

## **Towards greater African integration: Assessing EU support**

After almost four decades of largely symbolic cooperation under the Organization of African Unity, African governments inaugurated a revamped African Union in 2002. The goal was to build a more robust supranational entity that would spearhead joint action by Africa's 53 states to address common developmental and security problems, and help them respond in a more coordinated and effective way to emerging global challenges. The commitment taken in February 2009 to establish a new African Union Authority is the latest milestone towards what some bill a revitalised Pan African project. But institutional realignments are not enough in themselves to bring to life a United States of Africa, as the more ambitious proponents are calling for. Divergent political goals and economic interests make this a difficult project at best. The increasingly active role of the European Union and other external players in this process – not to mention the uneasy colonial and post-colonial dynamics that this evokes – is yet another factor that Africa's budding institutions need to learn to accommodate. And even if grander ambitions were to be set aside for more modest goals – such as gradual economic cooperation based on limited sub-regional agreements – it remains to be seen whether local and external players can transcend their narrow self-interest for the good of Africa as a whole.

It is against this background that the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) together with The Nordic Africa Institute (NAI) organised an informal high level seminar on the theme "Building the African Union institutional architecture: Progress achieved, new perspectives and possible support by the European Union" in Uppsala, Sweden on 21 October 2009 just ahead of the European Development Days held in neighbouring Stockholm. The seminar was organised with active support of the Swedish European Union (EU) Presidency and in close coordination with the African Union Commission (AUC). It was attended by high-level representatives from the various institutions of the African Union (AU), including Erastus Mwencha, Deputy Chairperson of the AUC, and the African Regional Economic Communities (RECs), NEPAD (The New Partnership for Africa's Development), ECOSOCC (Economic, Social and Cultural Council). The EU was represented by several officials from the EU Member States, including Joakim Stymne, Swedish State Secretary to the Minister for International Development, and the European Commission. A number of think tanks, including the Africa Capacity Building Foundation, and civil society and private sector participants also attended.

The seminar considered three key issues at the heart of African integration: progress in the Pan-African integration agenda; the continuing development of the AU institutional architecture; and the status of key reforms and future challenges.

With regard to the Pan-African integration agenda it was noted that while there has been little progress towards a "United States of Africa", inter-state economic collaboration, particularly at the sub-regional level has been more promising. The green light by African Heads of State in February 2009 for the establishment of an "African Union Authority" (AUA), has also placed the political integration project firmly back on the agenda. A key objective of the AUA is to "reform and refine the existing governance structure of the African Union as a tool for accelerating political and economic integration of the continent". The agreement includes a phased roadmap - including a Constitutional Conference - to set the basic framework for a United States of Africa (envisaged for 2017).

A key prerequisite for achieving this ambitious goal is ensuring that the AUA is sufficiently empowered, both in terms of its mandate and funding, to oversee the integration project. One of the mechanisms being considered for this is organising a comprehensive structural review and re-orientation of the AUA "on the basis of subsidiarity" between the AUA, Member States and the African Regional Economic Communities.

As noted by many of the meeting's participants, however, the effective implementation of this reform agenda is likely to be a long, uphill struggle. The systemic weaknesses that affected the AUC will not disappear overnight.

On the status of institutional reforms and future challenges, participants noted that a necessary pre-requisite to empowering the AUA to effectively play its coordinating role is to

strengthen the political foundations for moving forward in the integration process, based on the principle of subsidiarity. If Member States see that their interests are best secured at the African level this would give the necessary incentive to pool sovereignty and would give the AUA the necessary political legitimacy, hence creating the conditions for African Member States to accept the gradual move away from the currently prevailing “intergovernmental” mode of operation of the Union into a more supranational governance system. A practical example of this is the contribution by Member States to African peace-keeping forces in several conflict zones.

Achieving credible and sustainable results across several other fronts, however, remains a major challenge. The meeting considered how conditions can be created for robust bottom up debate (similar to the recent Lisbon referendum in Ireland). Participants also debated what other deliverables would get citizens involvement citing such examples as free movement of people and continental level support to farmers as examples that have made the European project relevant to European citizens.

### **Enhancing AU-EU collaboration**

Turning to the role of the EU in this process and the question of how best to align current initiatives (such as the Joint Africa Europe Strategy) to this agenda, the meeting deliberated on the role of external partners in the consolidation of the AU institutional architecture. It was emphasised that in order to work on an equal basis with a strong African interlocutor, external development partners must understand the long history and process of the African integration debate (dating back to colonial times) and allow space for the AUC and eventual AUA to manage their own processes. While it was acknowledged that some progress has been made within the EU and European Commission on this issue in moving away from traditional piecemeal, uncoordinated approaches towards individual African states, there is still a long way to go. Tough lessons have been learned because of setting overly-ambitious expectations and succumbing to frustration at the perceived slow speed of institutional reform. Some participants warned that EU and other donors’ support to RECs could undermine broader continental efforts if a proper balance of support to the AUC is not ensured.

In a similar vein, it is easy to overlook some of the achievements made by the AUC in its seven years of existence. Continental institutions have been established, decision-making processes put in place, and strategic priorities established. The APRM (African Peer Review Mechanism) flies against the face of long-cherished principles, such as non-interference in sovereign governments’ internal affairs. The AUC is becoming a key player in externally funded development programmes, and frameworks have been established to discuss joint issues of concern, such as joint technical meetings and high-level summits on key issues like peace and security and climate change.

### **Next steps**

The road towards African integration is still long and difficult. But in a relatively short period of time major achievements have been realised. The challenge will now be to ensure a bottom-up process towards African integration and unity, involving all Africans and their representative institutions at local, national and regional levels. The AU will be able to count on continued support from a widening group of international partners including the EU. The third Africa-EU Summit scheduled for the second half of 2010 will be an important milestone to identify consistent and innovative ways of EU support to the institutional development of the AU

*A full report of the meeting will be published on ECDPM's website in due course.*