Building Capacity, Building Borders: Assessing the EU Global Strategy From the Ground

Since the refugee influx of 2015, the European Union has intensified its efforts to stabilise African countries and control migration flows. But slowly surfacing consequences call for a re-think of EU crisis management as a whole.

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"Big strong boys for farm work," the man yells, pointing at two men with t-shirts and forced smiles. "Two hundred," someone offers. Then four hundred, seven hundred—sold. The grainy cell phone footage documenting a refugee slave auction held in Libya in August last year triggered a wave of outrage among policy makers and media outlets. The anger was not just directed at local authorities, but also at the European Union, who had recently promoted its cooperation with Libyan officials, police and border agents as a crucial step for coping with the refugee crisis. The idea: assist the security personnel to prevent migrants from crossing the Mediterranean Sea on their journey to Europe. A plan now considered "inhuman" by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, after the world had suddenly awoken to the cruel destiny awaiting intercepted migrants back at their detention camps.

Human rights violations in Libya are nothing new, and neither is the West's involvement in the country. But the video footage offered a rare gaze into the other, so far hidden sphere of the migration crisis and pushed the EU's external efforts into public consciousness. The scandal led a team of BBC reporters fly to the scene to verify the material, interview victims and report of the obstacles and dangers they faced during their research. The footage provided a glimpse into local structures and incalculable risks that everyone attempting to find a solution should take notice of. But the problems are merely culminating in Libya, where thousands of migrants find themselves caught up in the criminal structures of a lawless, dismantled nation-state. Initially, they have fled violence and poverty in Egypt, Niger, Chad, Sudan, Ghana, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Tunisia, Senegal and other West, North and South African countries. Most of these places rarely appear in global news media, despite the common narrative that the 'root' of our 'migration problem' must be buried somewhere down there.

The EU, most prominently, has recognized this and so extended its strategy beyond the Libyan borders, about 8,000 kilometres down south, all the way through the Sahara desert. Crossing Mali to the right, Niger to the left, its efforts to tackle these 'roots' stretch even further into the Central African Republic, Somalia, Sudan. Yet what the Union is actually *doing there*, has received not all too much attention— up until now. "We soon might see more people dying in those desert lands than in the Mediterranean Sea," Vincent Cochetel, a French official for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, recently told a team of *arte* reporters, hinting at the EU migration policies in Africa as more harm than help. An accusation, that should motivate media makers across the world to investigate its validity. What is it, that went wrong here?

Tracing the EU Global Strategy on the ground in Africa has become increasingly difficult, due to the complex mixture of humanitarian aid, support missions and diplomatic ventures. But following up with some of the policies introduced in recent years, it becomes visible that limited flows of information have produced a set of rather narrow-minded narratives, which not only threaten the credibility of the EU strategy, but have actually created unprecedented risks for the people on the ground.

Common Security and Defence Policy: The Missions

The operational – and most visible – part of the CSDP has taken the form of 35 military missions/operations and civilian missions deployed since 2003. Since the release of Federica Mogherini's EU Global Strategy 2016, the Union has defined a new level of ambition for EU securty, based on a) respond to external conflicts and crises; b) build the capacities of partners; and c) protect the Union and its citizens. In doing so, the EU has set out for so-called joint stabilisation operations, that provide maritime security, surveillance, monitoring, civilian capacity building and Security Sector Reform. The military training mission in Mali (EUTM) is currently the largest land mission in the region with 580 people deployed. EUNAVFOR MED (Operation Sophia) has outnumbered all missions by far, with a total of 1,671 people deployed.
Source: EUISS Yearbook '17 & '18

'Tackling problems at their roots': The CSDP Missions & Local Ownership

There are many political buzz words the European Union uses to describe their goals for any of their missions abroad: a 'holistic', 'comprehensive' approach for stabilization, that is 'non-executive', but works with the *modus operandi* of 'capacity building' and the goal of 'local ownership.'

In other words: the EU won't do the work, their partners shall learn how to do it themselves. This has long been their ticket to legitimacy: upon invitation from the local government, the EU will advise, assist and train selected facilities of a country's security institutions, whether that's policemen, legal experts,

border agents or soldiers. In some cases, the EU will provide equipment and logistics necessary to complete their goals. This way, they hope, the country will have greater 'capacity' to cope with threats, while the skills to do so are 'owned' by local actors. In the long run, the EU believes that improving security structures will be a crucial step towards economic growth, creating an environment of opportunities for locals, who would otherwise be running towards Europe.

While this sounds quite simple now, it can be perceived and interpreted differently among the population in the mission countries. In the worst case, some might not even understand it at all. In Mali, where 580 EU staff members have trained 11,956 Malian soldiers since 2013, researchers from the collective *EUnpack* have found that "even Malians who have personal and direct contact with the EU do not understand EU programming well enough to make up their minds about what the EU is doing in crisis response in their own country." Although the team was not able to conduct the survey among military personnel who have received training from the EUTM program due to "extremely slow survey authorization procedures" and the inability of EUTM staff to communicate the purpose of the study to counterparts in the Malian army, they did interview members of the police, gendarmerie, public administration staff and general population. About half of the interviewees were neither able to describe the mission's magnitude, nor say whether they are satisfied with it, stating they had too little knowledge about what is going on. Keeping in mind that the survey involved people who have somewhat of a connection with the EU, "one could only imagine what the figures might have been" if the survey was conducted exclusively among the general public, the researchers note. Their conclusion: "We should be aware of a serious information gap that cannot be glossed over as it is totally counter-productive to the local ownership that the EU claims it strives to achieve."

