



Public Policy in Africa
Initiative

Policy Recommendation: **Will the African Union become irrelevant on the international stage?**

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Will the African Union become irrelevant on the international stage?

Author:

Eric Tevoedjre, Ph.D.

Catholic University of Lille

e-mail: eric.tevoedjre@lacatholille.fr

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Acronym List

AU: African Union

AUC: African Union Commission

CAADP: Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program

CAC: Codex Alimentarius Commission

CERFAM: Centre d'Excellence Régional contre la Faim et la Malnutrition (Centre of Excellence against Hunger and Malnutrition)

CIRAD : Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement (The French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development)

ECA: United Nations Economic Commission for Africa

FAO: Food and Agriculture Organization

GFSI: Global Food Security Index

HGSF: Home-Grown School Feeding

IFAD: International Fund for Agricultural Development

IFPRI: International Food Policy Research Institute

MAFAP: Monitoring and Analyzing Food Policies

OECD: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

US: United States

USAID: United States Agency for International Development

WBCSD: World Business Council for Sustainable Development

WHO: World Health Organization

WFP: World Food Program

Since the beginning of the 21st century the race for raw materials has spawned increased interest in African countries by global actors. They want unfettered access to Africa's natural resources. To them, this objective requires forging bilateral ties. At the same time the African Union (AU) is slowly but resolutely moving in a different direction: industrialization through regional value chains, which is what Agenda 2063 is all about. It is the master plan designed to turn Africa into a global player. Beset with severe challenges, including lack of support from African countries, the AU struggles to impose this vision to the world.

Africa needs Agenda 2063. Here are three of the hurdles that it has to overcome:

- first, Agenda 2063 does not meet global powers' needs. What global powers want from Africa is raw materials, some of which are listed as critical¹. Agenda 2063 on the other hand wants to significantly reduce Africa's reliance on primary goods²;
- second, another hurdle is that the overarching processes of state and nation building hinder progress toward regional integration. They even appear to be negatively correlated. In his celebrated book *Black Africa: the economic and cultural basis for a federated Africa*, Cheikh Anta Diop wrote that the "... immediate unification of French- and English-speaking Africa [...] is the only way to start Black Africa along the slope of its historic destiny [...] To wait while invoking secondary considerations is to allow the various states time to harden in their shapes and become unsuited to federation."³ This was in essence the debate opposing the Casablanca and Monrovia groups in the early 1960s. Implementing Agenda 2063 requires that member states de-emphasize national sovereignty;
- third, the African Union itself is in urgent need of reform⁴. Lacking support from its own members, the AU cannot operate without aid from external donors who, focused as they are on security, do not consider Agenda 2063 a priority.

The African Union is the only regional organization which traces its origins to a political ideology. Pan-Africanism unites all people of African descent and the AU embodies that African identity. The paradox is that although Pan-Africanism calls for economic cooperation and unification of markets on the continent, Africa is the region of the world where trade between countries⁵ is the least dynamic. In 2022 a United Nations report⁶ estimated that commodities "account for more than 60 per cent of total merchandise exports in 45 of the 54 countries of Africa". These commodities are shipped abroad for processing.

In an effort to reverse this situation the AU in 2015 approved Agenda 2063, *The Africa We Want*⁷, the continent's blueprint for sustainable development. Of its twenty priority goals, one is the ambitious African Continental Free-Trade Area⁸ (AfCFTA) expected to broaden and deepen economic integration so as to allow African countries to trade more with one another.

A new scramble for Africa

Meanwhile, however, headwinds have been picking up. The past twenty years have seen renewed interest in Africa from foreign powers, a phenomenon termed the “new scramble for Africa”⁹, some 140 years after the first European-led scramble. The scale of foreign engagement on the continent is unprecedented. According to *The Economist*, between 2010 and 2016 more than 320 foreign diplomatic missions¹⁰ were opened in Africa, higher than on any other continent. Turkey for instance has 43¹¹, up from only 12 two decades ago. Perhaps even more significant are those large summits for African leaders hosted by the European Union¹², Russia¹³, England¹⁴, France¹⁵, Turkey¹⁶, China¹⁷ and **the United States**¹⁸. Participants to these large gatherings include dozens of African leaders, in addition to AU representatives.

The new “scramblers” may have put on different clothes and adopted a new discourse, the aims remain the same: increase access to Africa’s defense and consumer markets and control supplies of natural resources. What the rise in numbers of mega-conferences and bilateral agreements indicates is not only that advanced countries still see Africa as an essential **supplier of raw materials**¹⁹, but that each one of them, the **United States**²⁰, **Europe**²¹, **China**²², **Japan**²³, Turkey²⁴ or **Russia**²⁵, have adopted strategic action plans targeting the most likely suppliers of those commodities.

Bilateral relations

This is where the confusion lies: summits which gather fifty African heads of state aim at forging bilateral, rather than regional, trade relations. Under misleading catchwords such as “**Partnership of Equals**”²⁶ and “**Win-Win Cooperation**”²⁷, lurks the old “divide-and-rule” strategy.

Indeed, African beneficiaries of the **Belt and Road Initiative**²⁸, the **Economic Partnership Agreements**²⁹ (EPA) or **the African Growth and Opportunity Act**³⁰, are not regional groupings but individual states, many with gross national products smaller than that of a single U.S. state. Obviously, the power differential is enormous and the format of the mega-conferences aims at maintaining this structural imbalance.

