

The new Africa – Europe Alliance: opportunity to move from knowledge transfer to knowledge co-creation

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Abstract:

During his State of the European Union of 2017 the then European Commission President J.-C. Juncker launched the new Africa – Europe Alliance. The new Commission under Ursula von der Leyen decided to follow in the same direction and even to go further in reprogramming the relationship between Africa and Europe. This potentially is a game changer. The relationship so far has been asymmetric, vertical and build from a North-South perspective. The new rapport is said to be bidirectional, horizontal and pursuing mutual interests. This is supposed to be reflected in all policy areas: trade, investment, aid, geopolitics, etcetera. What will be the consequences in the field of knowledge development? Will Africa and Europe move from North to South knowledge transfer to knowledge sharing and co-creation? Will we see as many European Studies Centers in Africa as there are Africa Studies Centers in Europe? How must the rapport the force in the knowledge community change to realize this paradigm shift? Reviewing evolving policies and practices at macro, meso and micro-level we conclude that there are shifts in the direction of more co-creation on an egalitarian footing but that they are slowed down and even inhibited by vested views and practices that give pre-eminence to a North-South thinking that prescribes knowledge transfer as an unescapable precondition.

As globalization continues to rapidly shrink our world and pandemics, as well as climate change, confront us with the inescapable consequences of interdependence and collective vulnerabilities, the international donor community shifts its principles, orientations and working methods. Under President Juncker, in 2018, a new Africa-EU Alliance for Sustainable Investments and Jobs was launched. The first out-of-continent mission of his successor Ursula von der Leyen early 2020 was to Addis Abeba to talk to her colleague of the African Union. It was seen by many in the European bubble as more than a symbolic gesture. During the Juncker era and now under President Von der Leyen the dominant narrative suggests a new better balanced partnership between Africa and Europe. The relationship has to shift from an asymmetric rapport to a partnership of equals pursuing mutual interests. In this paper we want to reflect on the consequences of this new discourse and thinking on knowledge development. Is there room for a shift from knowledge transfer over knowledge acquisition to knowledge sharing and co-creation? How must the rapport the force in the knowledge community change to realize this paradigm shift?

We will first look at the broader perspective. What are the so-called major changes in the way Europe wants to deal with its African twin-continent? In a second period we will try to gauge how this is – may be – an illustration of a major recalibration of development cooperation in general. This justifies to zoom into the world of knowledge development in a third section. What could be some consequences if these

overarching transformations would also take place in the field of knowledge creation and application?

The mood swings of development cooperation

Development cooperation has been subject to multiple mood swings. 60 to 70 years ago, when development aid, in sociological terms, gradually became a sector and a system we looked at the world as being divided between North and South (Develtere, 2012). This gap or deficit model was infused with the idea that the North and the South were anchored in two diametrical and opposite positions. The North had and the South lacked, so to speak. The North thus had to be generous and not self-interested. It had to share its experience, provide much needed funding and transfer technology. This would allow the South to get out of the starting blocks, even to catch up with that generous North. This gave birth to the mechanisms of Official Development Aid (ODA) and technical assistance as the main leverages to fast modernization in the South. Bit by bit this paradigm shifted. It mainly did under pressure from the South which in itself is an exemplary reflection of the often overseen fact that evolutions in development cooperation are the result of dialectic interactions between the multiple stakeholder on the scene, including the so-called recipient actors. Already in the 1960s this resulted in a new vocabulary and narrative that stressed the need for partnership and an overhaul of the asymmetrical rapport between Europe and its so-called partners. This, in turn, inspired the consecutive Conventions (the Yaoundé Conventions and their successor Lomé Conventions spanned the period 1963 - 2000) that foresaw in ever more sophisticated, diversified and complex mechanisms of dialogue between Europe and the Associated African States and Madagascar (Yaoundé Conventions) and later the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific group (Lomé Conventions). Especially the Lomé Conventions were considered by many in the development community to show how far one could go in involving recipient countries and actors in co-decision making. In the 1990s the aid community, by then commonly called the development cooperation community, under the aegis of the United Nations and mainly through consecutive international conferences, started widespread and thorough reflections on the functioning, consequences and impact of the international system. It started with the UN World Summit for Children held in 1990 in New York, US, and culminated in the Millennium Summit and the launching of the Millennium Development Goals, in 2000, also in New York. Gradually this has been transformed in a model in which ownership by the so-called Southern partners would be the cornerstone of a new way of "doing development cooperation". As exemplified by the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness of 2005, the recipient countries would be in the driving seat and the Northern donors would limit their own role with just paying the bill and providing backstopping when needed (Develtere, 2019; 2020). In essence, this novel approach implied that the developing countries would be acknowledged as being the stewards of their own development, would write the script of their own journey and perform the act. The donors would bring down their flag and at the same time be more accountable for their own (wrong) doings.

