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Emerging actors in Africa: Impact and opportunities for EU-Africa and global relations

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The term ‘emerging players’ or ‘emerging powers’ needs to be questioned and clarified. Countries like China, India or Russia, who fall under this often used terminology, have in fact been present in Africa ever since the continent’s liberation wars, providing assistance worth billions of dollars (e.g. aid, military training and equipment, scholarships, training to officials, trade openings, technical assistance for infrastructure works) and playing a key role in the support to independence movements in Africa and their cause in international fora.

The increasing attention to the role of these countries in Africa is a result of their unprecedented level of economic growth and the expansion of their activities in the African continent in areas that previously were dominated by traditional donors (e.g. trade, foreign direct investment, development programmes). But this group of countries is neither homogeneous nor do they follow similar strategies in the same country. Nevertheless, differences between them and the traditional donors appear to be more significant than among this heterogeneous group of countries.

With the exception of South Korea and Turkey, none of the other emerging economies is a member of the OECD-DAC, and therefore does not abide by its principles. They all share the ambition of elevating their relationship with Africa to a strategic level, signed bilateral cooperation agreements, and organised over the last 7 years bilateral summits with Africa where a whole range of issues, beyond aid, are discussed. Their relations with African countries are not subject to conditionalities, nor do they advance the idea that universal principles like human rights and multiparty democracy are universal principles that must be observed. Instead, they base their relationship with Africa on identified mutual interests or other commonalities, emphasizing material goods or concrete realisations like infrastructure, equipment, technology, technical cooperation, larger trade opportunities, and providing for that purpose concessional loans and significant technical assistance. Furthermore, as emerging economies that developed over the last decade or two, their experience and realities are considered more relevant and closer to the African reality than those of countries that developed longer ago.

Traditional donors, on the other hand, often make aid conditional to the respect of a number

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of values (e.g. individual freedoms, multiparty democracy, human rights, fight against corruption and other governance principles) which underpins their cooperation. From the perspective of many African partners, however, these principles are not always perceived as universal or neutral. At best, they are seen as excuses to avoid providing aid in crucial areas for economic development (e.f. infrastructure, transportation, private sector development). In some cases, they are seen as a direct political interference and therefore a source of tensions. Despite OECD-DAC countries efforts to improve aid effectiveness, aid is not seen as having addressed the fundamental problem of poverty eradication, given its main focus on the social sectors and too little on the economic area. Concessional loans from these donors have also diminished substantially, and contracts with big multinationals in the mineral and energy sector have not favoured the development of African countries. Dialogue with these donors is viewed as unbalanced, not as a dialogue of equals. On relations with the EU, the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) have been a particularly contentious issue, seen by some African leaders as undermining existing regional cooperation schemes in Africa, and EU trade policy is not seen as that favorable – e.g. the EU does not have something like the Africa Growth Initiative, which provides African manufactured goods and other exports preferential access to the US market.

Relations with traditional partners and with emerging economies present African countries with advantages as well as disadvantages. Emerging economies have contributed to the development of Africa's economic relations, the improvement of infrastructures and the growth of African exports. Relations should, however, be framed under an institutional framework (still inexistent) where rules of engagement are clearly laid out in order to avoid perpetuating corruption. In energy and natural resource rich countries there is also a risk of not investing in the diversification of the national economy, making these countries further dependent on existing reserves and international prices. As far as relations with traditional donors are concerned, aid has undoubtedly allowed African countries to address many problems beyond traditional sectors (e.g. humanitarian, food security, health and education, macro-economic reforms), including institution-building through good governance and public sector reform programmes, which are critical for a management of resources for the public good. The energy and natural resource sectors are particularly critical sectors. However, developing countries in general are critical of the OECD-DAC cooperation model for its excessive focus on process rather than substance. In Busan, they have called for a focus on the effectiveness of development beyond the effectiveness of aid, and a dialogue that is not based on the aid factor only. Busan thus represents a first step towards a restructuring of the North-South dialogue on the fight against poverty and Africa's development.

This debate occurs at a time when the international context is marked by global challenges like climate change and the international economic and financial crisis. The latter continues to affect strongly the Euro-zone, while signs of recovery of the American economy are not as good as hoped. The financial crisis is affecting emerging economies too, albeit to a lesser extent. China's growth, still robust, is expected to slow down from the average 12% a year of the last couple of decades to about 7%. Nevertheless, China will remain interested in Africa and dependent on African natural resources to power up its economy. It is therefore critical that an adequate institutional framework can be found to allow for an open dialogue and redefine the concept of aid for development, if aid is to support the fight against poverty and the development of Africa.