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Getting partnerships right:
THE CASE FOR AN AU STRATEGY

POLITICAL ECONOMY DYNAMICS OF REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN AFRICA PEDRO

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The African Union (AU) is mandated to promote and defend African common positions on issues of interest to the continent and enable it to play its rightful role in the global economy and international negotiations. One of the AU's key objectives is to encourage international cooperation with external partners to meet its Agenda 2063 vision of Africa as a strong, united, resilient and influential global player and partner.

This paper discusses the AU's Partnership Strategy and Policy Framework, which it is currently developing as part of its ongoing reform process. The objective of the strategy is to reformulate how the AU engages with external partners. The AU has a number of partnerships with countries, regional organisations and international institutions, but there is a realisation within the AU that such partnerships are not fit for purpose and face a number of challenges – including the lack of a coherent strategy.

The new strategy is envisioned to establish clear principles and develop the AU's capacity to negotiate effective partnerships and monitor implementation. The paper identifies the challenges that the AU will need to address going forward. These relate to the AU's institutional architecture for managing partnerships, to its representation role, given the range of sometimes competing interests among member states, and to how it might prioritise its focus with specific partners based on their competences. The paper then provides recommendations for how the AU can advance its agency in external partnerships to ensure mutual benefits with win-win outcomes for the continent.

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Acronyms

ACBF	African Capacity Building foundation
AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
APSA	AU Peace and Security Architecture
AU	African Union
AU-IPPC	AU Interactive Platform for Partnerships Coordination
AU-PCIP	AU Partnership Coordination and Interactive Platform
AUC	African Union Commission
AUDA-NEPAD	AU Development Agency-New Partnership for Africa's Development
AUPSPF	AU Partnership Strategy and Policy Framework
BMZ	German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development
CAP	Common African position
CDC	Centres for Disease Control and Prevention
CIDO	Citizens and Diaspora Directorate
ECDPM	European Centre for Development Policy Management
ECOSOCC	Economic Social and Cultural Council
EU	European Union
FOCAC	Forum on China–Africa Cooperation
HSGOC	Heads of State and Government Orientation Committee
ISS	Institute for Security Studies
JFA	Joint financing arrangement
JPA	Joint programming arrangement
NEPAD	New Partnership for Africa's Development
NPCA	NEPAD Planning and Coordination Agency
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
PAPS	Political Affairs and Peace and Security
PMCD	Partnerships Management and Coordination Division
PMIS	Partnerships Management Information System
PMRM	Partnerships Management and Resource Mobilisation
PRC	Permanent Representatives' Committee
REC	Regional Economic Community
SCWMC	Sub-Committee on the Whole of Multilateral Cooperation
SPPMERM	Strategic Policy Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Resource Mobilisation
TICAD	Tokyo International Conference on African Development
TRIPS	Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights
WTO	World Trade Organization

1. Introduction

Africa's foreign relations are changing. The continent and individual countries are attracting ever-increasing attention externally, and African leaders are also increasingly collectively engaging at the global level. With these evolving dynamics, getting partnerships right is crucial.

The African Union (AU) has the dual role of forging internal unity among its member states and advocating for their interests internationally (Murithi 2010). This involves not only negotiating complex issues and achieving consensus among its member states, but also maintaining that consensus in the face of divergent national interests (Murithi 2010). This is reflected in the AU's growing role in presenting common African positions (CAPs) in global fora and, most importantly, in spite of the challenges, ensuring that member states respect these positions. The AU is also seeking to change how it engages in external strategic partnerships by building synergies with a wide array of countries, regional organisations and international institutions, focussed on maximising mutual benefits in a win-win situation in global fora.

Within the AU, there is a growing realisation that past approaches to partnerships are no longer fit for purpose and that "cooperation between Africa and its partners has mainly been a donor-recipient driven relationship that is skewed in favor of the donors" (ISS 2019a). Internal AU challenges including dependence on external partners, weak governance and leadership have limited the organisation's capacity, as identified in the Kagame Report (Kagame 2017). Further, internal fragmentation amongst countries in the AU's five different geographical regions, underlined by differences in colonial history, creates tensions that undermine unity, thereby limiting the AU's ability to engage with partners on an equal footing and on behalf of its member states (Schadomsky 2017). The AU and its member states have agreed to realign the focus of Africa's partnerships towards its continent's priorities, not least the implementation of its Agenda 2063 Flagship Programmes.

Yet at the same time, there is an ongoing shift in the way African leaders and the AU engage globally. This relates both to the overall *narrative* of African foreign partnerships, and to the way the AU *manages* its partnerships and relations with foreign powers. The relationship between the AU and its member states has often made it difficult to define priorities when engaging with partners, while external partners often perceive Africa as a passive player at the crossroads of global power, even using colonial language such as the "new scramble for Africa" in reference to the growing strategic interest of countries in Africa.[1] The AU is therefore seeking to take a more systematic approach, first identifying existing challenges, gaps and needs which require the support of partners, and then approaching the appropriate partners with the relevant competences.

This paper looks at how the AU seeks to engage with its multiple external partners in an increasingly dense international environment. It focuses on the development of the AU Partnership Strategy and Policy Framework (new Partnership Strategy) in terms of (1) managing multiple external partnerships, and (2) representing AU member state positions and efforts to strengthen AU agency before partners and on the global stage and (3) prioritising the focus of different partners. In doing so, it looks into the interests and incentives that shape how the AU engages with external parties and what this means for its partnership strategy. It attempts to answer the following questions:

- What is the role of the AU in articulating collective and joint policies and in making interventions in international decision and policymaking circles?

[1] *The new scramble for Africa*, The Economist, 7 March 2019.

- What are some of the concrete challenges to coordinating how AU members engage with external partners?
- Will the existence of a new strategy have the political traction to shape AU external partnerships?

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 provides a review of the AU's role as a collective actor in external partnerships and where this fits in the ongoing AU reform process. Section 3 then discusses the case for the new Partnership Strategy and some of the existing challenges it may solve. Section 4 provides a way forward in strengthening the AU agency in external partnerships.

The analysis in this paper is based on the findings of the 2019 *Revised Report of the Permanent Representatives' Committee (PRC) on the Evaluation of the Strategic Partnerships*[2] (PRC Revised Report) (AU 2019a), literature review and on interviews with some AUC staff, members states and academics.

2. Context: The AU as a collective actor in external partnerships

2.1. Historical basis

The concept of a collective African foreign policy is not new, but is part of the political and ideological foundations of the AU. The formation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the predecessor of the AU, had pan-Africanism as a key driving force for a post-colonial, united African state in the early 1960s. Early Pan-African leaders, such as Kwame Nkrumah, highlighted that "[w]e all want a united Africa, united not only in our concept of what unity connotes, but united in our common desire to move forward together in dealing with all the problems that can best be solved only on a continental basis".[3] The OAU sought greater African unity among member states to collectively deal with the challenges of political liberation, economic development and security as well as building solidarity and promoting Africa's stronger voice on the international stage.

Under the OAU, African leaders engaged in different types of cooperation at the multilateral level with individual countries, groups of countries and other regional intergovernmental organisations. These engagements were primarily driven by Cold War dynamics and the need to mobilise development aid in support of the OAU's main objective: to rid the continent of colonialism and apartheid, while safeguarding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states.

The transition from the OAU to the AU highlighted the need to promote African integration and the African continent 'as one' on the international stage, defend Africa's common interests and strengthen Africa's position in the global economy and in the international community.[4] These objectives are reinforced in both the Constitutive Act, which mandates the AU to "encourage international cooperation" (AU 2000), and in the AU's Agenda 2063: Aspiration 7 which envisions "Africa as a strong, united, resilient and influential global player and partner" (AU Agenda 2063). Achieving this will entail improving Africa's place in the global governance system; improving Africa's partnerships, and refocusing them to respond to African priorities for growth and transformation, while ensuring that the continent can finance its own development and reduce aid dependency (AU Agenda 2063).