It seems however that the recent developments augur in a new discourse, narrative and practice. With the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), launched in 2015, a clear signal is given that all are concerned parties, developed and developing countries

alike as they belong to one and indivisible global community. But also the business community, civil society and many more actors and institutions that can benefit from a concerted global approach have to get their act together and get space to take up their role.

From payers to players ... again

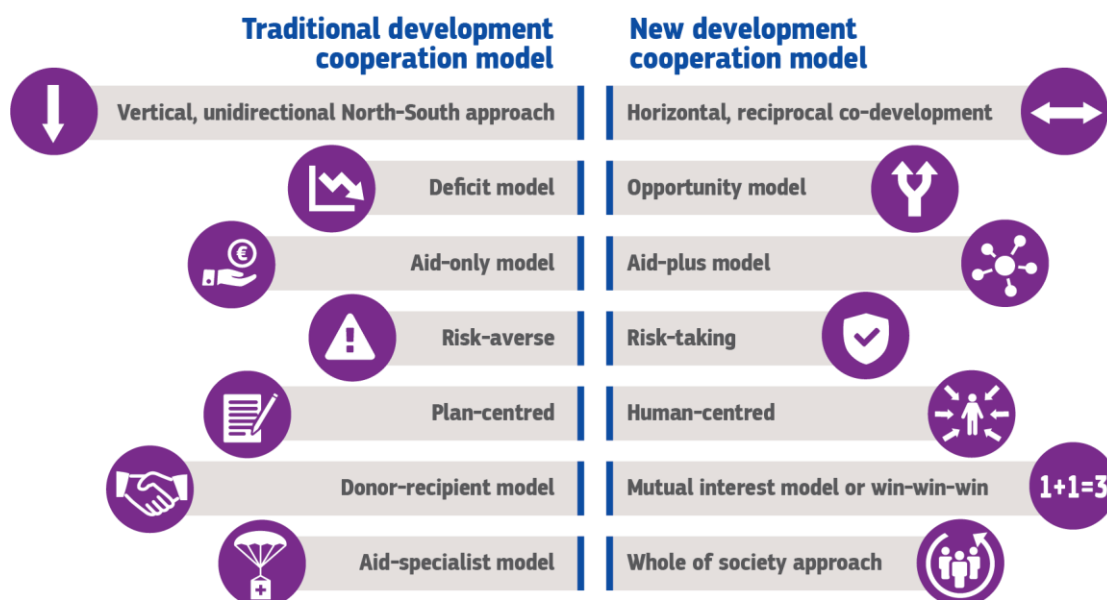
Major concerns about the future of global public goods and the sustainability of the dominant development paradigm, but also the advent of a multitude of unconventional or emerging development cooperation actors (Gu & Kitano, 2018), has stimulated western and traditional donors to revisit their approaches. It seems not to be a coincidence that in the frame of a couple of years we see leading donors recalibrating their vision and practices. During his State of the European Union, September 2018, European Commission President Juncker launched a Africa – Europe Alliance for Sustainable Investments and Jobs in an attempt to modernize its partnership with Africa in view of “our shared future and shared interests” (European Commission, 2018). In December 2018, 15 agencies of the US government, including USAID and the Millennium Challenge Corporation, initiated a joint Africa Prosper initiative to connect US and African businesses. The UK followed suit. Its government is promoting the notion of mutual prosperity as a manifestation of the ‘Fusion Doctrine’ which implies that it wants to “use its tools of external engagement in a joined-up way, in pursuit of common objectives” (ICAI, 2019).

