

## Whose voices will be present in the future African policy space? Observations from West Africa

Since 2011 a new Africa seems to be emerging. Why? And how? In this short paper I will sketch these changes and how these might inform policies for and with African nations. My studies have concentrated on West/Central Africa. This paper is based on observations there. I hope they can inspire a future perspective on EU-AU policies.

The demography of Africa shows not only a fast-growing population but also an increasingly young population. Over 70% of the population is younger than 35 and is increasingly connected to the world and each other via (digital) social media platforms. This connectivity has risen enormously in the past decades. For instance, the figures the ITU gives for Mali show a GSM coverage of over 100%. This is part of a general process of globalization in which the world has become interconnected. For my argument I would like to emphasize that such interconnectivity is not only economic, but also and probably especially sociological and ideological. Transnational connectivity is about flows of ideas.

We have observed that the youth in Africa is increasingly taking up more responsibility in political and social actions. The youth in Africa has gone to the streets on several occasions in well-organized protest, such as the protests in 2011 in Senegal organized by Y-en-a-marre in Senegal, or the protests in Burkina Faso in which the popular organization Balaie Citoyen played a leading role, or the youth movement Iyina in Chad. These youth movements and the organization of protest are evaluated as the Arabic Spring in Sub-Saharan Africa.

We also have witnessed an increase of the influence/growth of Jihadi movements, where Northern Mali and the lake Chad region are seen as the epicenters. It is maybe a daring suggestion, but the question rises if these Jihadi movements are also related to the rising voice of youth in West Africa.

Since 2012 the Sahel is increasingly the scene of violent turmoil that is created from different sides; the oppression of governments on youth movements (case in Chad), the fight against 'terrorism', the Jihadi responses; ethnic violence; etc. This has led to a deep insecurity and non-development for the population in many parts of West Africa.

The past year we have witnessed several *coup d'états*, in Chad, Mali, Guinea, Sudan, Guinea. The coup in Mali and their refusal to follow the urge to organize elections in due time have led to a condemnation of the Military 'Junta' by ECOWAS, who sanctioned Mali severely. These measures were supported by France and are now at the agenda of the EU for approval. Sanctions against Mali after the coup have led to huge popular protests against the sanctions and not only in Mali but in different countries of West Africa. Important to note that the protests in Mali were against the sanctions and not per se pro-Mali military government. Though increasingly we also hear support for the government, for a strong Mali, that chooses its 'own' future.

Since a few months protest opposing the presence of France in West Africa increases, which culminated in the expulsion of the French Ambassador (this week). The Malian government and their action against France is widely celebrated by young and old people in West Africa. The youth express itself clearly with protests on the ground and on social media. Important to notice, is that those who are critical of the Malian government, and who may support the sanctions, have difficulties/are afraid to express themselves. Populism is taking over in a large part of the Malian population. The situation is very volatile and confusing and there is a high risk of further destabilization at Europe's doorstep

This situation needs to be taken into consideration in our reflections on important themes of the EU policy vis-à-vis Africa that are central in the EU-AU top this month in Brussels.

*The first point is about inequality, access to a better life.*

I understand the rise in youth movements, populism and jihadism in West Africa as a call to be heard, with an important message to get access to better life conditions. I see a common ground in the protests in the streets of Bamako, and the rural youth joining Jihadi groups. There is a huge frustration under large parts of young people about the results of post-colonial governments. Corruption, inequality, poverty, bad education, no access to good health care are the daily life of many people. Jihadi ideology, and the firm words of the military leaders create hope for a possible better future. There is no other alternative.

It is therefore almost ironic that the army of the popular fights against the army of the jihadi, though they might be after a similar cause. This adds to the negative effects that military action has on radicalization and further polarization that is at stake in the Sahel conflicts.

Any policy that is developed for Africa should listen to this cry for a better future. The creation of a positive future for the next generation should be high on the agenda. Hope for the youth should go beyond the

creation of direct employment. There should also be attention for the recognition and regaining of identity, proudness of self, that is a basis for a self-defined and sustained future. There should be room to listen to the youth (rural, urban, educated, non-educated, women, men) and learn from their initiatives and movements. These spaces should be organized by these youth themselves.

*The second point is about equity in North-South partnerships*

This outcry from Africa should be a wake-up call in a time where also for Europe we are facing movements like Black Lives Matter. In the documents in preparation for the AU-EU top we read that there is and shows the need for equality in partnership. How is this equality given form in a world where the relations of power are not liberated from emotions and realities that are linked to colonial (im)balances?

Another question mark that we should place here is that the policies that have been developed and applied so far have also contributed to the confusing situation that we face in West Africa today. The 'North' should allow an evaluation of its past and present policies. 'North' is not the geographical north alone, it also refers to the knowledge systems/development models in which policies have been developed. We should dare to question these.

Another (daring) statement that I would put on the table here, is that the African Union as it is constituted now, does not have support of a large part of the young population in Africa. Part of the proposed reflections should also be if the institutions and the people who are nominated in these institutions, with whom are we making policies, do represent the population.

*The third point is how to interpret the common North-South agenda as it is presented in preparation to the top* Migration is high on the agenda but as is shown by researchers such as de Haan, Boas, Baker, for many African countries internal migration is a far bigger problem and sometimes very destabilizing. There is not enough attention for this problem. The increasing insecurity in the Sahel asks attention for internal displacements and its disruptive effects. Although Africa is a continent that has a history of mobility, today's mobilities demand for a reflection on the approaches that are directed to containment of migration at borders and emphasize the South-North migration. From an analysis of internal migration and security migration we may develop new strategies that better reflect realities in Africa as well.

Digitization is another topic high on the policy agenda. Indeed, digitalization also in youth organizations and enterprises led to more possibilities for economic development, for the development of transnational and transcontinental initiatives. Yet we also must address the disruptive effects of digitization, in the form of misinformation and fake news in social media. We cannot oversee the influence of these developments yet. For the confusing situation in West Africa the role of disinformation still needs to be assessed, but the first analyses of its influence direct us to an agenda to understand digital connectivity also as a possible (violent) weapon steering the observed turmoil. We need to develop an agenda to understand the disruptive effect of digitization.

My general point for the themes on the policy agenda is that we must question the knowledge and analyses on which the choice for and interpretation of these themes are based. Do we not need an understanding from within, and with a diversity of 'thinkers'? Especially in the confusing and rapidly changing socio-political situation in many parts of Africa (and the world) there seems to be an urgent need for the development of independent thinktanks/academic institutes in Africa in which (young) scholars and practitioners take the lead to develop strategies and policies for the future of a united world in which Africa is recognized as an equal partner.

To conclude: In the new EU-AU partnership for Africa the discussion should be opened to new and other voices, who can represent the youth, who are a majority in Africa, that have clearly voiced their malcontent the past decade. There should as well be room for a reinterpretation of what has been defined as the shared agenda. This agenda and its prominent themes are to be revisited. We need an equal partnership between knowledge institutes in Africa and beyond. In the digital environment of today such exchanges and platforms are easy to operate. The new policies should take into consideration that the future of Africa will be formulated in the triangle Youth-Connectivity-Security.