[2] This revised report is based on the Report on the Subcommittee on Multilateral Cooperation (SCMC) on the Evaluation of Strategic Partnerships EX.CL/992(XXX)v presented at the Executive Council Thirtieth Ordinary Session, 22-27 January 2017. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

[3] *Kwame Nkrumah – 'The People Of Africa Are Crying For Unity'*, New Africa Magazine, 26 July 2012.

[4] AU Constitutive Act.

In seeking to achieve these objectives, the AU has entered into a number of partnerships with individual countries, international institutions and regional organisations in a bid to cooperate strategically to leverage its continental objectives and global position to maximise its impact internationally. At the same time, there is a growing interest in African countries from global powers in multiple areas including commercial, military, cultural and diplomatic relations. The AU therefore seeks to respond to the increasing number of powers looking into Africa as a market and a foreign partner in a way that serves the collective interests of the continent and avoids fragmentation.

Formal mandates

The formal basis of a collective African 'foreign policy' is the AU's Constitutive Act which sets out to "promote and defend African common positions on issues of interest to the continent and its peoples" and to "establish the necessary conditions which enable the continent to play its rightful role in the global economy and in international negotiations" (AU 2000). In this regard, CAPs seek to promote solidarity among AU member states for collective diplomacy at the AU level and could be interpreted as an attempt to give the AU agency in international politics (Gwatiwa 2020). The agency granted to the AU by its member states has enabled it to engage directly with external partners allowing it to become an essential interlocutor vis-a-vis existing and emerging foreign partners. This allows it to streamline the continent's priorities and ensure that partnerships are based on the "principles of equality, ownership, accountability, inclusivity, mutual respect, efficiency, consistency, value addition and comparative advantage" (AU 2018a).

Beyond its formal mandate, solidarity is an important aspect of the AU's ability to carry out its continental vision *vis-à-vis* the international community. Many African countries individually lack the necessary power to negotiate 'as equals' with more powerful partners, making solidarity among Heads of States and Governments a key strength for the AU to leverage in pursuit of a win-win outcome in its partnerships, thus further underpinning its formal mandates.

Better representing its member states is a major element of the on-going AU reform process and a continental priority. Entrusting the representation in single partner summits to a select group of the AU leadership seeks to promote uniformity in the messaging and to minimise instances of division 'divide and rule' where bilateral interests may frustrate continental priorities. It also seeks to reduce transaction costs of partners having to engage with all 55 AU member states on a bilateral basis.

But a major challenge for the AU has been to move beyond an agreement on the need for a common external foreign policy and the principle of solidarity, towards coherent engagement with international organisations and third countries in practice. Past attempts to improve coordination have often faced obstacles, not least from AU member states themselves, thus illustrating some of the challenges that remain for a new partnership strategy. The next section discusses why the new Partnership Strategy is necessary.

2.2. Part of a wider reform process

Recognition of the challenges faced in advancing the AU's agenda have led to an organisational and financial reform process, underway since 2017. This built strongly on the Kagame Report, which noted that the AU is "currently involved in almost every area related to the continent's development. Its work lacks clear focus. This makes it difficult to channel resources strategically and results in a fragmented and ineffective organisation" (Kagame 2017). This lack of direction complicates the allocation of resources and contributes to the AU's organisational fragmentation and inefficiency, leading to a poorly coordinated approach to partners (Kagame 2017). One of the key obstacles to Africa's partnerships is the lack of a coherent strategy towards partners while at the same time, most

partners have developed specific strategies and policies on Africa. These include the European Union (EU) recent Strategy with Africa (EU 2020), China's 2006 and 2015 policies on Africa to mention a few.[5]

In this context the AU has been developing a new AU Partnership Strategy and Policy Framework which will reformulate how it engages with external partners. It aims to establish clear partnership principles as well as develop the AU's capacity to negotiate effective partnerships and monitor implementation and impact (AUC 2021a). The Executive Council in February 2021, requested the Permanent Representatives Council (PRC) in close collaboration with the AU Commission, AU Development Agency-New Partnership for Africa's Development (AUDA-NEPAD), the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and the Groups of African Ambassadors in partner countries, to finalise the development of the *Draft Partnership Strategy and Policy Framework* document for submission to the Executive Council in February 2022 ahead of next year AU's summit (AU 2021).

The development of the Partnership Strategy focuses on realigning the AU institutional framework, to efficiently and effectively manage the AU at both political and operational levels, and improve levels of self-financing, all essential in the AU's move towards strategic and financial autonomy. The AU in the PRC Revised Report, undertook an evaluation of its partnerships with an aim to "(i) enable Africa to speak with one voice; (ii) better target partnerships to the needs of Africa and the partners' comparative advantage; and (iii) apply better working methods in management of Africa's strategic partnerships" (AUC 2021a).The Partnership Strategy (and process around it) responds to different objectives/needs from the AU, including redefining priorities, addressing issues of representation in partnerships summits and meetings and better managing its external partnerships.

However, the key question is whether or not the new strategy will be able to address some of the shortfalls of the past, given the relationship between AU member states and the AU, and the continuing interest of states in engaging with external partners on their own terms. The partnership strategy is essentially an administrative process and a way to better guide the AU's external relations. It relates both to how the AU works with external funders, and how it manages its global voice in external partnership relations. The strategy is a work in progress, yet we can identify a number of key issues the AU is actively seeking to address in its partnership management.

3. Challenges for a new partnership strategy

Given the above context, this section discusses the case for a new AU Partnership Strategy and Policy Framework from three different angles. The first of these relates to the AU's institutional architecture for managing partnerships; the second looks at the AU's representation role, given the range of sometimes competing interests among member states; the third looks at the partners themselves and how the AU might prioritise its focus with specific partners based on their competences.

3.1. Better managing the AU's partnership architecture

AUC partnership arrangements

Previously, partnerships were managed within the AUC by the Partnerships Management and Coordination Division (PMCD), which became functional in 2012, and had been the main body managing and coordinating activities emanating from strategic partnerships at the multilateral level. However, the PMCD faced a number of challenges related to its limited capacity to handle the multiple existing and emerging requests for partnerships with the AU (AU 2019a). Challenges also existed in coordinating between partnerships management and resource mobilisation

[5] See China's African Policy (2006) and China's second Africa policy paper.

from external partners. Formerly, resource mobilisation was done through the Directorate of Strategic Policy Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Resource Mobilisation (SPPMERM) a separate institution from the PMCD, though they are both are viewed as “two sides of the same coin”, often engaging in political relationships and development cooperation with the same partners on similar issues (AU 2020a)

Calls were made for the PMCD division to be upgraded to a directorate to strengthen its institutional capacity and empower it with the necessary resources required to fulfil its mandate, a decision later adopted by the Executive Council in January 2018 (AU 2018c). The new Directorate was envisioned to take on "functions of partnerships management, coordination and resource mobilization” as well as to build “the ability to analyse and negotiate partnership scopes, develop a vision for Africa’s role in the world; and enhance Africa’s voice and representation” (AU 2018c).

As part of the ongoing AU institutional reform, the new structure of the AUC has therefore merged the PMCD and resource mobilisation division of SPPMERM into the Partnerships Management and Resource Mobilisation Directorate (PMRM), under the Bureau of the AUC Chairperson.[6] Its mandate includes to initiate, develop and manage policy for international cooperation and resource mobilisation; to ensure effective communication and information dissemination on all partnerships; as well as monitor, evaluate, follow up and report on partnership dynamics across the continent and globally among others (AUC 2021b). The PMRM is also tasked with facilitating regular dialogue between the AUC and partners at political, policy and technical levels and ensuring regular engagement with the AU Partners’ Group, a key way to strengthen coordination with external funders (AUC 2021b). This renewed, merged mandate seeks to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the AUC when engaging in partners and to ameliorate some of the past challenges related to capacity constraints, weaknesses in coordinated resource mobilisation, monitoring/follow-up, review, reporting and evaluation mechanisms of the partnerships.