Twenty years after the Economist depicted Africa on its cover as “The hopeless continent” (the Economist, 2000), the authoritative weekly jubilantly announced a special issue on “The new scramble for Africa”, tellingly adding “and how Africans could win it” (the Economist, 2019). This resounded particularly in the European Union that (re)discovered its unique and unparalleled strategic proximity with the African continent. The Juncker Commission set this new overture towards the current day realities in Africa and their geopolitical and geo-economic ramifications in train. The gestation and preparation period for this to happen was pretty long. In effect, the 2007 Joint Africa-Europe Strategy (JAES) was already a stepping stone that augured in and even solidified a continent-to-continent approach. Von der Leyen, Junckers’ successor, builds on this. In her mission letter to the Commissioner-designate Utta Urpilainen she wrote: “Over the next five years, your main objective will be to ensure the European model of development evolves in line with new global realities. It should be strategic and effective, should create value for money and should contribute to our wider political priorities. We must make the most of the political, economic and investment opportunities that Africa, with its growing economies, populations and digital innovations, presents. Building on the current EU–Africa Sustainable Alliance, I want you to work with the High Representative/Vice-President on a new comprehensive strategy for Africa. This should create a partnership of equals and mutual interest (Von der Leyen, 2019).

We hypothesize that this reformatting of the relationship with Africa will profoundly affect the overarching approach to development cooperation and thus also the way

donors will look at opportunities to reformulate their way of dealing with Asian and Latin American countries as well.

The donor-recipient approach is, again, in the process of revision. That is for sure. Mutual interests as well as win-win operations are becoming more central. In this model under construction, the focus is said not to be on the weaknesses and the deficits encountered in Africa, are other developing countries, but increasingly on the strengths and opportunities of all partners – allowing for a bidirectional, multidirectional and reciprocal partnership of equals. Accordingly, the traditional vertical and unidirectional North-South approach is supposed to give way to a more horizontal, networked model in which various stakeholders share common challenges and goals. The following visual we developed with the European Political Strategy Centre, the in-house think-tank of the European Commission during the Juncker Presidency, suggests the direction a new development cooperation model might take.



Source: European Political Strategy Center, 2019

In this new vision, aid is no longer the alpha and the omega of the relations with developing countries, but rather it is part of a wider framework that also includes investments, exchanges, training, trade, digital interconnectedness, etc. The traditional development cooperation community thus has to undergo a metamorphosis and becomes an enabler, a facilitator, and a vector that stimulates others to grasp the opportunities that cooperation and co-development provide.

This implies of course that partners drop the risk-averse attitude that has characterized development cooperation for so long. Processes become increasingly interactive and iterative and the interaction ideally revolves around a man-centred rather than plan-centred axis. The donor-recipient relation makes room for a mutually beneficial relationship not only between governments, but indeed between societies and economies more broadly.

The new model implies that a diversity of players, beyond official development agencies and non-governmental development organizations, can share control over the worlds' common destiny. This includes the private sector, of course, but also social partners, academia, think tanks, the diaspora, farmers' organizations, cultural organizations, civil society at large, museums, foundations, social and cooperative enterprises, start-ups, media, local authorities, etc.

In this incipient whole-of-society approach, an ever-growing range of state and non-state actors from anywhere are stimulated to collaborate and to co-create development.

The collaborations between, for example, Europe and its counterparts in what Juncker called its twin-continent can be more than just transactional. The infusion of new forms of financial, social and cultural capital beyond a single commercial transaction or short-term project has the potential to energize the societies and economies on both sides of the Mediterranean, forging lasting bonds.

