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Public Perception as key to the Success of EU/Africa Cooperation

By Lisa Monaghan in Belfast for CAAGLOP (07/12/07)

With the AU/EU summit only days away, we are approaching what marks a fundamental escalation in the strategy to create a partnership between Africa and Europe, based on common goals and values. With the leaders summit on the 8/9th of December what is to be made of the attitudes of the people of AU and EU states? Aside from the Mugabe issue, the summit has received relatively few column inches in European newspapers, the event has been overshadowed by the signing of the new EU constitution and the de-escalation of US hostilities with Iran.

Of greater concern to those hoping the summit will bring a positive change in relations, and a reformation away from the traditional paternalistic relationship to one of sustainable co-operation, is that the lack of attention being paid by the European Press is juxtapositioned against negative attention the AU/EU summit is receiving in Africa, with particular reference to the controversial EPA issue. The Accra Summit of July 2007 was met with public demonstrations, and the EPA's have been challenged by the Kenyan National Commission of Human Rights, to name two examples. These are simply a microcosm of the potential opposition any agreement made will face if the people of Africa are not brought along with any agreement.

There is to be no mistaking who the real winners or losers of the summit will be, and that will be the African people, all balancing upon what is decided at the Lisbon Summit. Two key issues will be whether the AU can actually act as a spearhead pressing for the most beneficial agreements for Africa as a whole or will it opt for the path of least resistant and

acquiesce into the demands of the EU. Some of these demands are not unreasonable. It would be difficult to argue against EU calls for greater democratisation, greater accountability and the extension of human rights, as well as for the cessation of violence in many countries, but these cannot be achieved by the AU alone. If the EU expects, then the EU must assist. There are other issues though where the AU will potentially become pushed over, and AU should resist adopting economic agreements which will be detrimental to its sustainable development. This will at best slow the development of the African economy, and at worst cripple them, resulting in the premature disintegration of the ideal of African Unity.

The second issue is that of the participation of the African people. As this summit will impact their lives most directly, best practice and good faith should motivate African leaders to honour their responsibility to the individuals they represent. The EU must honour its commitments to sustainable development and the Millennium Development Goals. Additionally the AU must inform and liaise with its citizens to create goodwill, based on good policies, between the African people and the AU/EU summit; otherwise the entire endeavour will become abortive.

The AU faces many challenges in the coming years if it is to generate an expansion of its influence both regionally and internationally. The implementation of the Summit and the communication of the purposes and aims of the AU/EU partnership is one of its earliest and most difficult tasks. With less than 1 staff member per 2 million people any task is an administrative feat. John Kotsopoulos and Elizabeth Sidiropoulos for the European Policy Centre (EPC) correctly identify the enormous structural and organisation capacity gaps between the AU and EU. This is one area where the EU can be of substantial assistance, helping to communicate the agreement settlements as well as draw feedback regarding its implementation.

The Lisbon Summit is the next AU/EU Summit meeting but it will not be the last. 7 years is a long time in politics and no doubt there will be measures to reduce this time-period between meetings. This summit will not be a "cure-all" and indeed this shouldn't be its aim. This summit will establish the tone of future AU/EU meetings. The interim period will establish the level of trust between the two regional

organisations, and to what extent they honour their commitments made to each other. This interim period is a critical period for gathering public support for the inter-regional co-operation, particularly in Africa. These are the individuals who will be living the reality of the Summit agreements, and will be involved in the implementation of any agreement. It will be they who will be continually involved in the monitoring and evaluating process, and it will be in their best interest that any decision made, should be based on their opinions. Poor public involvement will lead to poor policies and as a result a failure of the entire endeavour. The primary importance played by the Africans as the key resource in implementing and sustaining the summit agreements must be acknowledged, any attempt otherwise will be foolhardy.

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