LSE Round Table (FN)

Talking Notes

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1. Treaty of Rome (1957) launched EEC engagement by way of trade and development with the ACP countries. This was not characterised as restitution of wrongs of colonialism, although it was aware of the shadow it continued to cast over ECC/African relations, something which could not be ignored. Main, overarching motive of the engagement was strategic and economic.
2. Resentment against colonialism or neo-colonialism never precluded African states from cooperating with Europe; nor did the conspicuous asymmetry in the relationship; and neither did the contradictory modes of EU engagement i.e. self interest (trade) and benevolence (ODA). Actually ACP/EC trade declined under the Lome Free Trade dispensation.
3. EU/African relations never blossomed into a spontaneous or ‘special relationship’, or a break from its choreographed strictly top-down bureaucratic-legalistic strait-jacket; yet the relationship remained fairly amicable at the official level.
4. Indeed, ODA programmes and Lomé Free Trade arrangements did very little or anything to ameliorate SSA disastrous decline in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s,while other underdeveloped regions, notably Asia had steady economic growth. This was the ‘hopeless continent’ *The Economist* wrote about a few years back.
5. But things seem to be changing; Africa showed remarkable economic resilience in the face of the global economic crisis; It emerged as a economic and political role player in its own right; no longer regarded solely as developmental issue or recipient of ODA; more competition (traditional European sphere of influence) for a stronger presence in Africa (China in particular);EU realised need for a fresh approach in view of the new strategic and economic importance of Africa as a **predictable continental neighbour**, sympathetic to EU needs and expectations
6. Over the last decade, economic growth rates (per capita) in a number of SSA states have been positive and on the up. Particularly notable is the fact that in the 1990’s many African states, for the first time since the end of colonial status, held multiparty elections, while civic and media freedom reached unprecedented levels. The ‘**Lions are on the move’** as the recent Mackinsey report on the SSA region put it. Various states in Africa are experiencing a belated boom. From Ghana in the West to Mozambique in the East, SSA economies are growing faster than those of almost every other region in the world. Trade between Africa and the rest of the world has increased by 200% since 2000, and the IMF expects SSA economies to expand by 5.75% in 2012. According to the World Bank: ”Africa could be on the brink of an economic take-off, much like China was 30 years ago, and India 20 years ago”.
7. What caused the change for the better in various states (but not all 54) in Africa?: Available empirical evidence points at two things in particular: better education and new wave of democratization since the 1990s. From this platform African states can produce more ‘human capital’, engender good governance, entrepreneurship, accountability and spawn a new generation of energetic leadership (so-called ‘**cheetah generation’**). What we see in Africa’s up-and-coming states is more than simply ‘donor democracy’ or superficial ‘electoral democracy’ as some critics point out. Africa may have its Mali’s and Sudans but it is no longer the ‘dark continent’ we still read about.
8. Development Aid (ODA) was no panacea, no solution, to Africa’s development problems. Nor were the proliferation of ‘Grand Plans’, palliatives and hand-wringing exercises to save Africa which developed in a kind of intellectual cottage industry (UN, IMF, World Bank,G8, Tony Blair’s Commission). They kept the great debate about Africa’s plight alive, arranged 5 Star conferences in exotic places, assured media exposure to political prima donnas, but Africa’s problems unresolved.
9. While European involvement, up to the end of the colonial period, left an overwhelmingly negative impact on Africa, it is equally true that in the post-colonial era, the relationship changed positively. Although ODA and FTA failed expectations, EU involvement, being multilateral and non exploitative left a discernible footprint as it impacted on modernisation, development, politics, governance, economics and even culture.
10. Particularly since the 2000 Africa/EU Cairo summit, the EU read the dynamics and directions of change in Africa more correctly and adapted its policies accordingly, albeit with notable shortcomings.
11. Several aspects put the EU’s involvement in Africa apart from others: it is by some margin the largest donor (42% of its total ODA budget, Euro 4.1 billion); it is Africa’s largest trading partner by a wide margin; it engages Africa multilaterally as well as bilaterally; it is holistic and interdisciplinary; it puts emphasis on co-ownership; equal partnership; common goals; shared vision and consensus; it focuses on intercontinental as well as global cooperation, it facilitates dialogue on issues of joint political concern and interest, and probably most importantly, it is normatively based. These norms have been stated and restated since the EU/Africa Cairo Summit of 2000, the Cotonou Agreement, the EU’s 2005 Africa Strategy and the 2007 Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES).
12. As **a multilateral normative soft power** role player, the EU deliberately moved away from the traditional donor-recipient focus, to co-ownership, shared values and goals and partnership.Moreover, the EU sees Africa as an actor in its own right; it wants to remain a privileged partner and make the most of its relations with Africa.
13. A major problem with the EU’s Africa involvement is its inability to progress sufficiently from the aspirational to the operational and many problems remained unresolved; On the upside, however, its involvement left what could be called a ‘**catalytic residue’** which, in my analysis, had and continues to have a positive **normative qualitative spill-over to** African development and modernisation.
14. Therefore, it seems fair to conclude ***that the EU was probably the most effective soft power, norm-making, value-adding, external participant in Africa, with an impact which is perhaps more real than apparent.***
15. With the new ‘stampede for Africa’ threatening Europe’s traditional strengths and presence in Africa, the question is whether the EU’s ‘normative model’ would prevail as a preferred alternative to the Asian normless, non-interventionist model ?
16. China and other Asian countries follow a ‘no strings attached’ model based on ‘**resource-for infrastructure concessional loans**’ in Africa. It helps them to expand their reach into many African resource producers where the leadership look for a better cash-flow. This has made inroads into areas where Europe has traditionally been the pre-eminent, unrivalled development partner.
17. ***A caveat which could be added here is that*** China’s highly proclaimed stance of ‘neutral non-intervention’ in the sovereign domain of aid recipients has apparently **more to do with its own restrictive domestic policies on democracy and human rights, than respect for sovereignty *per se***. A second caveat is that commodity trade with Asian countries, being morally neutral, may prop-up authoritarian regimes, **but only about a third of Africa’s recent growth was commodity-led**, giving credence to the important role of locally induced normative criteria and accumulation of soft power as engines of growth.
18. **Even so, Europe’s influence in Africa is in a phase of decline. A new ‘scramble for Africa’ is afoot; Western Europe’s trade with Africa declined from 51% in 1990 to 28% in 2008; in 2009 China emerged as Africa’s largest bilateral trading partner and** the **fifth largest** investment country in the continent. South/South trade is moving upward all the time.
19. ***What about future EU/African relations?***
20. The term ‘actorness’ can be used to characterise the EU’s ability and role to function actively and deliberately in a specific situation. How the EU can exercise its ‘actorness’ in Africa is of particular importance and the main instrument in this regard is ***the comprehensive 2007 Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES).***
21. ***Unfortunately, the EU seems at a loss how to implement this strategy successfully.*** Lack of leadership in the AU (in particular), inadequate funding, top-down high-minded elitist-bureaucratic dominance; minor role to civil society; confusion and duplication in regard to integrating the JAES with the EU’s various subsidiary programmes in Africa (i.e. Cotonou, Trade and Development Agreement with SA, EU-Mediterranean Partnership); ineffective implementation, etc.......The 13th Africa/EU Troika (October 2009) asked for a ‘fundamental review’, even ‘fundamental changes’ to the strategy but this was refused and sticking to its guns the EU prefers to muddle on.
22. ***With Europe experiencing its biggest crisis since WW2 and Africa on the rise with its options expanding, a change former’s fate in the continent seems well-neigh unavoidablel.***