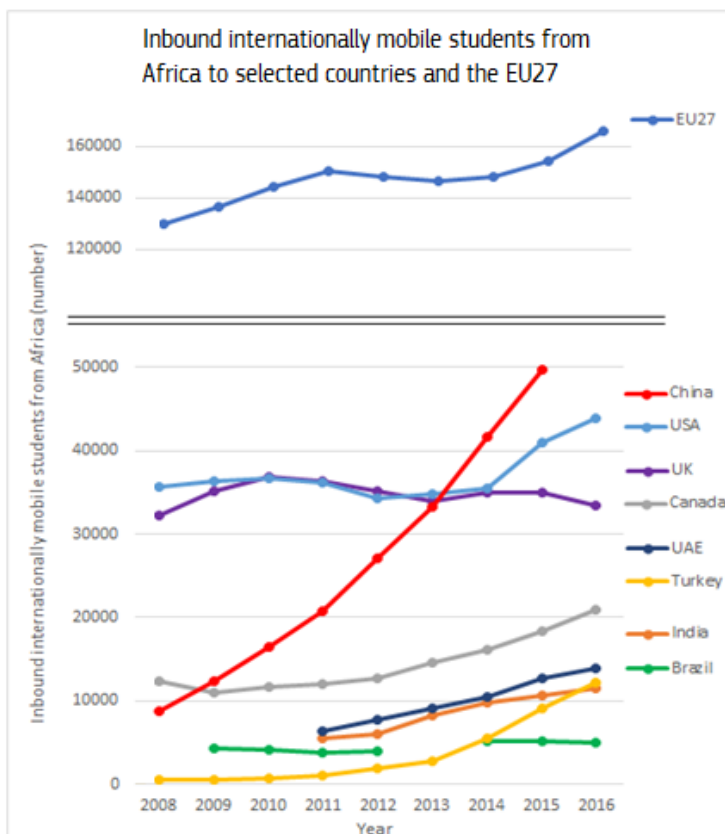
The birth of a new development paradigm faces several obstacles and obstructions, but also criticism from academia, traditional development actors, NGOs and stakeholders in the South. On the side of the Global North, the difficulty lies in the persistence of the perception of their actors as 'donors' rather than 'partners,' which creates an asymmetric relationship largely defined by wealth and interest. The question will always be who wins most from a theoretically mutual interest arrangement. Holden (2020), for example, hints to the fact that the new modalities open windows for development aid to reflect more political realism but also to be used in a more egregiously self-interested way. For Hurt (2020) it remains to be seen whether the new Europe-Africa Alliance will increase the prospects for African agency. In his eyes it seems to be very much an EU-led initiative with tacit support from the AU. On the side of the developing countries, the difficulty resides in the continuation of a top-down mentality among many governments, which often overpowers the capacity of non-state actors to take leading roles, and can result in inefficiency in pursuing dialogue and objectives with their international counterparts.

The bumpy road from knowledge transfer to knowledge co-creation

Ties between European and African educational and research institutions have been forged since colonial times when training and research were vehicles for knowledge transfer from a metropolitan environment where knowledge was considered abundantly available to places characterized by a blatant deficit in knowledge. These ties remain strong, intense and dynamic with twinning arrangements between European and African universities, joint research initiatives and programs, exchange of students and scholars. As the following table shows Europe is still the most attractive place for African students to take up their scholarship. French universities host the most African students.

However, two remarks can be made. First, as the graph makes clear the heterogeneous club of so-called emerging donor countries, especially China but also India, the UAE and Turkey, are increasingly investing in their ties with African

universities and are become popular destinations for African students. Secondly, Europe is a more attractive place to study for young Africans than Africa seems to be for young Europeans. Although there were, in 2016, little over 166,000 African students doing their studies in the EU27, in the same year only around 2,900 EU27 students were enrolled in African universities.



Source: UIS, Stat, Chinese Ministry of Education, EPS C

Public and soft diplomacy, such as language and science diplomacy, seems to play an important role in some of the “new donors” strategies. Mirroring French and British efforts to promote their respective culture and language, China already boasts 54 Confucius Institutes in 38 African countries. By comparison, *L’Alliance française* is present in 37 African countries, although more intensively (126 institutes). In 2018, *Rosstrudnichestvo* announced it would open new Russian cultural centres in Africa, Asia and Latin America. In almost every single African country one finds China Study Centres in one or more universities. Systematically these centres are institutionally linked to prestigious Chinese universities that host African students and do (joint) research on issues relevant for contemporary Africa and China alike. Since 2016 Korean study units are established at universities in a variety of African countries ranging from South Africa to Tanzania, Kenya and Ivory Coast. This dynamic and expansionist drive from the (relatively) new international actors on the African scene

contrasts sharply with the fact that there are European Study Centres in only three African countries (Tunis, Egypt, South Africa). Again, this does not reflect the lack of interest of European academia in the African continent. Europe boasts not less than 56 African study centres, most of them involved in the Aegis research network (www.aegis-eu.org).