Nevertheless, a revived partnership directorate (PMRM) is only one part of the solution as coordination challenges are present within the other AU institutions dealing with partnerships. The infographic below illustrates some of the key actors involved in the AU partnerships framework and some of the existing challenges.

[6] Interview December 2020.

KEY ACTORS IN AU PARTNERSHIP ARCHITECTURE AND SOME CHALLENGES

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Partnerships Management and Resource Mobilisation Directorate (PMRM) (merges the PMCD* and resource mobilisation division of SPPMERM**)

ROLE
Manages and coordinates partnerships and resource mobilisation within the AUC and for the continent.

CHALLENGES
- Under-resourced in both financial and human capacity.
- Lack of senior staff to engage with partners (director position is currently vacant).

Member states

ROLE
Implement AU Assembly decisions including on partnerships.

CHALLENGES
- Position coordination issues have arisen where consultations between member states and AUC have been deficient.
- National interests may be pursued at the expense of continental interests.

African Union Commission (AUC) technical departments

ROLE
Manage the thematic portfolios of the AUC and are responsible for initiating and implementing the programmes and projects to be supported by the partners.

CHALLENGES
AUC technical departments at times by-pass the partnerships unit when dealing directly with partners leading to coordination problems.

Regional Economic Communities (RECs)

ROLE
Building blocks of the AU and important actors in implementation of continental programs at the regional level.

CHALLENGES
RECs have their own mandates and may lack the financial and human resources to implement continental programmes.

African Union Development Agency (AUDA)–New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)

ROLE
Coordinate and execute priority regional and continental projects to promote regional integration towards the accelerated realisation of Agenda 2063 goals.

CHALLENGES
In the past the AUDA NPCA (now replaced by AUDA-NEPAD) wasn't fully integrated into the AU and at times there was lack of synergy with the AUC.

Private sector, civil society and diaspora

ROLE
As part of key AU stakeholders, they participate in the building and development of the African continent.

CHALLENGES
Non-involvement in the partnership management process of the AU, yet some priority areas would benefit from their engagement.

Sub-Committee of the Whole on Multilateral Cooperation (SCWMC)

ROLE
Subcommittee of the Permanent Representatives Committee (PRC) responsible for matters relating to Africa's multilateral partnerships with the rest of the world.

CHALLENGES
Communication gaps including the lack of clarity on whether the partnerships unit or technical departments, lead the way in the preparation and organisation of consultations with partners.

AU Partners Group

ROLE
Enhance partners' cooperation in their engagement with the AU, providing a forum for coordination and harmonisation among the donors accredited to the AU.

CHALLENGES
Partners at times by-pass the partnerships unit and engage directly with technical departments and/or AUC Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson offices, which undermines the credibility of the partnerships unit and leads to coordination problems.

*Partnerships Management and Coordination Division **Directorate of Strategic Policy Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Resource Mobilisation.
Source: Author's' compilation adapted from the AU Executive council (2019) Revised report of the Permanent Representatives' Committee (PRC) on the evaluation of the strategic partnerships, EX.CL/1104(XXXIV)iii Annex 1

The following sections discuss some of the AU actors involved in partnership engagement, existing challenges and how the AU can ensure synergies among these various institutions.

Synergy challenges among AU institutions

Beyond internal coordination challenges at the AUC, there has long been a realisation of the need to strengthen coordination among other bodies concerned with AU strategic partnerships and international cooperation. This section discusses three key relationships with the AUC technical departments, the PRC's Sub-Committee on the Whole of Multilateral Cooperation (SCWMC) and AUDA-NEPAD.

Past challenges in partnership management include administrative delays due to the "low priority given to partnership issues, bureaucracy, workload, amidst a lack of adequate decision-making processes in the absence of Departments' Heads" (AU 2019a). In addition to this, some technical departments did not involve the then PMCD when entering into memorandums of understanding with partners and seeking funding, breaking with procedures for partnership initiation and management (AU 2019a). For example, due to partner support, the former Department of Peace and Security has been likened to "a headquarters within a headquarters" and its status was at times seen as distinct from the AUC.[7] This is exacerbated by the lack of coordination within the AUC on the implementation of AU decisions on partnerships, as well as the partners' lack of awareness of the AU decision making process regarding partnerships initiation and management (AU 2019a).

A further challenge relates to coordination between the PMRM, AUC and the PRC. As the main AU member state body, the PRC plays a leading role in the management of, but also the discussions on rationalising partnerships. Specifically, the PRC's SCWMC is responsible for matters relating to Africa's strategic multilateral partnerships with the rest of the world. Originally, membership of the SCWMC was composed of 15 AU member states, but the new participation format consisting of all AU member states came into effect in 2018 after recognition of the importance of involving all member states in relevant discussions and developments concerning partnerships activities (AUC 2021b) Since the PRC is tasked with facilitating communication between the AUC and member states' capitals, coordination between it and the AUC aims to ensure that member states are consulted and updated on partnerships development and management. However communication challenges are present and at times it is unclear to the PRC who between the AUC and the technical departments lead the way in the preparation and organisation of consultations with partners. (AU 2019a).

Added to this, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) emerged in 2001 at the time the OAU was transitioning to the AU. NEPAD implements continental programmes by brokering partnerships with international financial institutions, UN agencies and Africa's development partners and resource mobilisation for the implementation of Agenda 2063.[8] In the past, in engaging with external partners, weak coordination between the AUC and the NEPAD Planning and Coordination Agency (NPCA) did not send a strong signal to partners that the two structures are complementary. In fact, as noted in the Kagame Report, although NEPAD (before the AU reforms commenced) had been incorporated into the AUC as a technical body, in practice it had not yet been fully integrated. As such, coordination between the AUC and NEPAD was challenging, with each body planning and raising resources independently and in some cases even competing for the same financial resources in similar focus areas (Kagame 2017). For example, NEPAD focuses on industrialisation and infrastructure yet the AUC's Department of Trade, Economic Affairs and the Department of Infrastructure and Energy cover these areas as well (Staegar & Byiers 2021). In July 2018, the NPCA was transformed into the African Union Development Agency-NEPAD (AUDA-NEPAD) as part

[7] Interviews May 2021 and June 2021.
[8] Ibid.

of the overall institutional reforms of the AU.[9] This transformation and full integration into the AU structure is therefore a welcome move towards more synergy which will contribute to higher levels of coordination of partnerships and implementation of continental programmes. The fact that the AUDA-NEPAD unit is housed together with the PMRM under the Bureau of the AUC Chairperson provides opportunities for cooperation. This AUDA-NEPAD unit is mandated to ensure the effective coordination, collaboration and synergy between the AUC, AUDA-NEPAD and the RECs (AUC 2021b). The creation of the AUDA-NEPAD necessitates an adjustment in how partners work with the AU as the role of project implementation is gradually moving away from the AUC to AUDA-NEPAD, whilst the former retains policy and political engagement (AU 2021).

AU-REC coordination on partnerships

Past coordination between AUC and RECs has not been without challenges.[10] At times the AU's partnerships are designed without inputs from RECs, though implementation of continental programmes requires active involvement of RECs. Secondly, RECs themselves negotiate partnerships on their own with the same strategic partners as the AU, leaving room for possible duplication of regional and continental programmes. Further, RECs may lack the financial resources to engage in planning and implementation of AU-related activities, which limits the uptake of continental programmes at the regional level (AU 2019a).

