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How (not) to prepare for the next AU-EU summit

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In March, the EU and the AU launched a **year-long celebration** marking **25 years** of their "unique and successful partnership", looking ahead to the next milestone in this 'robust collaboration': a seventh AU-EU summit slated for the second half of 2025.

The rise and fall of summit diplomacy

'Summit diplomacy' with Africa was initiated by France – who else – in 1973, but only really took off in the 2000s, with the first EU-Africa summit in Cairo, soon followed by the first Forum on China-Africa Cooperation.

These summits often seem more about optics and boasting convening power than about substance. The results are always similar: vague (financial) promises on one side, and equally vague commitments to loyalty and shared values on the other, without tools to monitor them.

At least the EU and the AU cannot be criticised for lack of consistency. Over time, not much has changed in terms of substance. From summit to summit, joint declarations start with platitudes about a shared past and shared values, and end with good intentions and promises to add a new strategic dimension to the partnership, which shall be mutually beneficial and developed "**in a spirit of equality, respect, alliance and cooperation**".

Regional integration, trade and private sector development have been on the agenda from the start, along with efforts to find common positions in international fora, a 'comprehensive and integrated approach' to migration, peacebuilding and conflict prevention, the development concerns of the day, and climate change and environmental issues. The four P's of the 2022 summit (prosperity, peace, people, planet) are only a rebranding exercise of the same themes.

A new generation of **pan-Africanists** wonders why, 140 years after the Berlin Conference, "African leaders are still trooping en masse to sign new treaties that give away the continent's natural resources", denouncing the "asymmetric and lopsided deals" and arguing that, despite increased African agency, "global powers are using the summit diplomacy to perpetuate a paternalism bequeathed from the imperial era".

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The (double) self-deception trap

The EU wants to project a privileged 'mutually beneficial partnership', preferably among 'equals', but doesn't escape this (at least partially unconscious) paternalistic and Eurocentric approach.

Carlos Lopes, former UNECA secretary-general and chief AU negotiator for the post-Cotonou negotiations, wrote a book about his experience, entitled '**The self-deception trap. Exploring the economic dimensions of charity dependency within Africa-Europe relations**'.

In health terms, self-deception is the downplaying or denial of health conditions, often as a psychological defence mechanism against anxiety and distress, resulting in neglect of necessary and appropriate treatment. Translated to summit diplomacy, it means bending reality to align with one's aspirations, beliefs and self-perception, "weaving a comfortable

veil over inconvenient truths", blurring the lines of disagreement and casting a spotlight on assumed shared goals. In some circumstances, this can be an effective diplomatic strategy, but the boundary between strategic flexibility and "delusional entrapment" is perilously thin.

Carlos Lopes admits that this self-deception holds for both sides. In his view – and resentment – the EU behaves in a passive-aggressive way, trying to fragment Africa to enhance its negotiation position. It portrays itself as a benevolent, altruistic actor and equal partner, but often acts in a self-interested and domineering way. It likes to blame African leaders for mismanaging their economies, but doesn't admit shared responsibility and "structural, systemic and institutional" obstacles to sustainable development, rooted in Africa's historical marginalisation and its self-perpetuating economic dependency since the slave trade and colonial era.

Strongly influenced by his compatriot, Amilcar Cabral, and by Frantz Fanon, he also denounces African elites. While Africa could increase agency considering its demographic weight, natural resource endowment and decisive role in the fight against climate change, its leaders prefer competing among themselves for attention and funding, while underfunding their own regional representative institutions.

Carlos Lopes' analysis is hard, but it remains self-deceptive in its recommendations. He criticises African mendicity and Europe's charity approach to aid, but regrets the increasingly political, conditional or interest-driven nature of the partnership. He denounces the "paradigm of comparative advantages", while admitting that successful resource-based development is possible but hinges on effective policies, investments and institutions.

