



Following Europafrica's interview with representatives from the African Union and the European Commission. Europafrica posed questions about the JAES after the Summit to a representative of the Belgian Presidency: Renier Nijskens, Director of the Africa Desk at Federal Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His reply to the questions is published in Issue 41 of the Europafrica e-bulletin and on the Europafrica.net website in January 2011.

Renier Nijskens explained the Belgian Presidency's involvement with the JAES in cooperation with other European institutions:

First of all, it should be noted that following the Lisbon Treaty coming into force, the third Africa–EU Summit was co-chaired by European Council President Herman Van Rompuy. In the context of preparing the summit, Belgium acted *under the authority and at the service of* the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, Catherine Ashton. Nevertheless, Belgium, as one of the twenty-seven Member States, has always been committed to making its contribution to monitoring the Africa–EU Strategy and to the success of the summit. It is on the basis of this shared workload that I have agreed to answer your questions.

Europafrica: In your view what is the main added value of the Joint Africa–EU Strategy in comparison with Africa's other strategic partnerships, such as with China for example?

Mr. Nijskens: What the Joint Africa–EU Strategy provides is a singular approach, as reflected in the fundamental principles on which it is based.

- ***Beyond the African continent:*** Africa–EU relations cover all the international questions and key sectors of the world today. Through the eight partnerships implemented in the Action Plan, it addresses all the areas of cooperation between our two continents (ranging from peace to security, trade, climate change, science, etc.). The Joint Strategy takes a global view of our relations, whereas China, for example, targets its relations with Africa which specifically involve trade and infrastructure;
- ***Beyond development:*** emphasis is placed on African ownership through the institutionalisation of contacts and political dialogue between the EU and AU. Relations are no longer characterised by a unilateral transfer between donor and aid recipient;
- ***Beyond the institutions (that structure them):*** it gives a special place to civil society actors, a unique element of this partnership. The role of the private sector and the link between the pan-African and European parliaments are emphasised. The Joint Africa–EU Strategy has brought about a renewed dynamic of dialogue

between different sections of our societies (as reflected by the success of the Business Forum and the Youth Forum, which were held as side events to coincide with the Tripoli Summit).

In addition, the Africa–EU Partnership takes a long-term approach towards areas of cooperation, and is supported by substantial resources. It is thus an investment in the future of the development of the African continent. One should remember that the EU remains the leading provider of official development assistance (ODA). The tenth EDF, covering the period from 2008 to 2013, provides a budget of €22.682 billion, a major part of which is earmarked for the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. Under the tenth EDF, a bigger portion of the budget is devoted to regional programs, thus emphasising the importance assumed by regional economic integration for national and local development. In support of the Africa–EU Strategy and its eight partnerships, the European Commission alone has committed €24.4 billion through its various financial instruments over the period of 2007 to 2013 (European Development Fund, European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument/Instrument for Mediterranean Countries, etc.).

Europafrica: Looking forward what are the three most important priority issues for Africa-EU relations from your perspective?

Mr. Nijskens: At present, I believe the key questions regarding our relationship are the following:

All actors must be involved in the Africa–EU relationship and at all levels. I believe it is essential that the regional and sub-regional economic communities (RECs) of Africa become more deeply involved within the framework of the Africa–EU partnership. Other actors, like parliaments, civil society and the private sector – to which I shall return –, were also induced to take part in the strategy and are invited to join efforts to implement it. This ‘participatory’ approach, which includes different types of actors, constitutes a fundamental element of our relationship with Africa. Unlike during the previous Africa–EU summits, a series of side events were held to coincide with the main event. Their main aim was to breathe new life into the Joint Africa–EU Strategy as a ‘people-centred partnership’ by inviting all those involved in the proper functioning of the summit. In my opinion, all the actors concerned must become more involved in this process with the aim of creating a dynamic from which future beneficiaries of the Africa–EU partnership can benefit. Given the current complexity and the cumulative effect of the actors and various active partnerships on the African continent, of the funding mechanisms and of political and strategic priorities, it has also become absolutely essential to ensure synergies and to strengthen the coherence, coordination and complementarity of initiatives at both the European and the African level.