As part of the AU reform process, efforts are being made to improve the coordination between the AU and RECs through annual Mid-Year Coordination meetings. More so, the legal documents governing the AU-REC relations are currently being revised to better provide for division of labour and coordination mechanisms. A draft protocol on AU-REC relations is being finalised for presentation at the AU Summit in 2022, building on a proposed framework for *Division of Labour between the AUC, RECs, and member states* presented at the first AU-REC Summit held in Niamey in 2019 (AU 2019b). RECs are mandated to facilitate the implementation of continental policies, programmes and projects (such as the AfCFTA). They are also responsible for the execution of continental programmes and developing regional frameworks for the mobilisation of resources to implement continental policies and programmes. In addition, the framework specifically addresses partnerships by delineating roles for both the AU and RECs including on joint development of the scope of partnerships and joint resource mobilisation. This will ensure there is synergy between regional and continental partnerships strategies in realising Agenda 2063.

Private sector, civil society and diaspora engagement

One of the key focus areas of the AU reforms is to better connect the continental body to its citizenry. As key stakeholders of the AU's Agenda 2063, the private sector, civil society and the diaspora play an important role in the development of the continent. As such, their participation in the AU partnerships framework may have additional benefits for the implementation of the continental priorities and the AU's flagship projects. However, the AUC has not always comprehensively consulted the private sector, civil society and diaspora in its partnerships management.

[9] AU Assembly, Decision on the Transformation of the NEPAD Planning and Coordinating Agency (NPCA) into the African Union Development Agency (AUDA) Doc.Assembly/AU/2 (XXXI). Assembly/AU /Dec.691(XXXI). Assembly of the Union, Thirty-first Ordinary Session 1-2 July 2018. Nouakchott, Mauritania.

[10] The AU recognises eight RECs, which serve as the building blocks of the AU. However, RECs in themselves are separate legal entities with mandates relating to regional integration among their member states and engage in external partnerships to pursue their regional agenda.

One of the mandates of the now merged PMRM is to "build strong and strategic relationships with the private sector to create sustainable partnerships aligned with the AUC strategy" (AUC 2021b). In fact, the mid-term plan (2018-2023) of the AUC Strategy explicitly provides for private sector engagements for continental economic transformation as one of its thematic areas of focus, with targets for three pilot areas: infrastructure, education/youth and agriculture (AUC 2018). Already private sector involvement has seen some success such as through the AU Business Council and AfroChampions initiative in the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).[11] However, more is needed to leverage this private sector input within partnerships initiation and management as the AU advances in implementation of the AfCFTA. Some forums for private sector engagement in partnerships exist for example, through the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) summits, and the AU-EU partnership but these need to be strengthened.

The AU has existing frameworks for civil society and diaspora engagement through the Economic Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) and the Citizens and Diaspora Directorate (CIDO). Article 3 of the Protocol on Amendments of the Constitutive Act of the African Union specifically encourages the participation of the African diaspora in building the AU while one of the areas identified for diaspora involvement is in intercontinental partnership strategies.[12] However, engagement of civil society and diaspora in continental activities is limited by lack of adequate consultation. There has been some involvement of civil society in peace and security issues, a key AU priority, through the Livingstone formula and the diaspora, through CIDO, has been involved in discussions on the migration-development nexus including on remittances, which is for example, one of the focus areas in the AU-EU partnership on migration and mobility (Mangala 2016). Leveraging civil society and diaspora engagement in partnerships will ensure that the vision of a people-centred Agenda 2063 is implemented.

3.2. Balancing collective representation with member state visibility

'Speaking with one voice' is a clear priority running through all of the above reforms and discussions. This is sought both internally to achieve the Agenda 2063 objectives and externally when engaging with partners to support its continental agenda.

However, ensuring AU member states are on the same page is not always an easy feat. With the rise in partnerships, since the 2000s in particular, there has been an accelerating frequency of Africa summits and partnership meetings with third countries and regions. These include strategic partners with established summit frameworks such as the EU, China, Japan, India, Korea, Turkey and the Arab League, but also through summits with other countries like Russia, France, the United Kingdom and the United States once in 2014 under the Obama administration, with another planned under the Biden administration next year.[13] With 55 AU countries, this can lead to a mass mobilisation of African leaders, and place a high burden on the diplomatic services of AU member states, at times with unclear direct benefits for the participating countries. Former president Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, an early critic of the bilateral summits between Africa and individual third countries, called for the adoption of a mechanism that "preserves its [Africa's] dignity and is no humiliation to the Continent", to avoid instances where the 55 AU heads of state and government have to travel to meet one president or prime minister (AU 2006).

[11] *The African Union Commission engages the Private Sector on the Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA) negotiations processes*, African Union, 12 November 2015 and *AfroChampions Initiative will work side by side with the African Union to promote the African Continental Free Trade Area; AfroChampions Initiative commits USD 1 million on awareness-raising actions*, African Union, 20 March 2018.

[12] African Union Diaspora & Civil Society Engagement.

[13] *President Biden to Host Second U.S. – Africa Leaders Summit*, The White House, 19 November 2021.

Participation in external meetings remains an important prerogative for sovereign member states seeking to meet their own national objectives. African actors are variably using 'Africa+1'[14] summit diplomacy and the competition among external powers as a means to "(i) attract investments through forum shopping in a competitive environment, (ii) diversify economic partners to reduce dependency, (iii) tactically claim back their economic policy space, and (iv) for some, to escape at least temporarily from political isolation by getting more visibility and expanding networks." (Soulé 2020). Summit attendance therefore can be a key way for countries to engage with partners, which is why discussions around who attends such Summits have garnered much debate from AU member states. This is due to the fact that at times bilateral interests are placed before continental interests when engaging with partners resulting in competition for resources and fragmented messaging when engaging with partners.

The crux when dealing with representation matters is how to ensure the right of AU member states to participate in all partnership meetings on one hand, and the stated AU objective of providing an effective framework for AU partnerships as part of its overall AU reform process on the other. This dichotomy reflects the competition between a reluctance of member states to delegate power of representation to AU organs, versus the desire for effectiveness in institutional reform where the representation aspects are streamlined.

Representation at AU partnership summits is important as not all member states enjoy the same relationship with each of the AU's strategic partners in a bilateral context. For example, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, has not been able to attend all partnership meetings, such as that with Russia, owing to the position of some countries, both in the continent (Morocco) and externally, in recognising its official status (ISS 2017). In other cases, some countries have had difficulty or a limited role in some partnership agreements such as the case of Eswatini in the case of China's Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) owing to the former's recognition of Taiwan.[15] Sanctions by some partners against AU member states have prevented them from attending summits. For example, EU sanctions against Zimbabwe led to the postponement of the 2003 summit due to division among leaders from both sides over former President Mugabe's participation.[16] Some EU countries led by Britain opposed his participation, while some AU states led by South Africa supported his attendance.[17] Tensions between AU member states have also prevented attendance of partnership meetings where one of the countries involved in such tensions is hosting the event. As such, actual attendance in partnership meetings has been in practice governed by the nature of diplomatic relationships existing between the member states and partner but also between member states and the host country.

Given rising tensions around how partnerships and summits should be conducted, some member states requested a moratorium on new partnership meetings until the comprehensive review of the AU's partnerships was completed, in order to ensure clear guidance on the modes of interaction (AU 2019a; ISS 2019b). Others however opposed such a moratorium, based on the need to respect the current partnership obligations in place (AU 2019a).

Over the years attempts have been made to coordinate, and limit the participation of AU member states to international partnership meetings, and to ensure a manageable rhythm of these diplomatic events over the course of a year, however, this has been with limited success, and the AU cannot prevent member states from participating. At continent-to-continent partnerships meetings, all AU member states participate however formulas have been proposed for partnerships between the African continent and an individual partner country. Below is a discussion of some of these formats.

