Civil society groups in Africa and Europe say that they have been repeatedly shut out of the process of influencing and shaping the agenda for EU-African relations. The result, they argue, is a top-down process between political leaders that is disconnected from the needs of local people and their communities. With the EU and African Union in the process of drawing up a new 'strategic partnership' between the two blocs, this needs to change.

In this event report, EURACTIV looks at the demands and expectations of civil society groups and how they can be at the heart of developing EU-Africa relations.
EU-Africa must be a ‘fair partnership’ of equals, say NGOs
There’s still time to change EU-Africa agenda, say activists
Civil society driving change: Towards a new quality of the Africa-Europe partnership
African civil society groups want to be part of drawing up a new ‘strategic partnership’ between the EU and the African Union, in a bid to overhaul a process which many believe is deeply dysfunctional.

More than two thirds of civil society organisations from Africa and Europe believe that cooperation between the two continents “does not work well” or “not at all”, according to a survey of over 360 representatives of civil society organisations from Africa and Europe by VENRO, the umbrella organisation of German development NGOs, in October.

“A deeper partnership has to be more than a process between governments. It must be built on human relationships, and enable dialogue and participation,” argues a VENRO policy paper published ahead of the delayed EU-Africa summit, which is pencilled in for December.

The paper urges the German government, the current holder of the rotating EU presidency, to prioritise health, participation of all generations, climate justice, peaceful societies, fair economic and trade relations and fair digitalisation in the new partnership.

The European Commission presented its draft for a ‘partnership’ with Africa in March on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic, promising to “build a more prosperous, more peaceful and more sustainable future for all”, around five proposed partnerships on energy, digitalisation, inward investment, peace and migration.

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African civil society activists say that the EU-Africa relationship has long been unequal and dysfunctional, with the EU dictating the terms on trade, economic relations and migration, amongst other issues.

Yet despite their criticisms of the EU, many African activists say that the African Union has failed to punch its weight and be assertive when dealing with Brussels.

“The AU has also failed to overcome the dependency syndrome and to come up with a coherent cooperation strategy for the EU,” says Jane Nalunga, director of the Southern and Eastern Africa Trade Information and Negotiations Institute.

“Our governments in the AU showed so much silence it was deafening,” adds Lungisa Huna, Director of the Rural Women’s Assembly. “They've not had much to say. Many of the issues are structural issues.”

**A SEAT AT THE TABLE**

In the meantime, many African governments are ambivalent or openly hostile towards civil society groups in their countries.

At an event held in Berlin by VENRO, Jestas Nyamanga, Tanzania’s ambassador to the EU and Africa, Caribbean and Pacific community, questioned whether civil society groups were really representative of their populations, accusing them of behaving like an alternative to elected governments.

That point is refuted by Chika Onyejiuwa, executive secretary of the Africa Europe Faith and Justice network.

“African leaders don't speak for their people. They don't have the interests of their people at heart and that is why the resources of their countries are stashed abroad. They don't like dissenting voices (from civil society organisations) because you are simply challenging the status quo,” he says.

“European civil society should appreciate the challenges facing African civil society, especially in terms of access to resources and the complicated operating environment,” explains Jane Nalunga.

Despite European and African activist groups having a lot of common goals, “there is a power imbalance based on access to resources like finances, information and spaces for engagement. This has sometimes led to a skewed relationship between the two sides,” adds Nalunga.

That appears to be reflected in the survey finding that 71% of respondents were hardly or not at all familiar with the ‘Africa-Europe Partnership’ initiated by the AU and the EU back in 2007.

Civil society is the key, said French MEP Chrysoula Zacharopoulou, adding that the delay to the EU-AU summit could be a ‘silver lining’ by giving extra time to reset the agenda.

Other panellists at the VENRO event said that the nature of EU-Africa co-operation has meant that it has been driven by politicians, not civil society, a dynamic that urgently needs to change. “Civil society is the conscience of the people,” said Abu Brima, Director of the Network Movement for Justice and Development.

In a communique launched at the VENRO conference, African civil society groups expressed concern at the EU’s “failure to address the big issues facing Africa, primarily the corporate capture of food systems, and the damage this is doing to our environment, our soils, lands and water, our biodiversity, our nutrition and health.”