The national approach must also be re-examined and developed in order to move beyond the framework of dialogue between the two EU and AU Commissions. Summit participation reveals that the strategy is still too much an Addis–Brussels affair. It is indeed crucial to further engage the political leadership of the EU and African Member States both in implementing the JAES and in preparing the next summit. A stronger sense of ownership will result in more political and economic engagement with the continent.

The development of Africa must entail greater involvement by the public sector and closer cooperation between the public and private sectors. The question of the private sector's role is crucial to the future of the African continent and to our relations generally. I think it is essential to promote its role and to encourage the establishment of conditions favourable to foreign investment. It is also important to promote the public sector's assimilation of the commercial style and mindset of the private sector. Private investors will come to Africa only if political and legal conditions are favourable.

I would like to make a point of underscoring the success of the 2010 Business Forum, which brought together over 500 representatives from twenty-four European countries and forty-two African countries in Tripoli. I am reminded of the main message communicated to the heads of state at the summit: *'we need a partnership between governments, donors, international financial institutions, the private sector and local banks so that we can find ways of using aid funding more effectively for promoting development.'* Our Minister of Development Cooperation, Charles Michel, who gave a speech during the closing session of the forum, took the opportunity to emphasise the fact that a great number of representatives from the two continents had made the trip to Tripoli. This demonstrates once again the partners' desire to join together in their commitment to invest in the partnership. The interest shown by European entrepreneurs in taking part in this forum clearly demonstrates that Europe wants to continue to invest in Africa and, in this way, contribute to the development of the continent. In my opinion, the participants' contributions during the round table of business leaders present in Africa were of a high quality and very focused on the most appropriate way of improving the business climate in Africa and of furthering good governance. We must think about the best way of developing these types of initiatives in the future while bolstering the current format of the Business Forum.

Finally, the question of the visibility of EU initiatives in Africa should not be underestimated. Much to my regret, the Tripoli Summit has not facilitated clear messages being launched regarding our partnership with Africa. However, the summits do provide a unique political window that must be capitalised on. It is necessary to change perceptions and to provide effective communication starting today which reaches broad levels of the population both in Europe and in Africa.

Europafrica: In your opinion what sort of progress has the Tripoli Summit brought?

Mr. Nijskens: First, the summit brought about the adoption of two important texts: the 2011–2013 Action Plan, which defines concrete measures that should be pursued or launched in the strategic areas, considering what has been accomplished since 2007; and the Tripoli Joint Declaration in which the partners emphasise the importance attached to their strategic partnership at the global level. The summit was also important in that it brought African and European heads of state round the table for an exchange that, compared to that of Lisbon in 2007, was felt to be more balanced and based more on an honest and open debate between partners, who discussed the eight main priorities of the partnership: peace and security; democratic governance and human rights; trade, regional integration and infrastructure; Millennium development goals; energy; climate change; migration, mobility and employment; and science, information society and space. The recognition of the private sector as a crucial factor in development also constitutes a major plus.

The next Africa–EU summit will be held in Brussels in 2013. Up to that time, lessons must be learned from the Tripoli Summit, and we will have to see how the European Union could ideally adapt its approach so as to better highlight the decisive importance of its partnership and its support mechanisms.

Europafrica: Given the new institutional set-up, where do you think EU political leadership concerning Africa–EU relations should come from?

