**A new Dawn - Towards a people Centered Africa – Europe Relations**

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The Africa-EU Partnership is the formal political channel through which the European Union (EU) and the African continent work together, engage in political and policy dialogues and define their cooperative relationship. It was established in 2000 at the first Africa-EU Summit in Cairo. The partnership is guided by the Joint Africa-EU Strategy, which was adopted at the second EU-Africa Summit in Lisbon in 2007.

The stated objective of the partnership is to strive to bring Africa and Europe closer together through strengthening economic cooperation and promoting sustainable development, with both continents co-existing in peace, security, democracy, prosperity, solidarity and human dignity.

The partnership has a Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) which sets out the intention of both continents to move beyond a donor/recipient relationship towards long-term cooperation on jointly identified mutual and complementary interests. It is based on principles of ownership, partnership and solidarity and its adoption marks a new phase in Africa-EU relations. The strategy is implemented through multiannual roadmaps and action plans. The latest declaration was adopted at the 5th AU-EU Summit held on 29-30 November 2017 in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, under the central theme of 'Investing in Youth for a Sustainable Future', where EU and African leaders defined four new joint priorities for 2018 and beyond. Its main priorities include investing in people through education, science, technology and skills development, strengthening resilience, peace, security and governance, mobilizing investments for Africa’s structural and sustainable transformation and migration and mobility. The priorities are set to be reviewed in the next Africa – EU summit.

The current partnership between the European Union and the African continent is exciting yet at the same time puzzling. On the one hand you have one partner who is organised institutionally and supported by strong technical, financial and political muscle, and on the other, you have a continent that lacks all these. You have a continent whose collective interest is at times at loggerheads with national interest of its members.

At the citizenry level, both stakeholders of this partnership have failed to recognize the roles and responsibilities of the citizen in the partnership. They have both placed citizen and their Organisations at the periphery of the partnership. This is no wonder, since although the strategies look sound and sensible, their definition and application is still heavily states driven and high level. In essence they have moved to alienate people from the partnership rather than bringing them into it. It is with this in mind that a new Africa – EU partnership is important and necessary. This partnership must be democratically owned, inclusive of citizen, transparent and accountable and focus on results for the populations of both Africa and Europe.

While both the EU and African states must be commended for initiating the partnership, time is now ripe to promote this partnership among their people and have them owning it. It must move from being a project of politicians and technocrats, to principles and values that are propagated and promoted by citizens. In this regard both the African Union and the European Union must put in place frameworks and mechanisms of engaging their citizenry on matters concerning the partnership as well as priorities for the partnership. While the European Union has a history of structurally engaging its citizen through their CSOs, the same cannot be said of the African Union on partnership matters. Of concern however is that both the African Union and the European Union lack mechanisms and frameworks of engaging their Citizen on affairs and priorities of this partnership. As such the priories currently under implementation are a product of political negotiations between the political class and technocrats with no or very limited input by the citizen. A structured and institutionalized engagement with CSOs is necessary to bridge this gap and place the people at the centre of the partnership. The engagement will not only enrich the discussions but also bring the partnership closer to the people.

Aside from being more deliberate in engaging CSOs through creating spaces and processes, there is also the need to enable such processes through reforming the legal and regulatory framework of the partnership, setting aside financial resources to enable CSOs to participate in its initiatives, and also build their capacity to play their role. The partnership would also need to create political and policy enabling environment for the foregoing to take place. The objective of engaging CSOs is indeed a means to an end. The target is to democratize the processes and secure ownership by the citizen in the priority setting and the development of the join strategy.

The identified priorities in the current joint strategy underscore the need for an inclusive Africa – European Union partnership. Targeting education, and skills development and other priorities will warrant involvement of other stakeholder including Technical and vocational training institutions, industries, Civil Society Organisations, political parties etc. It is crucial that the current partnership understands the needs and perspectives of all stakeholders of their society. This will be key in the success of the initiatives emerging from the partnership. The partnership must seek to understand what issues are important to them now as well as what needs to be put in place to address them. This can only happen if there is a change in the way the current partnership is designed – Top down – From the politicians to the recipient.

In the anticipated review of the joint strategy, it will be important that the proponents of this partnership do their homework to learn about whole society approach – where all actors are part of the implementation of the partnership framework and action plan. It is important that the partnership is sensitive and respects the needs and perspectives of other stakeholders and be mindful of power dynamics at play, and creates a welcoming environment for all actors especially for civil society.

At the centre of ownership and inclusive partnership is the people accountability. The current partnership framework has no accountability mechanisms to citizen of Africa and Europe. People accountability is not part of the fabric of the partnership. As a matter of fact accountability has been reduced to a technical exercise of evaluation and report production of various initiatives of the partnership. There must be a change from the current accountability framework to domestic accountability where both the African Union and the European Union are accountable to their own taxpayers and citizens through different governance channels like parliaments, independent oversight bodies, CSOs and the media. They must also guarantee that they are also accountable for their partnership commitments - to each other, and to civil society. In this regard the partnership will have to address the asymmetric power relations that currently exist in the partnership and create an accountability framework.

Above all, the essence of the partnership is to deliver positive results for the people of Africa and Europe. The partnership must focus on showing impact on the areas of priority it has selected before moving on to the next best thing.