[14] Folashadé Soulé, (2020), uses the term 'Africa+1' to refer to instances where African countries convene with a single (non-African) partner country in a summit or partnership meeting.

[15] *Handful African presidents not attending 2018 FOCAC summit in China*, Africa News, 3 September 2018.

[16] *Disarray over Mugabe forces EU to delay summit*, the Guardian, 15 February 2003.

[17] Ibid.

Banjul formula – a one-size-fits all approach

The AU Assembly in 2006 adopted a decision on bilateral summits between African countries and an individual external partner country, colloquially known as the 'Banjul Formula', to try and ensure effective representation and bargaining in such summits.[18] The Formula recommends the following African representation for 'country-to-continent' summitry: the outgoing chairperson of the AU; the incumbent chairperson of the AU; the chairperson of the AU Commission; the five NEPAD founding members (Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria, Senegal and South Africa); the chairperson of the NEPAD Heads of State and Government Implementation Committee; and the current chairing countries of the AU-endorsed eight RECs (AU 2019a). The Banjul formula was devised and adopted to rationalise participation in single-country partnership relationships, irrespective of whether such a partnership is strategic or not.

The Executive Council in 2012 underscored the need for member states to respect the Banjul Formula which was applicable to Africa's partnerships with various countries taken individually, thus enabling Africa's representatives to speak on behalf of all member states.[19] The Banjul Formula began well and was used in the 2008 and 2011 India summits, the 2009 and 2012 Korea summits and the 2014 Turkey summit. However, outside of the Banjul formula, the AU left the door open for all leaders to attend other bilateral summits such as FOCAC and TICAD (ISS 2019b). This sent mixed messaging on the consistency of the use of the Banjul formula. Later summits such as the one with Russia in 2019 also did not adopt the Banjul formula, with 43 heads of state attending.[20]

Member states also raised concerns about the formula's effectiveness. Some AU member states voiced concerns that the Banjul Formula didn't allow for adequate representation of all member states given the absence of adequate rotation in representing Africa vis-a-vis the partner. Others had concerns that member states participating in their capacity as representatives of RECs would represent their national interests over regional interests/priorities (AU 2019a). From the partners perspective, applying the Banjul Formula to all single-country partnerships deprived those partnerships (when considered strategic) of "the merits of the visibility that could be accorded by the non-application of the Banjul Formula" (AU 2017).

Apart from the earlier examples where it was used, the Banjul formula has been ignored more than it has been observed (AU 2017). It was also difficult for the AU to impose its directives on sovereign states when it is not the one organising the summits (ISS 2019b). An example of this was when India chose to depart from the Banjul Formula during the third Africa-India Summit in 2015, and invited 54 African countries. This departure may have been motivated by India's desire to widen its foreign economic policy goals, but was also related to the success of other summits such as FOCAC and the AU-EU summits that have participation of most AU member states.[21]

[18] AU Assembly, Decision on other items proposed by Member States to the Sixth Ordinary Session of the Assembly, Assembly/AU/ Dec.131 (VII). Seventh Ordinary Session 1-2 July. Banjul, The Gambia. This Assembly Decision is based on Holding of Bilateral Summits between Africa and Certain States and the Establishment of a Mechanism to participate in the Summits (Item proposed by the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya), EX.CL/243 (VIII) Add.2 presented at the Executive Council Eight Ordinary Session 16-21 January 2006. Banjul, The Gambia.

[19] AU Executive Council, Decision On The Report Of The PRC Sub-Committee On Multilateral Cooperation with Respect to Africa's Strategic Partnerships, Doc.EX.CL/720(XXI)iv, EX.CL/Dec.699(XXI), Twenty-First Ordinary Session, 9- 13 July 2012. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

[20] *Putin announces Russia's return to Africa in Sochi summit*, Axios, 24 October 2019.

[21] *Goodbye Banjul : India set to intensify relations with Africa*, Graphic online, 29 October 2015.

In a bid to ameliorate some of the tensions around representation, the Executive Council has in practice issued an individual decision for every partnership summit, confirming the date, venue, title and theme, as well the participation formula and has in some cases, found it beneficial to adapt the participation formula in order to maximise the benefit of the partnership and the outcomes of individual summits (AU 2019). The 2017 *Report on the Sub-committee on Multilateral Cooperation on the Evaluation of Strategic Partnerships* also proposed the waiver the application of the Banjul Formula for partnerships that are considered strategic and that "notwithstanding the sovereign right of Partners and member states in conducting their diplomatic relations, priority should be accorded –whenever possible – to holding meetings in venues that can allow the participation of all member states without distinction" (AU 2017). This illustrates the apprehension by member states to limit participation when engaging with strategic partners.

Nevertheless, the issue around representation in partnership summits continued to be discussed within the AU and was one of the areas identified in the AU reform process. In fact, in 2016, 10 years after the adoption of the Banjul formula, the Executive Council requested the AU Commission to review the Banjul formula on the participation from Africa's side,[22] a bid to clarify issues of representation.

The next section discusses the review of the framework for the partnership outlined in the Kagame Report and subsequently adopted in Assembly decisions as part of the AU reform process.

A reviewed framework for Partnership Summits

Given the above challenges, the 2017 Kagame Report recommended that Summits convened by external parties be reviewed with a view to providing an effective framework for AU partnerships (Kagame 2017). Specifically on representation the report recommended that Africa should be represented by the Troika (incumbent, outgoing and incoming Chairpersons) of the AU, the AUC chair and the chairpersons of RECs (Kagame 2017). This recommendation was later adopted in the AU's Decision Assembly/AU/Dec.635(XXVIII) in January 2017, and adjusted to add the Chairperson of the NEPAD, a vital actor in the AU's partnerships framework.

However, some countries found that this formula was not sufficiently representative. The Troika does not capture all the five geographic regions of Africa. Further, when this idea was proposed – the Troika were Chad Guinea and Rwanda, all small states within the AU's power politics, which member states felt can only represent the interests of the Troika and not necessarily that of the continent as a whole.[23] Later, in the February 2019 and July 2019 Executive Council ordinary sessions, there was no consensus from member states on representation in partnership meetings and the matter was referred back to the SCWMC for further consideration in order to reach consensus on AU representation in partnership statutory meetings.[24] This reflects the earlier concerns around the Banjul Formula and the challenge of finding a solution to a representative formula.

[22] AU Executive Council, Decision on the Activities on the Permanent Representatives Committee Doc. PRC/Rpt(XXXI) EX.CL/Dec.899(XXVIII)Rev.2. On Multilateral Cooperation– Doc. EX.CL/928(XXVIII)v. Executive Council Twenty Eight Ordinary Session 23-28 January 2016. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

[23] Interview August 2021.

[24] AU Executive Council, Decision on the Reports of the Sub-Committees of the Permanent Representatives' Committee (PRC), EX.CL/Dec.1031(XXXIV). The Sub-committee on Multilateral Cooperation Doc.EX.CL/1104(XXXIV)iii. Thirty Fourth Ordinary Session 7-8 February 2019. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Subsequently, the AU Assembly at its 2020 Summit finally decided upon representation aspects. First, all AU member states have the right to participate in statutory meetings, related to partnerships between the AU/African Continent and another continent or regional organisation, such as the AU- EU Summits.[25] Secondly, the AU/African Continent will be represented at the statutory meetings of partnerships with a partner country by the members of the Bureau of the Assembly of the Union, the Chairpersons of RECs, the Chairperson of the Heads of State and Government Orientation Committee (HSGOC) of AUDA-NEPAD and the Chairperson of the AU Commission[26]. This builds upon the initial Kagame Report recommendation that had suggested the Troika- now extended to the Bureau.[27] Furthermore this 2020 AU Assembly decision also provides that the internal preparatory process of the Statutory Meetings between the AU/African Continent and a partner country will be inclusive with the participation of all AU member states.[28] This allows for consultation with member states thereby giving more impetus for the AU to speak with one voice when engaging with a partner country.