Mr. Nijskens: First of all, I would like to clarify that since 2005, Belgium has been actively involved in the implementation of the Africa–EU partnership. Consistent with the work to be undertaken by the EU's European External Action Service (EEAS), Belgium will continue to play an important role, as one of the twenty-seven Member States, in implementing the second Action Plan (2011–2013), of which project monitoring is a part, as regards peace and security, or in connection with pursuing the Millennium development goals, for example, which our country has supported for several years, as much as the new initiatives in aid of our key partners, including central Africa. The establishment of the EEAS will ensure the coherence of European policy – through all its instruments – and will facilitate more effective monitoring and better continuity, since this will no longer depend on the instigation of the six-monthly Presidency. The role of High Representative Catherine Ashton, also in her capacity as Vice-President of the European Commission, and that of her departments will be central. The role of the Member States will remain important, however. In this context, Belgium will especially ensure that this project continues to be one of the EU's priorities. Since we started working in the new EU/Lisbon mode, the setting of our political dialogue with the AU needs to be adjusted to make our different dialogue forums (Summit, Ministerial, PSC to PSC) more meaningful.

Europafrica: Many observers considered the First Action Plan as too ambitious, as something that has been detrimental to its implementation. Now the Second Action Plan has just been agreed on. What do you think of it regarding the implementation of the Joint Strategy?

Mr. Nijskens: Indeed, although it perhaps did err on the side of ambition, the First Action Plan (2008–2010) did facilitate the implementation of many projects as far as peace and security are concerned, particularly involving the operationalisation of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). For the 2008–2010 period, €300 million from the tenth EDF was thus reserved for the African Peace Facility (APF), a financial instrument aiming to help the African Union (AU) and the subregional organisations of the African continent deal with conflicts on the ground. The APF is based on the idea that maintaining peace and security in Africa is an essential condition for development; as part of the Millennium development goals, building and rehabilitating miles of road, and building schools; and in the area of energy, hydroelectric projects like the Felou Hydroelectric Project in West Africa, etc. In 2007, when the First Action Plan of the Joint Strategy was launched, it was a matter of establishing a working base with our African partners. In 2010, we learned from this and established an Action Plan for another three-year period (2011–2013), one which is more condensed, focused and concentrated on new initiatives with a specific added value (e.g. regional added value). The Options Document on Horizontal Questions (*Document d'options sur les questions horizontales*), which in a way introduces the Action Plan (2011–2013), aims to improve the structures

underpinning the partnership. In particular, it emphasises the operational implementation of political dialogue and the functional improvement of the Joint Expert Groups, thanks mainly to a strengthening of the coordinating mechanisms; increased African ownership (via the deployment of initiatives simultaneously involving funding, capacities and specific relevance to Africa); and setting up a dialogue platform system and a secretariat (technical support mechanism for implementing the Joint Strategy). In addition to these purely administrative and logistical tasks, the secretariat, funded by the parties, could constitute a pan-African working structure. It will assist in the work carried out by the Joint Expert Groups, thus enabling a greater engagement by the States, and will work to strengthen synergies between the financial instruments and the various areas of cooperation.

Crucially, we must take care to narrow the gap existing between the technical level and the political dimension. It is necessary to impart a direct, intensified political impetus to the work of the experts, which will guarantee better management of the process.

In this way, we can seize the opportunity offered by the deployment of the new European institutional architecture for intensifying contact between European and African heads of state and their departments, given that the Lisbon Treaty has placed development policy at the heart of the EU's policies.

Europafrica: Do you think that the Joint Strategy has helped to improve relations between the two continents?

Mr. Nijskens: Thanks to the Joint Africa–EU Strategy, relations between our continents are now grounded in the reality which the States must face on a global level. It lets our peoples prepare the ground which will allow them to find joint and coherent answers to the multifaceted upheavals and challenges that the modern world confronts us with (e.g. climate change, poverty reduction, the economic and financial crisis, the food crisis and integration in a global economy). Since 2007, and even though there is still a very long road ahead, it seems to me that the tone has changed, the scale of the exchange between our continents has increased, our relationships are more balanced, like those between two partners who appropriate their future together with an even deeper conviction that the prosperity of one contributes to that of the other, and vice versa. This partnership relationship involves the adoption of contractual approaches based on dialogue on the policies to be pursued. The debate on questions such as the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA), for example, developed in a more unbiased manner in Tripoli. We have reason to believe that this progress is also the fruit of the climate of confidence introduced by the Joint Africa–EU Strategy.

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