Chapter 5

Africa-EU Partnership on Trade and Regional Integration

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Introduction

One of the most enduring economic relationships is between Europe and Africa, which gathered pace in the fifteenth century during the era of European adventurism abroad. The nature and configuration of this age-old relationship have inherently been asymmetrical, because the two groups of countries have existed on different planes of economic development. Today, the European Union (EU) comprises some of the most developed countries in the world, whereas Africa, approximately twice that of the EU in membership, includes most of the world’s poorest countries. Hence, their relationship has essentially been between two unequal groups, whereby Africa has been dependent on the EU for economic assistance and commerce in its quest for development. This core-periphery relationship, a legacy of the colonial experience, has enabled the EU to dominate negotiations between the two.¹

Attempts to reposition the relationship as a “partnership” emerged in Cairo, Egypt in 2000² at the historic first Summit ever between the two continents, and in initiatives at subsequent Summits in Lisbon, Portugal in 2007³ and in Tripoli, Libya in 2010.⁴ At the meetings, both groups shared a vision to put their relationship on a new and stronger footing as strategic partners to provide a sound framework for long-term, systematic, and well-integrated cooperation. The new thinking resulted in the adoption of the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES), first developed at the 2007 Lisbon Summit, and extended at the 2010 Tripoli meeting. The JAES comprises eight thematic strategic partnerships, making it arguably the most robust, intricate, and ambitious manifestation of the partnership to date. It entails Africa and Europe forging consensus on shared values, common interests, and common strategic objectives, as well as adopting priority action plans with concrete and measurable outcomes.
One of the eight thematic provisions of the JAES initiative encompasses the development of trade, regional integration, and infrastructure, primarily in Africa. After two iterations of the priority action plans (2008–2010 and 2011–2013), the overall objective of the trade and regional integration partnership ostensibly is to promote the socioeconomic and political integration and development of the African continent in consonance with the development agenda of the African Union (AU).

This chapter examines the degree to which the JAES Action Plans and “partnership” have effectively promoted regional integration, trade, and infrastructure development in Africa. In order to address this, we provide an overview of the evolution of the relationship between the EU and Africa in section two. In section three, we describe the provisions of the JAES on trade, regional integration, and infrastructure, followed by a discussion of their implementation and achievements. We follow in section four with an assessment of the trade and regional integration partnership by exploring the theoretical and empirical arguments for trade and regional integration as stratagems for fighting poverty and ensuring development in Africa. In the penultimate section five, we discuss lingering challenges about the future of the partnership and how to make it more effective for Africa. We conclude in section six with a summary and policy recommendations.

Antecedents of the JAES: Historical Overview of Africa-EU Relations

Until recently, the EU had characterized its policy orientations in the Southern hemisphere as a “pyramid of privilege,” and the relative import of each Southern group’s relationship was determined or reflected by the scope and structure of their accords. Needs, history, and geography are key factors that have determined where developing countries feature on the pyramid. At least until the end of the Cold War in 1989/1990, it seemed that the more destitute a group of developing countries was, the more concessions it received from the EU, and the higher it placed on the pyramid. Thus, the JAES partnership can be traced to three strands of trade and development initiatives in the EU’s external relations enterprise. Foremost, the EU provided Africa, along with Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries, extensive and nonreciprocal trade and aid concessions, which placed them at the top of the pyramid until the end of the Cold War. Second was the relationship with the Republic of South Africa (RSA), which followed a slightly different trajectory due to its distinct history. Third, the EU’s agreements with North Africa, which were a part of its broader Mediterranean policy, involved limited concessions and trade, and thereby occupied a lower stratum on the pyramid.7

From Rome to Cotonou/Economic Partnership Agreements

The genesis of the modern relationship between Africa and the EU was the 1957 Treaty of Rome that established the European Economic Community (EEC), in