The 2020 EU Strategy with Africa was “concentrating on creating a conducive environment for large scale private sector business interests,” the communique added.
As policy-makers in Brussels and Addis Ababa plough ahead with plans for what is billed as an ambitious ‘strategic partnership’ between the EU and Africa, civil society groups complain that they have been repeatedly shut out from having any influence over EU-African relations.

“We have never been asked to participate (in AU-EU summits) and we don’t know the agendas,” Million Belay, co-ordinator of the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa, told EURACTIV on the sidelines of an event organised by VENRO, the Association of German development NGOs.

That needs to change says Belay and fellow civil society leaders, who also insist African governments need to take more ownership of the ‘strategic partnership’, because there is a prevailing sense that the blueprint has been drawn up by Europe for Africa.

“We have no idea how the agenda was developed. I would suspect that the EU has had a big hand. I feel that it has not been drawn up by Africa – a heavy European hand,” adds Belay.

“The challenge remains for us as a civil society movement to advocate for change and for political leaders to take account of the struggles facing local people,” adds Lungisa Huna, director of the Rural Women’s Assembly.

“People are tired of waiting – they want to see change and we as the people on the ground want to be part of these negotiations.”

UNEQUAL RELATIONS

In the meantime, many African governments are ambivalent or openly hostile towards civil society groups in their countries.

But Belay and his colleagues have had only mixed support from African governments.

“The relationship between civil society and government (in Africa) is very difficult,” says Belay, adding that “I don’t expect African countries to be consulting with CSOs”.

That poses the question of whether the process is just a top-down exercise between political elites.

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“There is a chance for African civil society who have been really marginalised from this process,” says Emmanuel Yap, who represents the Coopération Internationale pour le Développement et la Solidarité, an organisation of Catholic development agencies.

Yap sees an opportunity to raise the issue of transparency and the participation of grass-roots activists.

“We see that under the German presidency, the German civil society is listened to. We should seize this opportunity, and the onus is on the EU to use their imbalanced power relations to get civil society voices heard,” he says.

Yet there is still a sense that inequality is entrenched in the EU-Africa dynamic.

“There is a fundamental lie in the EU-Africa partnership,” says Chika Onyejiuwa, executive secretary of the Africa Europe Faith and Justice network.

“The EU is a unified entity – it presumes that it is negotiating with Africa on an equal basis. That is the fundamental lie. Any agreement is polluted by the fundamental lie.”

The relationship “is becoming more unequal”, he warns. “How come the agenda and postponement was dictated by the EU.”

“You are talking about a partnership but do not ask me my interest.”

That point is echoed by Million Belay who remarks that “the EU-AU is not a relationship between equal actors.”

**CHANGING THE AGENDA**

One of the main priorities of African governments from the process is to secure improved trade terms that will enable them to develop domestic and regional manufacturing with a view to increasing exports.

“The trade imbalance is the economic structure that sustains it. It is this system that has become entrenched – it hasn’t changed from what it was during the colonial period. Words are changing but the substance has not changed,” says Chika Onyejiuwa.

With the summit now set to be held in December, the pressure is now on the African Union to be more assertive.

“The agenda can be changed. Civil society in Africa and Europe must be consulted and be part of the process – so we can work out the mutual interests of our two continents,” says Onyejiuwa.

“How can it be that we don’t talk about improving value chains in Africa, or sustainable food systems in Africa?”

“If you develop the value chain then the jobs will be there,” he adds.

**PRIORITISE AGRICULTURE**

In the meantime, agriculture should be key priority of African leaders.

“I am quite shocked that agriculture or sustainable food systems are not on the agenda – over 70% of Africans are small scale farmers. It’s our main source of GDP and most Africans live in rural areas, and our agriculture is in shambles. Agroecology should have been on the agenda,” says Million Belay.

That will mean taking promoting small-scale farming rather than focusing on increased investment and access for agribusiness giants.

“We cannot continue to have big agribusiness feeding our people the wrong kind of food– we want to have food and seed sovereignty,” adds Lungisa Huna.

In that vein, campaign groups have launched the ‘Our Land is Our Life’ platform, which seeks to promote African rural development and agroecology, combat land grabbing and monitor the use of EU investment activities.

“This platform is also about promoting solutions, such as agroecology,” says Emmanuel Yap.

“But the problem is that there is a lack of funds and subsidies for industrial agriculture in Africa which is destroying agriculture in Africa.”