Even though this format of representation has now been endorsed by the AU Assembly, it is still to be seen if member states and partners will respect this format going forward. This new format is arguably a mere revitalisation of that old format of representation, with representation by a select group of leaders on behalf of all AU member states. Maintaining the consensus on who represents the AU/African continent in partnership statutory meetings is crucial to enable the AU "move forward in an organised manner on its priority to strengthen Africa's global voice and representation" (AU 2020b).

[25] AU Assembly, Decision on Multilateral Cooperation Assembly/AU/Dec.762(XXXIII). This reiterates the 2015 AU Executive Council decision in which it reaffirmed the right of the AU Member States to participate without discrimination in all meetings, activities and events organised within the framework of the partnership in which the *AU is a stakeholder*, as has maintained this stance.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

FORMULAS OF REPRESENTATION AT PARTNERSHIP SUMMITS BETWEEN THE AU AND SINGLE PARTNER COUNTRIES

ecdpm

Banjul formula

- Current AU Chair
- Previous AU Chair
- AUC Chair
- NEPAD HSGIC Chair
- NEPAD* Algeria
- NEPAD*Egypt
- NEPAD* Nigeria
- NEPAD* Senegal
- NEPAD* South Africa
- Chair AMU
- Chair COMESA
- Chair CEN-SAD
- Chair EAC
- Chair ECCAS
- Chair ECOWAS
- Chair IGAD
- Chair SADC

PROS

Seen as a way to balance representation rather than having all AU member states convene before one partner.

CONS

- Lack of rotation of all AU MS.
- Elevated the 5 NEPAD founding members over other AU MS.
- National interest may be pursued at the expense of regional and continental interests.

Kagame report recommendation

Troika

- Outgoing AU Chair
- Incumbent AU Chair
- Incoming AU Chair
- AUC chair
- Chair AMU
- Chair COMESA
- Chair CEN-SAD
- Chair EAC
- Chair ECCAS
- Chair ECOWAS
- Chair IGAD
- Chair SADC

PROS

Troika ensures continuity among the AU leadership on the reform process.

CONS

- Troika excludes all 5 geographical regions of the AU.
- Excluded NEPAD-AUDA.

AU Assembly/AU/Dec.762(XXXIII)

Bureau of the Assembly

- Incumbent AU Chair
- First Vice-Chair
- Second Vice-Chair
- Third Vice-Chair
- Rapporteur
- AUC Chair
- AUDA-NEPAD HSGOC Chair
- Chair AMU
- Chair COMESA
- Chair CEN-SAD
- Chair EAC
- Chair ECCAS
- Chair ECOWAS
- Chair IGAD
- Chair SADC

PROS

Bureau represents all 5 geographical regions of the AU.

CONS

- Excludes private sector, civil society and diaspora.
- Seen as a revitalisation of the Banjul formula.

AU = African Union, Chairs are elected for one year on a rotational basis between the AU's five geographical regions
AUC = African Union Commission, the Chair is elected for a 4-year term.
NEPAD = New Partnership for Africa's Development
HSGIC = Heads of State and Government Implementation Committee
(HSGIC) of NEPAD*= founding member of NEPAD
AMU = Arab Maghreb Union
COMESA = Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
CEN-SAD = Community of Sahel–Saharan States
EAC = East African Community
ECCAS = Economic Community of Central African States
ECOWAS = Economic Community of West African States
IGAD = Intergovernmental Authority on Development
SADC = Southern African Development Community
AUDA-NEPAD = African Union Development Agency-New Partnership for Africa's Development
HSGOC = Heads of State and Government Orientation Committee of AUDA-NEPAD

Source: Authors compilation adapted from AU Assembly/AU/Dec.131(VII); AU Assembly/AU/Dec.762(XXXIII) and Kagame (2017) The imperative to strengthen our union: Report on the proposed recommendations for the institutional reform of the African Union.

3.3. Refocusing priorities vis-a-vis partners' competencies

To date, the AU has engaged in a number of external partnerships, each with its own unique foundations and institutional arrangements and covering a breadth of topics. Some partnerships such as that with the Arab League go back to 1977, followed considerably later by some in the early 1990s and 2000s. Their rise in number attest to the interest of outside parties of engaging more structurally with the AU and a rise in the legitimacy of the AU as a partner. The breadth of coverage also points to the potential need for greater prioritisation and focus, as is cited as motivation for the partnership strategy exercise currently underway.

As stated by Uche Madueke, Head of the AU's Strategic Partnerships, the AU seeks strategic partnerships based on "equality, accountability, mutual respect, efficiency, ownership and win–win cooperation" (AU 2018a), moving away from a model where donor funding is perceived to determine the area of focus to where external support is tailored to the AU's priorities. The AU at the moment engages multiple partners in a myriad of similar issues. This approach has been criticised as "Africa has engaged in too many programmes with its Partners without achieving much" (AU 2018a). Instead Africa should engage with its partners based on their "core competences", rather than a "bucket list of wishes … without any focus on priority areas" (AU 2018a). The challenge for the AU is to reconcile the pre-determined, different forms of foreign funding and support, with African preferences and interests. (Gwatiwa 2020).

Common areas of focus for the AU's partnerships include peace and security, infrastructure and energy development, and trade and investment, all clear priorities for the AU. However, there is less clarity on the strengths of each partnership and their comparative advantages and added value. Lack of guidelines and a systematic approach on engaging in meaningful and strategic relationships has led to a proliferation by AUC technical departments and other AU institutions in establishing partner relationships without prior identification of Africa's needs from the outset (AU 2019a). In addition, limited understanding of the partners' areas of core competencies before initiating the partnerships has resulted in "convoluted activities in numerous areas, without clear focus or objectives, thereby achieving little" (AU 2019a).

Arguably, there is merit in approaching multiple partners on a specific focal area. Contessi coined the term 'issue splitting' which is defined as "the segmentation of the relevant issue area in which assistance is required into various constituent parts. In this way, each segment can be "auctioned" separately so that no single great power can totally capture a given policy area, market sector, or portion of sovereignty of the implementing state" (Contessi 2015). This may be a way to mitigate dependence on a stronger partner especially in asymmetric relations. While each partnership presents an opportunity for the AU to explore multiple areas of cooperation, this will also depend on the accompanying level of financial contributions. This justifies the need to narrow down focus to each partner's strengths, backed by both political commitment and dedicated financial support.

With the development of the new Partnership Strategy, the AU's new approach now seeks to focus on identifying the comparative advantage of its partners and pursuing partnerships that match the level of political buy-in, capacity and financial backing by partners.

The PRC Revised Report emphasised developing a common understanding of what Africa wants from its partners and recommended the assessment of capacities and core competencies of each partner with a view to assessing their effective contributions and added value, in order to leverage delivery and promote relationships that are mutually beneficial (AU 2019a). This highlights the need to move away from the status quo, where the AU's partners have over time, been allowed the "prerogative to develop concepts that guide relationships between both parties that ordinarily should have been joint efforts" (AU 2015), resulting in identification of needs that are not necessarily priority areas for the AU.

The new Partnership Strategy provides the opportunity to rethink and address challenges of overlap and duplication of externally funded programmes related to Agenda 2063, the main vision on Africa's continental needs. That comprises 7 aspirations, 20 goals and around 40 priority areas, further clustered into five implementation phases (AU Agenda 2063). One of the AU reforms requires focussing its agenda on fewer priority areas which have continental impact, such as, issues related to political affairs, peace and security, economic integration and reinforcing Africa's global voice, and the growing focus on climate change, the green economy and digital transformation. As part of the evaluation of partnerships, the PRC Revised Report has proposed a matrix of partners' areas of core competences, which maps out current areas of cooperation, aspirations, goals and priority areas of focus and justifications for the AU's strategic partners.[29] This is a step in the right direction as it clearly delineates support for AU priority areas based on partners' competences.