From this, one can conclude that cooperation between European and African universities is, at least on an institutional level, far from bidirectional and still on the side of the European scholars leavened by a genuine desire to better understand past and current African realities on the one hand and to give a selected group of young Africans the opportunity to immerse in European (student) life and taste the European epistemic on the other hand. The simple fact that African researchers and students currently have access to the internet liberates them from an erstwhile dependent relation that limited their agency and their choices in terms of the universities and scholars they could relate with and the knowledge and knowhow they could receive. Knowledge acquisition as an alternative and liberating option to the smothering knowledge transfer mode is currently even enhanced by the proliferation of new offers to discover, to exchange or to cooperate with academic and other research institutes in the traditional but also the non-conventional donor countries.

The field of Research and Innovation, involving universities along with other research centres and the private sector, is another major test case for the Europe – Africa Alliance. As ECDPM think tankers write in a recent discussion paper collaboration between Europe and Africa in this area has evolved into a multi-layered set of relations. These have grown from colonial times, when research was mainly extractive and developing from individual ties among scientists to formal governmental involvement (Di Ciommo et.al. 2019). Many European member states have a large presence in Africa when it comes to R&I but EU-wide coordination and even information exchange on the issue is limited. In the meantime, other countries like China, India, Russia, Turkey and the United States influence the global R&I agenda and politics, including the incipient African R&I scenery, and have stepped up their engagement with Africa over the past decade. Some of them have historically established knowledge and technology exchange mechanisms and push for more South-South cooperation. China, for example, has developed a Belt and Road Science, Technology and Innovation Cooperation Action Plan and encourages knowledge and technology transfer to Africa through, for example, technology transfer offices and their recently created China-Africa joint research centre. The ECDPM researchers, who interviewed R&I stakeholders in Africa and Brussels, conclude that the EU has showed its limits in working in the field of innovation. They noted that African partners prefer a more honest communication on the motives and the benefits the EU expects to gain from collaboration. There also is a demand in Africa for more risk-taking, as well as flexible and rapidly deployed funding. Some of their interlocutors mentioned that all of this needs a change of mindset in Europe, away from the clichéd image of Africa as a continent hindered by intractable issues

alone. And, tellingly, many express their view that Africa needs to move away from the donor-recipient mentality when looking at Europe (Di Ciommo & Thijssen, 2019). As a policy conclusion ECDPM and the Deutsche Stiftung Weltbevölkerung (DSW) suggest that a more demand-driven and locally relevant research agenda could be built on wider and more timely engagement with African actors. They hint to the fact that the Joint Africa EU Strategy and Europe's major research programme Horizon2020 already suggest to co-create and co-design some aspects of the joint programmes with society, including in strategic programming and specific (ECDPM & DSW, 2020).

One can only conclude that the mental frame for a new relationship between Europe and Africa in the R&I community is maturing, but that this is challenged by a weakening of the monopolistic rapport both continents were locked into and a stubborn path dependency. The road to co-creation of knowledge seems to be bumpy.

How does this translate at the more personal level of interactions between European and African researchers and other academic staff? Dahdouh-Guebas et. al. (2003) made the sobering observation that western academics involved in research in southern countries pride themselves to be engaged in development cooperation but more often than not submit their southern partners in a subaltern position. They investigated whether publications of scientific research that is carried out in the least developed countries is done in cooperation with research institutes from these countries and what the consequences were in terms of authorship position. Using the Current Contents database of peer-reviewed publications they showed that 69% of the publications of research carried out in least developed countries by at least one 'western author', were done without including local research institutes. This percentage appeared to be variable according to the science category with Life Sciences having a much better collaboration percentage (65%) than Basic and Applied Sciences (27%), and a negligible collaboration for the Social and Human Sciences (5%). Within the subsample of papers where collaboration exists, the 'target country' was only occupying a first author position in a minority (on average in 30%) of the cases. The majority thus fell under the so-called 'safari-research' category i.e. research carried out in developing countries, published as coauthored papers, and with a 'developed country' author as the lead author. Still, asked about their concrete practices of collaboration, the majority of western researchers was in favour of collaboration, arguing that local scientists are scientifically as reliable as scientists from industrialised countries, and they acknowledged that local institutes in least developed countries must be involved in scientific research undertakings by foreign groups. Specifically, they stated that this actually happened in their case on the level of proposal-writing, in situ data collection, analysis and publication.

