, the Summit proved that true cooperation and equal partnership between the two continents is far from becoming a reality. As Crisis Group’s Elissa Jobson accurately points out, the economic disparity alone provides clues to the gravity of the situation: “The

⁴ Daily Maverick. AU-EU Summit: European Countries Blocking the Migration of Africans Blamed for Rise in Slavery. 2017. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-11-29-aeu-summit-european-countries-blocking-the-migration-of-africans-blamed-for-rise-in-slavery/>

⁵ African Union. Final Declaration: Investing in Youth for Accelerated Inclusive Growth. 2017. <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20171207/final-declaration-investing-youth-accelerated-inclusive-growth-and>

EU's 28 states boast a GDP of \$17 trillion, seven times the \$2.39 trillion generated annually by the 55 AU members.⁶ While both blocs have clear political goals and priorities, there is an obvious imbalance of economic and political power that is deeply rooted in post-colonial frustration.

On one hand, the EU and Member States are frustrated by their perceived lack of cooperation from African partners. Commissioner Mimica and other EU leaders explain that EU leaders feel as if they are being used as a cash machine. As a result, cooperation-based conditionalities are becoming more and more popular in discussions in Brussels, where aid is given on the condition that it achieves EU political priorities like managing migration flows. If any future partnership between the EU and Africa is to succeed, the EU must avoid colonial-era, transactional relationships, and instead build partnerships based on shared interests.

On the other hand, it is increasingly clear that the AU is in need of institutional reforms to drastically improve its capacity and efficiency. In order to serve as a balanced, political counterweight to the EU, the AU must be able to provide a clear, united message of its members' priorities. This requires extensive mediation, intra-African political dialogue, and stronger relations with the regional economic communities throughout the continent.

Conclusion:

Ideally, the AU-EU Summit was the perfect opportunity to negotiate a new, efficient system to manage migratory flows, with particular emphasis on strengthening intra-Africa migration for stronger regional economic cooperation. Yet instead of a comprehensive long-term solution rooted in development principles, leaders delivered a weak, short-term fix for the humanitarian crisis in Libya. In order for leaders to negotiate a truly forward-thinking system, both sides must clearly delineate their strategic priorities and agree on common goals.

If leaders should learn one thing from the fifth AU-EU Summit, it is that a true partnership is more than empty rhetoric, and both sides need to come prepared with measurable strategies and solutions for how each partner can strengthen the other. Realistically, this may require more political will and ambition than is readily available. The relationship between Europe and Africa is historic and unique, but with China, Saudi Arabia and other actors stepping up their political and financial presence on the continent, African leaders may find it easier to make new friends than to keep old ones.

⁶ Elissa Jobson. EU's Desire to Contain Migration is Africa's Opportunity. 2017. <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-migration-africa-migration-african-union-eu-desire-to-contain-migration-is-opportunity/>