If followed, the AU will engage with partners on limited and targeted priorities to maximise the benefits of working with each. For example, the EU, as AU's biggest partner, has provided continued support to peace and security on the continent. To date, it has been the primary financial partner to the AU on peace and security – €2.7 billion allocated between 2004 and 2019 – (Crisis Group 2021), mostly for peace support operations. The EU had a dedicated fund, the African Peace Facility, which supported the AU Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), although this has been replaced by the European Peace Facility. With the merged AU Commission on Political Affairs and Peace and Security (PAPS), and the focus on the peace and governance nexus, opportunities lie to leverage the existing partnership from focus on peace support operations towards support to early conflict prevention (Ronceray et al. 2021). In addition, the partnership between the AU and the EU has evolved to include digital and the green economy which are new topics of interest in the partnership. However, these are driven largely by the EU's own priorities at home (Green Deal) (Teevan et al. 2021) and geopolitical competition with China (digital) (Teevan 2021), which highlights the need for the AU to have a clear agenda for engagement to avoid a situation where the agenda is largely driven by the EU. The sixth AU-EU Summit planned for next year, provides an opportunity for the AU to develop structured priorities for its engagement with the EU based on the latter's competences.

One clear focus for the AU and its member states is on building back economies in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Already the AU has shown its strength during the COVID-19 pandemic, by taking on a leadership and coordinating role on health governance within the continent, through the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) (Medinilla et al. 2020). Going forward existing partnerships should be tailored to the priorities of the AU both in access to vaccines and building resilient economies and health systems. Getting the right partnerships in building back Africa's economies is crucial and the AU should select partners that have the right competencies to support its priorities.

4. Way forward in advancing the AU's agency in external partnerships

The AU's multiple partnerships are guided by an array of different geo-political interests ranging from security and stability, economic interests, emerging issues such as climate change, environmental sustainability and recently in health governance in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. African countries are in turn affected by external geo-political, economic, environmental developments of both their partners and the shifting global dynamics, which reflect the necessity of the African countries to take an active role in shaping the constantly evolving global order.

[29] For more information see: Matrix of Partners' areas of core competences; Current Areas of Cooperation, Aspirations, Goals and Priority Areas to focus and Justifications EX.CL/1104(XXXIV)iii Annex 3 in *Report of the Subcommittee on Multilateral Cooperation*, EX.CL/1104(XXXIV)iii. Executive Council, Thirty-fourth ordinary session 7-8 February 2019. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Going forward it is imperative that the AU finds a way to strengthen its partnerships framework to be able to meaningfully engage with partners on its priorities and taking account of member state interests. The following sections discuss some ways the AU can increase its agency in external partnerships.

A stronger PRRM

Now that the AU's partnership division has been upgraded to a Directorate (PMRM), bolstering its financial and human resource capacity will enable it to engage with the multiple and diverse partnerships of the AU from inception to monitoring. This requires building the Directorate's capacity for initiation/negotiation, implementation and reporting which requires a combination of diplomatic skills, project development and management skills, thematic development assistance/cooperation skills and implementation skills. There is a role for the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) as the specialised agency of the AU for capacity development, in strengthening the PMRM's ability to develop the practical skills urgently required for the continent's partnerships management.

However, one critical factor remains regarding the leadership of this new Directorate. Previously the PMCD was led by a Head of Division. The PRC Revised Report notes that this position "is too low when compared to Directors heading Departments on the one hand, and with high level Diplomats and senior officials from partners on the other hand" (AU 2019a) As such, asymmetric relations in the negotiations resulted in situations where partners tended to by-pass the PMCD opting to "speak directly to the Chief of Staff, Bureau of the [AUC] Chairperson and/or the Technical Departments" (AU 2019a), thereby creating communication and information flow problems for both the PMCD and external partners. The new PMRM Directorate, is presently being led by Acting Director Jacques Mukwende (AUC 2021b), and the recruitment process[30] for a permanent director should ensure the candidate selected has the leadership capacity to balance the range of different interests and dynamics around partnerships to make them work for the continent.

Strengthen partnerships management

When it comes to partnership management the key point is coordination both within the AU structures and with other relevant stakeholders to improve synergies in the partnership initiation, development and management. The former PMCD proposed an AU *Outline Framework for Strategic Partnerships* (AU 2015) to provide guidance on the baselines and approaches to identify areas of cooperation and how to develop working documents for the partnerships, taking into consideration the AU Agenda 2063 objectives. This is envisioned to help AUC technical departments to streamline how they engage with partners, especially in the development of partnership declarations and action plans.

Some efforts are also ongoing to have a platform for coordination among various stakeholders. In 2017, the AU Partnership Coordination and Interactive Platform (AU-PCIP) was launched, later changed to the AU Interactive Platform for Partnerships Coordination (AU-IPPC). It comprises the AU, RECs, ACBF and partners. The inaugural AU-IPPC meeting was motivated by recognition of the need for a well-articulated, comprehensive, coherent and strategic response to its global partnerships, not least given the competition between national interest and regional interests, hence weakening Africa's voice in its partnerships. Three AU-IPPC conferences have been held so far, the latest in 2019 in Kenya, which served as the platform for planning towards the AU participation at the ongoing Expo 2020 Dubai,[31] and was instrumental in advancing the collaboration between the United Arab Emirates and the AU.[32] In order to maximise the potential and objectives of the platform, the AU-IPPC pushed for a Partnerships Management Information System (PMIS) as an important tool for coordination of partnership activities. At the time of writing, the AU is in the process of developing the PMIS, which will enable the African Union to coordinate and

[30] https://ngojobsite.com/director-partnerships-management-and-resource-mobilization-at-the-african-union-au/
[31] For more information on the Dubai Expo 2020 see https://www.expo2020dubai.com/
[32] *The African Union's Journey to Expo 2020 Dubai*, African Union, 2 November 2019.

manage its engagement with partners systematically.[33] The objective of the PMIS is to improve and facilitate the coordination role of the AU for an effective and result-oriented management of partnerships and "serve as a high-level strategic planning, coordination, monitoring & evaluation and reporting tool with a view to promoting sound management of partnerships at international, continental and regional levels" (AU 2020c). If properly implemented this tool has the potential to bring more synergy into the way the AU manages its diverse external partnerships, though it is yet to be seen if its operationalisation will manage to bridge the communication gaps currently existing between the various continental regional and national actors dealing with external partnerships.

Strengthen the AU's collective voice in partnerships and globally

The AU is mandated to promote and defend African common positions on issues of interest to the continent and to establish the necessary conditions to enable the continent to play its rightful role in the global economy and in international negotiations. Ultimately, the development of the new AU Partnership Strategy and Framework is about strengthening the AU global influence and strategic autonomy, defined as "the ability to set one's own priorities and make one's own decisions in matters of foreign policy and security, together with the institutional, political and material wherewithal to carry these through – in cooperation with third parties, or if need be alone" (Lippert et al. 2019). For the AU, developing such global influence and its strategic autonomy requires it to strengthen its capacity to act and reduce its external dependencies in order to "move from being observers to autonomous shapers of global affairs" (Uhomoibhi 2019).

Leveraging Pan-Africanism requires developing the capacity for common action at the continental level. Over time CAPs by the African countries have been used to get alignment and agreement on key issues, such as peace and security, in an attempt to influence change in global fora. An example is the Common African Position on UN reforms (Ezulwini Consensus)[34] which proposed reform of the UN Security Council to allow more representation for African countries (Shiferaw 2021). Through its external partnerships, the AU can pivot its CAPs and garner support from its partners in global fora to push for positions that are beneficial to the continent and its peoples.

