

Building a strategic partnership between Africa and Europe The challenge of CSOS!

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Exploring the historical landscape

This paper aims at examining the challenges for CSOs both in Africa and Europe, to effectively and actively participate in shaping a new partnership between Europe and Africa. The topic under discussion infers that there have been previous, and probably ongoing, partnerships between the two continents that need to either be revised or reshaped and in which CSOs have not played a critical role.

In order to appropriately situate the discussion, it is essential to shed light on the historical events that have over the years shaped the current partnership between the two continents.

African and European interaction is traceable to the seeds sown over centuries commencing with the early exploration voyages, in the eras of Vasco da Gama, when Africa was perceived as the intriguing Dark Continent that had to be explored. This was later followed by the exploration treks of the early European travelers such as David Living Stone, Henry Morton Stanley, Samuel Baker and others.

The current relationship equally has its roots in the early economic interests Europe developed of Africa especially as Europe progressively industrialized. Africa then emerged as a crucial source and supplier of raw materials, thus culminating into slave trade and later the scramble and colonization of Africa. European countries that later took, for themselves, colonies in Africa were driven by the primary motive of gaining access and control over raw materials that the continent was endowed with.

During the later European politics of the cold war, Africa was again an important playing field where the economic, ideological and geopolitical struggles, between capitalist west and socialist Eastern Europe, were played out until the 1980s when the Soviet Union and the Berlin wall came down.

Summing up the history of partnership between Africa and Europe, historians may agree, these have been varied but have always been shaped by the economic and geopolitical interests at play in Europe. CSOs and particularly those in Africa have always had very scanty roles in shaping such partnership. There are three important lessons that emerge from this brief historical overview:

1. The seeds planted through history have shaped and continue to define the manner in which the two continents interact and engage each other up to today.
2. In all these experiences, Africa people and institutions have always been passive participants.
3. The world is being reshaped and new partnerships need to be forged and CSOs in both continents have a role to play.

What is at play today?

Before delving into the subject of challenges that CSOS have to overcome, it is essential to examine the current economic and political discourses in the world so as to determine the role, if any, for CSOs and the challenges CSOS would have to overcome to effectively play such role.

The fall of the iron curtain gave dynamism to capitalism to relentlessly push and shape a new global agenda. Global capital and trade were deemed as the main mechanisms for delivering social and economic development and therefore had to be pursued at all costs. The World Bank, the IMF, the WTO and many multilateral agencies, all built on a capitalist ideology and broadly owned by rich European states, are among key institutions that have been in the thick of driving this new agenda. This drive has culminated into- globalization, the dominant ideology of our times.

However globalization has equally come at a price. The quest for more and more wealth has unleashed tremendous pressure on the resources of the world resulting into two crucial developments. On the one hand it has led to an escalation in the demand for raw materials and hence generated new geopolitical interests in which capitalism as the predominant ideology competes against itself! This is evidenced by the manner in which the US and EU are trying to outdo each other in curving out economic hegemonies in Africa, Latin America and Asia.

Globalization has also given rise to several new and significant actors, China, India, Brazil, whose industrial growth and increasing demand for raw materials is raising a new wave of geopolitical and economic considerations and is shaping the world in its own right.

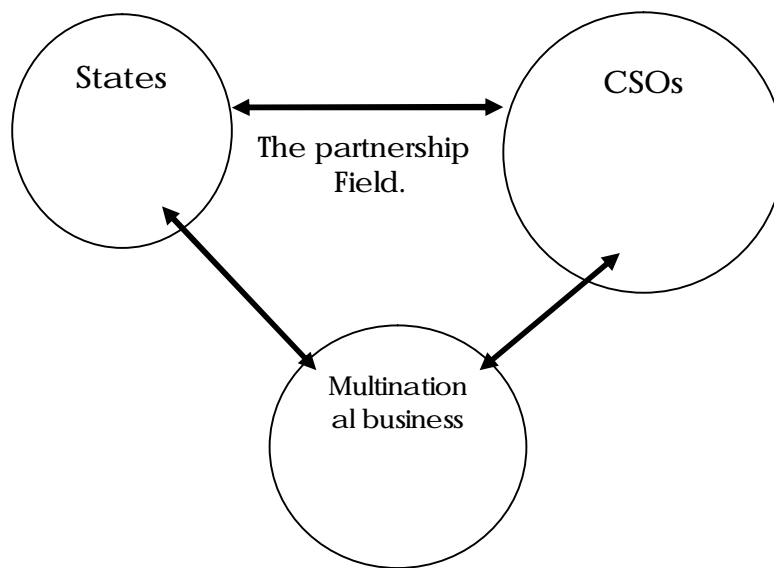
But perhaps the major contribution of Globalization has been shading light on the fundamental gap between rich and poor and how current economic pursuits are impacting on the two.

Do CSOs have a role to play in this situation?

While the idea of a new strategic partnership between Europe and Africa emerges primarily as a European driven initiative, it is significant in two ways.