“COVID has made us realise that we have to rethink how we organise our food system and I think Europe is now realising that. That is why the movement for food sovereignty is more important than ever,” he says.

“Hopefully the EU will listen more – we have launched our campaign to get our demands heard,” he concludes.
The African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) have long announced their intention to establish closer cooperation. But postponing the sixth AU-EU summit, originally planned for October 2020, is yet another example of the half-hearted political relations between our two continents. It is now high time to involve civil society in an inclusive and open process that must result in a partnership of equals.

Bernd Bornhorst is the chairman of the Association of German Development and Humanitarian Aid NGOs (VENRO).

African and European societies face an ever-increasing number of common issues and shared concerns: the coronavirus response, multilateralism and climate protection; functioning health care systems, human rights and social protection; rural development and food security; local value chains and fair trade relations; decent jobs and safe migration routes; corruption and illicit financial flows; intergenerational and gender justice; digitalisation and civic engagement; not to forget, confronting the colonial past.

There is an obvious need for closer and more equitable collaboration between Africa and Europe. But the postponement of the sixth AU-EU
Summit to 2021, which actually could have been organised virtually like the EU-China Summit in September, or the contentious negotiations over the EU budget and the coronavirus recovery fund, which have largely neglected the Global South, speak a different language. Neither national governments nor the German EU Council Presidency nor AU and EU institutions have lived up to their promise to give the necessary impetus that would drive our relations forward. On the contrary, they seem to be trapped in past dependencies and repetitive rituals.

CIVIL SOCIETY CONNECTS LOCAL AND POLICY LEVEL

Political initiatives like the Africa-EU Partnership or the AU-EU Strategy should address all these pertinent issues and propose solutions. But although they have an impact on the lives of more than 1.6 billion people, these processes are almost unknown among the general public. Needless to say, citizens can only benefit from political decisions if they understand or, even better, have an opportunity to influence them.

The relations between Africa and Europe should therefore be much more than just a formal process between governments. And actually they are: It is time that AU, EU and national governments acknowledge the positive contribution of African and European civil societies in promoting democracy, human rights, peace, and the wellbeing of the people. The enormous response to the coronavirus pandemic is just the latest example of how civic engagement and international solidarity contribute to human development.

In its capacity as a bridge between the local and the policy level, civil society can render the African-European partnership more transparent and accessible. But this implies that civil society sits at the table, ideally in a way that reflects the cultural and social diversity of our two continents— including, among others, diaspora groups, grassroots organisations, indigenous people, or youth initiatives.

REGULAR CONSULTATIONS AND NEW FORMS OF DIGITAL COOPERATION

Over the last months and years, civil society has repeatedly asked for genuine consultation with citizens from both continents. Rescheduling the AU-EU Summit to 2021 at least offers an opportunity to organise such involvement. In the medium to long term it needs to be institutionalised in the form of regular consultations and participation in decision-making processes. Concrete mechanisms have to be established and financially supported to make this happen.

New forms of digital cooperation can help harness local knowledge and promote political participation even amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. Ahead of the German EU Presidency in July 2020, the Association of German Development and Humanitarian Aid NGOs (VENRO) invited around 70 NGOs from Africa and Europe to join the multi-week Digital Africa Forum which came up with a position paper on the Africa-EU partnership addressed to the German Government.

VENRO and its partners in the EU Presidency Project “Towards an open, fair and sustainable Europe in the world” – the European NGO Confederation for Relief and Development (CONCORD), the Plataforma Portuguesas das ONGD, and the Slovenian NGO Platform for Development, Global Education and Humanitarian Aid (SLOGA) – will continue along this line. On 16 October, the hybrid conference “Civil society driving change: Towards a new quality of the Africa-Europe partnership” will take place with broad participation from African and European civil-society actors and policymakers. More than 400 participants have registered and will come up with concrete ideas and recommendations on how to improve African-European relations.

These examples show that there exists a strong desire to jointly discuss our future. A new quality of the Africa-Europe Partnership can only be reached if African and European civil society are recognised as drivers of change and are able to contribute their expertise. The current German and following Portuguese EU Presidencies should use the remaining time until the AU-EU Summit 2021 to organise participation. We have pushed and will continue to push our governments in that direction to make politics work for all of us.
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