

Strengthening Cooperation between Europe and Africa on Democratic Reform

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The development of democracy in African states - often prone to situations of fragility or facing difficult post-conflict transitions - remains a considerable challenge. Since the end of the Cold War, one of the cornerstones of the international engagement in Africa has been the reinforcement of democracy. To that end, the European Union and the African Union have both developed frameworks and policies in order to support these complex democratisation processes.

The scope of this conference is to take stock of current practices and policies, review cooperation instruments in support for democratization in Africa and assess political challenges and opportunities in a policy area of constant flux.

The conference will first analyse trends in democratisation processes on the continent over the last decade and the alignment and consistency of European policy agendas, with special attention to the effectiveness of political dialogue and technical cooperation developed under the Cotonou Agreement, a central building block in the relationship between the EU and Africa.

The tensions between a principled approach and the stability agenda are at the centre of this debate. A context of political uncertainty and the delicate equilibrium between conflicting policy objectives has translated into greater inconsistencies between a value oriented rhetoric and policy pragmatism, which affects both credibility and effectiveness of European efforts in support for democratic change and development. Similarly, the difficult coexistence, at times, between domestic agendas and the formation of EU policies towards democratisation processes in Africa have had an important negative impact in the development of EU – Africa relations in the area of support for democratisation. These trends will be analysed and discussed in full during the first day of the conference.

On day two the discussions will be focusing on concrete elements of the practice of the democracy support agenda. We will start by questioning the relevance of the existing policy instruments used to support democratic reform in order to deal with underlying structures of power and domestic agendas. Support for democratisation in Africa (and elsewhere) has not been able to tackle in full the challenge of understanding the underlying structures of power and their impact on policy and institutional reform in the context of democratisation processes.

These remain a crucial factor determining the successes and failures of democratisation processes but also the effectiveness of our own policy instruments in support of these processes.

In this context, the conference will also assess instruments to support political dialogue. The effectiveness of these approaches is proving important to ensure the sustainability of political and institutional reforms – after all political will and commitment of all parties is key to a successful transition – but also to create the conditions for democratic ownership and better aligned policy efforts from the part of international and European donors. If support to democratic reform has to stay an essential component in the EU and AU programmes intended to African governments in transition, how can it deal with these issues in order to reach better results?

Lessons learned from previous panels will be discussed in the context of difficult political transitions (like DRC, Zimbabwe or Burundi). These situations present extraordinary challenges to the international community due to the combination of numerous factors such as continuing conflict, the resilience of authoritarian rulers, conflicting domestic and international interest, the complexity of the political and social processes at stake or the incapacity of domestic political institutions to channel effectively people's demands and actor's preferences.

Finally, the conference will analyse the relations between electoral support and democratisation, and consolidation processes. Elections are at the heart of a well functioning and consolidated democracy. Nevertheless, despite important developments in the area of electoral support (electoral cycle approach) more work seems to be necessary in order to strengthen the link between supporting free and fair elections and other areas of democracy support. The conference will assess recent trends and lessons learned from recent electoral support missions in African countries; raising the question of renewing the social contract between governments their respective populations.

In order to ground the debates, case studies will be presented on the effectiveness of policy instruments to work with local agenda's and power structures (Ethiopia or Côte d'Ivoire), difficult transitions (DRC, Burundi or Zimbabwe), and elections observation and support (Sudan and Mozambique).

This conference is organised with the support of the Belgian Presidency of the EU and in partnership with the European Partnership for Democracy. It will bring together African and European policy makers, analysts and stakeholders from different backgrounds with an overall objective to feed directly into the ongoing policy debates both at the EU and AU the level.