The inconvenient truth that scientists of the global North are consciously and unconsciously perpetuating asymmetric relations with their counterparts in the south and notably in Africa is corroborated by research and a growing package of evidence and is food for much debate. This twisted and deeply rooted relation hinders the

transition from a paternalistic knowledge transfer mode to one in which both parties join forces to facilitate each other's perpetual need to acquire new knowledge and to co-construct research paths that are mutually beneficial.

In a recent paper Marchais, Bazuzi and Lameke (2020) reflect on the creation and evolution of a non-profit association specialized in the collection of data in conflict-affected areas of eastern DRC. The research association was conceived as an enclave against the racism that pervades professional relations in the region. They conclude that researchers and research projects in the region are relying on race as a regime of inequality to achieve their ends. They describe how racial inequalities can distort academic knowledge that is produced through inequitable, time-bound research projects. They warn that given that contemporary Western academia is characterized by increased competitiveness, pressure by donors and funders to produce 'value for money', and an impetus for original empirical data which requires extensive labour, there is a clear and present danger that Western research projects are relying on race as a resource to increase production and maintain competitiveness on the academic market.

Marchais, Bazuzi, Lameke and their colleagues were involved in a unique local experiment with the ambition to overcome some of the persistent inequality perpetuating mechanisms blocking genuine partnerships of researchers from north and south. On the initiative of the university of Ghent (Belgium) more than 100 researchers from all over the globe, a volunteer mode, signed a Manifesto for New Avenues for Collaborative Research (<https://www.gicnetwork.be/silent-voices-manifesto/>). They find it reprehensible that research partners in the south are addressed in derogatory ways as fixer, assistant, broker, collaborator, connector, 'local' researcher, host, associate, translator, guide, co-researcher, friend, colleague, protector,... As a radical alternative they suggest five guiding principles to come to just and sincere collaborative research. First they suggest that participants in research collaboration have to be fully transparent about the reasons for and expectations from engaging in collaborations. Sincere research collaboration thrives on diversity in terms of gender, race, nationality, class and educational background. For research collaboration to fulfill its potential the signatories of the Manifesto call for a stronger awareness of the power relations that intersect with this diversity. The third principle might come as a surprise to many in the academic world. The participants in this movement for a fairer rapport in international research cooperation suggest modesty "about the knowledge we produce, and about our own role in producing it". Not only humbleness should underpin co-creation of knowledge, they assert, but also creativity in the pursuit for better ways to do collaborative research. Although the above principles sound far from radical, the participants acknowledge they are far from established practice. As research collaborators, they commit themselves to improve their own modes of thinking and practice. "Together we aim to unsettle mistaken ideas and ill practice in research collaboration", they conclude.

By way of conclusion

The new Africa – EU Alliance comes after much cold water fear. It was no easy exercise to accept that the North-South divide that has been the geometric reference for the conceptualization of the rapport between Europe and Africa has been annihilated by forces as strong as globalization, the advent of new actors and powers on the international and African scene, digitalization and increasing precariousness of global public goods. But over a decade of testing the cold water, the Alliance, finally and as an iterative project, provides a frame to engage with African partners in another, modernized way.

We have seen the unsettling effect of this evolution for the world of knowledge. First considering itself to be part a mission to help to bridge the North-South divide with the transfer of knowledge to 'the heart of darkness', academic and other research actors gradually accommodate(d) themselves with a context in which researchers and students in the South got plenty of avenues to acquire knowledge without guidance from the North. The internet and a growing span of opportunities to liaise with academic circles all over the world had a liberating effect on the knowledge-keen people in the South. Both at the level of policy-makers in Europe and research practitioners we recently see major shifts in the direction of more co-creation of knowledge on an egalitarian footing. This is much in line with the twin-continent and mutual interest concepts underpinning the Africa-EU Alliance. However, this process is still slowed down and even inhibited by vested views and practices that give pre-eminence to a North-South thinking that prescribes knowledge transfer as an unescapable precondition.

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