

A NEW NARRATIVE ABOUT THE AFRICA-EUROPE PARTNERSHIP

In the High Level Group on the Africa-Europe Partnership, the outline of a roadmap towards such a fair and equitable partnership has been discussed. But it is generally believed that the technocratic approach is not enough, there needs to be a joint new narrative about their past interactions.

Why this is needed

The time is ripe to finally put away with the old colonial narratives and to propose a new one, based on the actual realities of economic, cultural and political interchanges between the two continents. Their interactions go back to the Roman Empire and have continued, with the vicissitudes of history, until the early 19th century. However, global economic developments, and also climate change, had weakened African states to the point that they became easy victims for European armies. To justify this, a historically false narrative was developed.

Today, the key role of science and technology in the modern economy requires free trade in order to fully benefit from comparative advantages and necessary scale. Therefore the USA nudged the European states after the devastation of their economies during the second world war towards a common market. This was the basic idea of the Marshall Plan. An accompanying narrative was developed to ensure social acceptance and a new way of thinking as the basis for openness and cooperation on the basis of equality between hitherto fully sovereign states.

When supporting the African Agenda 2063 and its key initiative of a Common Free Trade Area, Europe should learn from its own successful experience, which brought again welfare to its peoples, and operate similarly. The EU needs a holistic and coherent approach to support this goal, backed up by sufficient and efficient funding. However, the proposal for *a Partnership between the EU and the AU equally needs an accompanying narrative*, after the devastation of African economies in the previous centuries, to serve as the basis for new way of thinking between the two continents.

To give the proposed Partnership a basis in the minds, a joint effort must be made to develop this new narrative and to finally put away the remnants of the old.

Unequal relations and the development concept

In the Treaty of Rome (1957), setting up the EEC, the precursor of the EU, the colonial view dominant at the time is clearly present. When the independence movements became unstoppable, the EEC member states changed tactic and offered the new independent states an association agreement with funds attached for development. The Lomé and later the Cotonou Agreements consolidated the unequal economic relationships from colonial times. It is only a minor overstatement that the whole of Africa got what would happen much later in South-Africa after the end of apartheid: political freedom without economic empowerment.

European political establishments had a vested interest to promote the development angle of the relationship with Africa; so did a large part of business, aiming to protect existing supply chains. Not

only did it maintain the underlying extractive economic relationship, it avoided difficult adjustment processes in Europe when the EEC/EU was going through the process of building a common and later a single market. Institutional instability in Africa is at least partly related to this unequal relationship, and provided additional rationale for the development paradigm.

However, the development paradigm is often a mask for the civilisational one dating from the 19th century to justify imperialism. The idea that Africa had no history before the arrival of the Europeans, that its societal development had stopped a millennium or so ago while Europe moved on, that Europe now was helping Africa to develop, became a colonial fallacy which has infected millions of European minds through education and media.

This condescending idea is still present in the minds of too many Europeans when dealing with Africa. Even those with the best intentions are often not devoid of it, and it is at the roots of many discussions turned sour, until very recently. The anti-colonial response, however justified, is not sufficient to develop a constructive and shared new narrative, based on the future benefits of cooperation for both continents.

The EU Commission has announced a new departure, an equal Partnership with Africa, but it has not yet gone beyond a vague vision and technocratic thinking. The French President has widened the debate about the underlying cultural assumptions. Historians are setting the facts right. A new school of research has arisen to analyse the serious defects of development policies. Geo-political conditions force the EU to rebalance the relationship with Africa.

The importance of a fact based narrative

Leading philosophers, such as Avishai Margalit (the founder of Peace Now) and others, have often remarked that *a shared memory has the power to link different societies*. Memory is never single, mostly multiple, and a common memory can serve as alternative for dividing forces and can have a binding role to jointly work on a better future.

Europe after the second world war has made a number of constructive experiences with reconciliation processes (such as the Franco-German Reconciliation Treaty), so has in particular South-Africa (under the Mandela Presidency). They have led to a number of specific actions to positively influence the minds of people, and thus to create a new social-cultural paradigm. This has facilitated the work of politicians to steer the necessary process of economic integration and political cooperation.

The EU has at times included some minor activities which could contribute to launch such a broad new narrative, but they were isolated and without coherent strategy. However, it shows that the need was already recognised to do something.

Only business' thinking has really changed and seems to be in tune with the times. African large companies, some of them MNCs in different sectors (eg. Dangote, Safaricom) are driving economic growth in the continent and a few (eg. Mondi, Sappi) are even inward investors into Europe. European funding continues to go disproportionately to development projects instead of going into strategic investments projects which would greatly help the growth of African SMEs.

Whereas history can often be interpreted from different perspectives, economic history is fact based and therefore a solid basis to review political history. Both provide useful input in changing the overall view on a series of events, or a country, or a continent.

The project aims to develop a new, fact based narrative, which can be used by both African and Europeans as the intellectual underpinning of the future Partnership.

It will be co-chaired by prof. Achille Mbembe, WITS University, Johannesburg, and Prof. Stefan Schepers, secretary general of the High Level Groups and director of AECIT, Johannesburg, supported by a steering team of experts from all over Africa and from Europe.