He pleads for a more "systemic", structural approach to development, but criticises the "good governance mantra", preferring to hide behind the enduring legacy of colonialism and failed structural adjustment programmes of the past. He laments the asymmetric nature of the EU-AU relationship and the fragmented nature of the EU's policies with Africa, but offers no solution to the AU's own interests-driven internal divisions.

Towards a more equitable partnership?

On 21 May, AU and EU ministers will meet again to prepare for their seventh summit, scheduled for late 2025. The EU-AU partnership faces many **challenges in a rapidly moving**

geopolitical context. But rather than immediately working on a substantive agenda that reproduces past efforts, it may be more useful to reflect on the asymmetric power dynamics in the partnership and have an open, frank discussion on the approach for preparing the next summit.

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The EU must address several **cognitive biases**. First of all, stereotyping, oversimplifying and generalising (for instance, projecting Africa as a hungry, conflict-prone continent in need of the EU's continued 'benevolent charity'). Second, egocentrism, projecting one's own characteristics onto the other (for instance, assuming the AU can play a similar coordinating role as the EU, while being an institution with a far weaker political mandate and supportive administration, struggling to build internal consensus and negotiation positions). Third, overemphasising short-term and single-issue concerns (for instance, irregular migration to the EU). And finally, anchoring, the EU's historical capacity to set the agenda and steer the negotiations (for instance, the EU's recent zero-deforestation regulation, introduced with hardly any impact assessment and an extremely short transition period).

The question that also remains is: "**who genuinely represents African interests** given the crises of legitimacy, accountability and good faith faced by almost all the African leaders who so willingly troop to the world's capitals at the slightest whim of the convenors"?

To come to an '**equitable partnership**' among partners of unequal power and resources, it is essential to acknowledge this power imbalance, respect the diversity of interlocutors and interests at stake, streamline processes and truly foster collaborative decision-making. This requires listening with humility and the ability to recognise past failures, inconsistencies and double standards.

Many EU delegations in Africa now have youth sounding boards and roadmaps for civil society or private sector engagement. Similar structures exist in Europe. To overcome the representation challenge, a broad consultative process could follow the May ministerial meeting, involving both these structures and the more traditional partnership dialogues

with the governments, to identify priorities for a healthy EU-AU partnership on both sides. Grouped by themes, these could be presented at high-level roundtables alongside the summit, with conclusions submitted for an open discussion by heads of state and government, possibly in a similar thematic roundtable format that reinvigorated the last summit.

Not having pre-chewed and sanitised draft summit conclusions prepared by EU and AU bureaucrats may create uncertainty and be seen as risky, but would result in a more honest exchange where mutual irritations and differing priorities are openly discussed, to lay the basis for a 'decolonised' and uninhibited relationship.

The credibility challenge

A summit has at least three dimensions: optics, messaging and credibility. To **be effective**, equal attention has to be given to all three dimensions. In the past, the EU has excelled at optics, and as suggested, the message can be rejuvenated through a truly consultative and collaborative drafting process. But the biggest shortcoming has been credibility, which depends on the attention given to the partner and the ability to deliver on what has been agreed. This includes ensuring sufficiently high-level participation even at less eye-catching joint events, such as the preparatory ministerial meetings preceding the summits.

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When China or the US organise summits, their leaders make time to engage with African partners, both bilaterally and outside the formal sessions, showing respect. At the last EU-AU summit, EU leaders were almost inaccessible because of competing agendas, feeding the perception of a lack of interest in a 'low-priority' partnership and contradicting the official discourse. Both parties also tend to see the EU as the solution provider to AU challenges, leading the EU to consistently overpromise and underdeliver, with weak monitoring mechanisms.

It is time to abandon lofty but unrealistic commitments, embrace **new methods** of engaging, identify more pragmatic goals and develop credible monitoring tools to assess the partnership's 'unique' quality and achievements.

The views are those of the author and not necessarily those of ECDPM.

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