Academic studies show³¹ how EPAs, for example, rather than promote African sustainable development, actually weaken regional integration and industrialization prospects. Firstly, agricultural exports to Europe often compete with subsidized European goods. Secondly, by focusing on individual players, EPAs clearly undermine basic customs unions rules, thus creating divisions among their members.

For instance on **December 8, 2020**³², to promote its flower industry Kenya signed an EPA with England, whereby it would gradually lower tariffs for UK products. The deal forced Nairobi to ignore a key decision of the **East African Community**³³ (EAC), of which Kenya is a member, to raise their **Common external tariff**³⁴ to 35%. The UK demanded that its exports be **exempted from**³⁵ the new tax charges. Of course, the situation created tensions with the other EAC countries, a number of observers even accusing Nairobi of betrayal³⁶.

Sovereign states

One of the obvious reasons why global powers are able to successfully engage with individual African leaders and access natural resources, is that those leaders are sovereign and in a position to use domestic resources as they wish. Consequently, bilateral deals get signed not necessarily because weak states are being coerced, but because both parties benefit: as resources from the deal help increase their ability to redistribute the proceeds, African leaders consolidate their power. They will therefore want to strengthen national sovereignty³⁷ rather than dilute the state into regional blocks. This is why the African state, which Crawford Young labeled “patrimonial autocracy”³⁸, presents such a challenge for the AU.

Hopeful signs?

Another reason why African countries sign bilateral deals with non-African countries is because processing minerals is often technically complex³⁹. A few countries however announced their decision to process natural resources locally. In February 2020, the president of Ghana, Nana Akufo-Addo, on a state visit to Switzerland, unexpectedly announced⁴⁰ that his country would no longer export raw cocoa beans, but rather do the processing in-country. Ghana is the second largest producer of cocoa beans and Switzerland a major chocolate manufacturer. In April 2022, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Zambia signed an agreement⁴¹ whereby the two countries will jointly develop a supply chain in the electric battery and clean energy sectors. The DRC has considerable cobalt deposits while Zambia is one of the largest copper producers in the world. In October 2022,⁴² the military in Guinea ordered foreign companies to build refineries and process Guinea's bauxite ore locally before export. If they failed to comply, foreign mining companies would be penalized. The decision will not only increase benefits; it will create many jobs. The country has the largest reserves of bauxite on the continent.

Finally, in early 2023 authorities in Namibia and Zimbabwe⁴³ decided to ban the export of unprocessed lithium. Harare claims that it has the capacity to satisfy one-fifth of global needs.

An increasingly dependent African Union

As much as it yearns to play its part as engine of economic growth, the AU is today powerless.⁴⁴ Indeed, fewer than 40%⁴⁵ of all members actually pay their contributions, and the organization is severely dependent on external donors⁴⁶ for up to 75% of its operations. The AU's largest department, Peace and Security, receives most of its resources from the United Nations⁴⁷ and the European Peace Facility⁴⁸. The organization has taken steps towards financial autonomy. In July 2016 it adopted the "Kigali Decision"⁴⁹ on Financing the Union", a significant first step towards independence, even if the results are, so far, disappointing. Indeed, **only about 10%**⁵⁰ of the amount expected by the organization has actually been paid by the countries who defaulted on payments. This again raises the question of commitment on the part of the members.

An African Union sorely dependent⁵¹ on foreign donors for much of its operations may find it increasingly hard to assume the role of an influential global player which it aspires to⁵².

Should the AU fail in its quest for autonomy, could it soon become irrelevant?

As we noted earlier, a successful Agenda 2063 has to meet the needs of both global powers and of African countries. There is one African project which may receive political and financial support from all sides, including from the private sector. Although not mentioned among the flagship projects of Agenda 2063⁵³ the Great Green Wall of the Sahara (GGW) could help raise the status of the African Union significantly and bring it back into the global mainstream.

Indeed, as a regional public good, the GGW will not only impact a majority of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals⁵⁴, but also drastically reduce extreme violence in the Sahel and illegal immigration to other continents. Finally it will enhance regional integration and boost cross-border trade.

Policy Recommendation to make the African Union more relevant internationally:

The GGW was launched by the AU in 2007. Its objective is to restore “100 million hectares of currently degraded land; sequester 250 million tons of carbon and create 10 million green jobs by 2030”.⁵⁵ Unfortunately, the AU today appears to only monitor the progression of this enormous project, which stretches over 8,000 kilometers and twenty-two African countries.

Going forward, the African Union must take back effective leadership of this formidable initiative. This is why they must, first, include the GGW into their list of flagship projects. By doing so, the Pan-African organization will acknowledge that to them the future of the continent depends to a great extent on the success of the Great Green Wall Initiative, the “largest living structure on the planet”.⁵⁶

Second, as climate change is unquestionably the greatest challenge of our time, the AU must make sure that, from now on, the GGW figures as the number one issue on the agenda of every global summit focusing on Africa. Indeed, for several years now, global leaders have been clamoring that “Africa is the future of the world”⁵⁷: let them make the GGW a priority.

Third, the AU must lend unwavering support to local farmers in Senegal, Niger, Burkina Faso ⁵⁸, Ethiopia and elsewhere. They are the real experts and they have shown that reversing desertification is not only possible but vital. The AU must make sure that global news networks regularly report on the GGW, highlight its progress and explain the tremendous challenges that it faces.

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