1. A new Africa Europe partnership shaped with Africa's own participation and active contribution is a new and exciting phenomenon.
2. This is a rare opportunity for the people of the two continents to break the yoke of history and genuinely redefine the destiny of the two continents.

The above being true therefore implies that there is a role for state actors, private sector and civil society in shaping and creating a new future.



Possible roles for CSOs in forging a new strategic partnership

- Acquire internal growth and authenticity.
- Contribute to shaping ideology
- Mobilizing own resources
- Challenging and facilitate attitude change
- Continue articulating the needs of the poor
- Balance the focus on poverty with proposing new alternatives.

Challenges that CSOS have to overcome

- Confidence to shape ideology

As seen from the diagram above, shaping and nurturing a new strategic partnership draws CSOs into an unfamiliar terrain. Rather than having to work as critiques and opponents to the state and business, CSOS would have to deal with the challenge of shaping ideology and proposing alternatives. It is only by being able to hold its own in such a context that CSO will be regarded as an authentic and equal stakeholder.

A key challenge that CSOS will have to deal with is championing the case of poverty and how to deal with it. At the moment there is a conviction that global trade will deliver development. There are many CSOs that disagree with this and they have evidence. CSOs will need to find more convincing ways to articulate poverty concerns and the need to continue channeling substantial resources in poverty eradication. It will be essential to highlight the fact that even in countries in Europe which have been market driven for centuries, poverty pockets still exists.

Coupled with the above CSOs have to deal with the challenge of how other actors, the state and business, relate and view them. In Africa especially, CSOs are perceived as a foreign creation funded by foreign capital. CSOs have to work hard to prove their credibility. They need to evoke their own internal energy by being impeccable accountable, democratic and honest. Then they will be able to genuinely engage other actors.

European based CSOS that have overcome such hurdles need to support their counterparts in Africa in gaining respect and acceptability by the state and other actors.

- Resourcing and funding

CSOS in many countries in Africa depend on donor support for their work most of who are Europe based. The above Donor support is restrictive, accompanied by stringent measures and is often short term. The above casts doubt on the independence and sustainability of the African CSO. It also often renders them suspect in the eyes of the state and business actors who feel that CSOS are a front for external forces. CSOS will therefore have to overcome the challenge of mobilizing their own independent resources.

Related to the above is the need for CSOs to deal with the challenge of what their constituency is. Who do they represent and to who are they accountable?

CSO in Africa and Europe should evolve into strong mutual partnerships that transcend donor recipient levels. Partnerships between CSOS in the two continents have to be driven by a common commitment to a shared vision.

- Skills and human Capacity

Emerging from a history of relief delivery, to facilitating development and now advocacy, CSOs especially in Africa, will need a completely new set of skills to be able to effectively execute the responsibility of shaping and delivering a strategic partnership.

CSOS will need to adopt a new outlook to life and to adopt new ideologies and philosophies. And because large areas of Africa are groaning under the burden of poverty, CSOS will need to acquire the capacity and skills to constantly articulate this reality. This would require a CSO that can propose alternatives to existing perspectives on how development can be delivered.

CSOs in Europe have a shared responsibility to overcome their paternalistic attitude towards their African counterparts. As pointed out earlier, interaction between the two should be based on mutuality of aspirations and goals.

Most important Europe based CSOS need to deal with the challenge of constantly remembering that their counterparts in Africa are emerging from recent traumatic histories of powerlessness, discrimination, insecurity, violence, sickness, and degrading poverty.

European CSOS will need to support African CSOs to deal with the challenge of externally and internally inflicted powerlessness. These dual challenges require deep self reflection and transformations within the body politic of CSOs in general.

- Attitude change and facilitating attitude change.

Perhaps the greatest challenge that CSOs will have to overcome is the deeply rooted attitudes and stereotypes that have emerged between the people of Europe and Africa over the years. The manner in which people in the two continents regard and relate with each other is broadly a result of how the world has been shaped over the years.

A new strategic partnership will need to address itself to the challenges posed by such attitudes. For instance while Africa needs to cease regarding Europe as, “those people that took us into slavery and colonized us and developed at our expense”, Europe equally needs to cease looking at Africa as, “that place where we can do anything with impunity and once things go out of hand we can run back to the relative safety of our continent and block our borders!”

CSOs face the challenge of instilling a new sense of co-existence and confidence within themselves and facilitate it among other actors as well. The fundamental question this raises is whether the two continents are prepared to change and therefore forge a completely new strategic partnership.

- In conclusion

A Europe that is too prosperous lying next to an Africa that is sinking in indigence and poverty is the reality of our times. But we are also privileged to live at a time when the human being is at its most advanced level of development. Therefore it is well within the means of the human race to deliver prosperity to all human beings.

A new strategic partnership between Europe and Africa based on a shared aspiration and future is achievable. The onus lies on the various participants in this process and how ready they are to let go of the past to invest in a new future of a shared prosperity.