Advantages of collective action are clearly seen in the AU's coordination and visibility in the context of COVID-19 and vaccine diplomacy. The added value of the AU is its ability to coordinate the various funding mechanisms and also to have pooled procurement overcoming challenges faced by individual member states trying to access vaccines. Furthermore, the AU through its collective weight backed the call for a World Trade Organization (WTO) waiver (initiated by South Africa and India) on the enforcement of intellectual property IP regulations under the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) for COVID-19 treatment, to allow for the more affordable production of generic treatments for the duration of the pandemic.[35]

The AU can also increase its global influence through its representation in the leadership of international fora. The AU member states have been exemplary in maintaining solidarity behind the fielding candidates to the World Health Organisation, WTO, International Finance Corporation and the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie all currently headed by Africans. This has allowed for focus on the continent by this high-level leadership. The AU should also use its strategic partnerships to garner support for its candidate, as seen in the election of Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala to the WTO which was backed by the EU and seen as "a clear signal to Africa and a sign of mutual trust."[36]

[33] Speech by Dr Madueke at the Expo workshop Nairobi 2019.

[34] AU Executive Council 2005. *The Common African Position on the proposed Reform of The United Nations: "The Ezulwini Consensus"*. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

[35] *African Union backs call to waive IP rights on COVID-19 drugs*, Reuters, 25 February 2021.

[36] *EU backs Nigerian candidate for WTO leadership*, Euractiv, 27 October 2020.

Strengthen representational capacity in partner countries

Africa on its part has attempted to strengthen its position with some of its partners and be clearer on what it wants by strengthening its representational capacity. For example, following the end of the Cotonou Agreement, the AU supported the negotiations of the Africa pillar under the post-Cotonou agreement to ensure a strong and united African position in redefining the partnership between Africa and Europe. Due to the significance of the AU-EU partnership, the AUC Chairperson appointed Carlos Lopes as the High Representative for AU-EU Relations post 2020,[37] to support member states in the negotiation of a new agreement with the EU post-2020. This move was viewed as an attempt by the AU to be more proactive in setting the parameters of the type of partnership it wants with the EU (Medinilla & Bossuyt 2019). Aside from this attempt, the AU has not pursued similar efforts with other partner countries such as China and United States, yet these are key players in today's geo-political world. It may have to consider appointing special representatives for all its strategic partners in future.

Furthermore, the AU should pragmatically strengthen the representational capacity of its Permanent Missions in its strategic partner countries in order to ensure that Africa speaks as one voice, and that the messaging at the AU headquarters is relayed to these offices abroad. Currently, the AU has Permanent Missions/Representations in Brussels, Cairo, Geneva, at the UN Headquarters in New York and in Washington, DC and has opened one in Beijing, given China's role in Africa.[38] The Permanent Missions promote AU programmes and decisions of its policy organs, advocate for CAPs and promote its values and interests (Tieku 2021). They also represent the AU in multilateral and bilateral forums, engage with the African diaspora where appropriate, and support the work of the group of African ambassadors. Staffing these offices with the qualified and knowledgeable staff to not only maintain diplomatic issues but actively represent Africa's voice in various meetings. Granted that not all 55 AU member states can have Ambassadorial representation in partner countries, the AU should strengthen the capacity of the African Diplomatic Corps present in partner countries, to be able to leverage its positions when engaging with partners.

Maximise partners coordination on programming and financing

Budget management is a key area of the AU reform process, and one way in which the AU seeks to rationalise external funding sources by channeling such funding through existing and new AU systems to be managed and administered by the AUC itself. This is partly a response to the historical proliferation of instances where AU departments and organs have unilaterally engaged with external funders with funds channelled outside the official budget. This was mainly for programmes that were mainly funded by donors. The AU has developed Golden Rules on financing in a bid to have better financial management, oversight and accountability of the Union's finances (AU 2018b). Specific to external funding, Golden Rule 9 requires that there should be a centralised process for engaging partners. Further the rule calls for the establishment of a central office that will be the central coordination point for partner engagement and prohibits any AU department or organ from signing contracts or receiving partner funds without the permission of the central office (AU 2018b). This financial management was necessary as the way multiple donors distributed aid to the AU created a lot of bureaucratic overload and transaction costs for the limited administrative capabilities of the AUC (Vanheukelom & Pharathlatle 2019).

The new Partnership Strategy, therefore provides the opportunity to maximise efforts towards joint programming arrangements (JPA) and joint financing arrangements (JFA) by the AU Partners Group and other external partners in line with the Executive Council's 2016 Decision calling for the alignment of the AU Program Budget jointly funded by strategic Partners, with the priority areas identified in the First Ten Year Implementation Plan of Agenda 2063.[39]

[37] https://au.int/en/high-representatives

[38] *African Union launches China-funded office in Beijing*, Africa News, 5 September 2018.

[39] AU Executive Council, *Decision on the Activities on the Permanent Representatives Committee,* Doc. PRC/Rpt(XXXI) EX.CL/Dec.899(XXVIII)Rev.2. On Multilateral Cooperation– Doc. EX.CL/928(XXVIII)v. Executive Council Twenty-Eight Ordinary Session 23-28 January 2016. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Early efforts on JPA and JFA have been ongoing since 2010 for example international partners through the JFA for Governance have funded the AGA Secretariat and significant parts of the former Department of Political Affairs activities (Ronceray et al. 2021) as well as that of the Peace and Security department. Such JPA and JFA arrangements are a way to have economies of scale through an increased funding volume and reduced paperwork. Other examples include the JFA Salaries used to pay for seconded AU staff and the JFA for AU Liaison Offices.[40] Another option that could be pursued is to have AU multi annual planning and budgeting with external partners to ensure consistency and predictability of funding.

However, the AU should not only mobilise sufficient resources, amongst its diverse partners but also mobilise resources within the continent to enable it to play its role as a partner, not merely as a recipient of external support. The AU can build on positive efforts such as the Peace Fund through which the AU is increasing its financial autonomy towards funding peace and security programmes on the continent. Furthermore, through the 0.2% levy, the AU seeks to be more self-reliant in meeting its financing agenda (Apiko & Miyandazi 2019).

Conclusion

The AU plays an important collective role engaging with external partners on behalf of its member states. However, it faces some challenges related to managing its multiple external partnerships, representing AU member state positions and efforts to strengthen AU agency before partners and on the global stage and in prioritising the focus of different partners.

External partnerships within the AU are dealt with through different institutional arrangements that cut across multiple mandates and different external partnerships. As the AU develops its common voice in external engagement, it's imperative that it also coordinates the messaging and priorities within the various institutions mandated to engage with external partners. This requires the AU to streamline coordination internally within its institutions as it simultaneously bolsters its external voice and engagement with partners.

A stronger AU requires enhanced strategic, governance, technical, logistical and financial support to the partnership management function of the AUC alongside the involvement of all AU member states, other AU institutions, AUDA-NEPAD, RECs, the private sector, civil society and its diaspora in an attempt to bring ownership, assertiveness and uniformity in the way partnership frameworks for cooperation, implementation and monitoring is done.

In order to maximise the opportunities of its existing and emerging potential partnerships, the AU needs systems which enable it to perform its role as a global player, and represent the continent 'as one'. The ongoing development of the AU's new Partnership Strategy and Policy Framework is therefore a welcome and timely initiative to get its partnerships right, by strengthening its partnership management, speaking with 'one voice' before partners and by focussing support for its priorities to the core competences, capabilities and resources of its partners to ensure mutual benefits with win-win outcomes for the continent.

[40] *African Union and International Partners sign a Joint Financing Arrangement*, African Union, 8 December 2011.

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