The link the researchers draw between local ownership and information flow is crucial. How can you create sustainable solutions for the civil society if no one understands where you're going? And in turn, how can you understand what the people really need if an exchange of information is absent? 'Capacity building' and 'local ownership' essentially are political strategies not just the EU, but also NATO or the United Nations work with. However, if disconnected from the aspect of communication, essential goals could be missed. "We are of the view that this finding

must lead to a serious rethink of how the EU interacts and reaches out to its counterparts in Mali and to the population at large", *EUnpack* writes. Their assessment of the relationship between local actors and the EU is one very relevant aspect for working towards a bottom-up understanding.

Applying this to whole of the society, another factor surfaces. When taking a look at the general conditions for communication in those countries, we are harshly reminded of a reality that we felt had long passed. In Sub-Saharan African a significant number of people have close to zero access to a wide range of sources of information. Even in Nigeria, Africa's largest economy, between 17 to 25 per cent of the entire population have no access to the most widely distributed forms of media. Some areas are hit harder than others due to their geographical condition and a large gap between urban and rural areas persists, where in the latter case people are often either shut off from telecom network distribution or too poor to purchase satellites and other gadgets. Some areas are not even close to getting there—they simply lack electricity.

On top of that, there is various decisive social and cultural factors. First and foremost, many countries still struggle with high rates of illiteracy. Particularly Niger, where the EU aims to rebuild the law enforcement sector, is an example of a worrisome scenario: Ranking 187th out of the 188 countries in the United Nations' Human Development Index, estimated illiteracy rates range between 71.3 and 82.4 per cent. The economically extremely weak country struggles with high desertification, inefficient agriculture and overpopulation, hence education of the entire public still dwells in the far future. What this effectively means for communication, is that radio has evolved as the primary source of information. Print and broadcast formats do exist, yet almost at no time outside of the cities—and most of Niger's people live in rural communities. Sadly it figures, that internet users just make up 1.4% of the population.

In neighbouring Mali, conditions are slightly better, but radio again prevails to be the main media operator. Some online news sites do exist, such as *Maliweb*, which, for instance, often discusses developments of the UN's MINUSMA Peacekeeping mission. But these services are—as the case in most other African countries— predominantly offered in the former colonial language French. Almost all African

countries have numerous indigenous languages, that are only spoken and rarely used for written formats. If societal discourses of entire regions only exist in vocal forms, there are very few opportunities to store or share information outside of these spheres. Admittedly, trying to grasp the local narratives is not easy for anyone intending to understand what the people have on their mind, whether that's international journalists or EU staff.

"The need to address a country's media deficit should be built into its national development strategy as part of way of giving people information that empowers them," Russell Southwood, CEO of a consultancy agency for media and telecom industries in Africa, has written in his recent report on the continent's struggle for information systems. Especially in crisis-laden areas, tools of communication could improve modes of awareness, social cohesion and non-violent resolution of differences. Southwood offers numerous suggestions for how to approach these goals. Certainly, there has to be an effort on the side of local governments. But the international community, and especially actors like the EU, could contribute on two levels, as well: One, facilitate greater investments by and in support of the private sector to extend telecom and broadcast access. Second; donors, civil society and regulators need to put in place programmes that will encourage local, citizen-created content and flow of information.

The EU is in dire need of a larger set of information at their disposal, otherwise the opportunity for it to become known as a provider of beneficial developments for the civilian sphere will be missed. A more grounded debate around these processes is heavily overdue, and could have helped the EU to boost its vision and generate trust and patience among all involved parties. The EU's CSDP missions offer a promising outlook, since they operate based on political and moral incentives. But if there are no means to hold the EU accountable to these promises, wrong turns will be taken. A reality-check and subsequent debates that include civil society and media voices could refine and improve the implementation on the ground.

No Time, No Virtues? From Capacity Building to Migration Control
Unfortunately, developments have taken a very different turn already. As it seems, the EU could not wait for these long-term visions to fully settle and bring forward some

tangible results. The absence of success stories from its missions and increasing pressure from EU leaders to make migration the top priority brought forward a new impetus for how to approach the situation in Africa. In June 2016, the Commission announced a new "Partnership Framework" for migration within and from the continent. Here, much of the earlier vocabulary around 'local ownership' has vanished: while the long-term plan holds on to the thought of 'tackling the roots of migration,', the new approach primarily "rethinks how... to better manage migration flows." The outspoken focus is on preventing illegal migration and "enable migrants and refugees to stay closer to home rather than embark on dangerous journeys." Societal factors, such as development and growth, have become side aspects. To begin with, the EU has set out to develop individual "compacts" for its first five priority partners Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Ethiopia. These 'compacts' shall include all tools necessary for those partners to control migration into and out of their countries. To afford that, the Commission announced it would stock up the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa with an additional 1 Billion Euro.

EU Emergency Trust Fund For Africa (EUTF)

The EUTF was established during the 2015 EU summit in Valetta, Malta, as a response to the enourmous political pressure in the wake of the refugee crisis. It is an essential fundament for the EU migration policy, as it "aims to foster stability and to contribute to better migration management, including by addressing the root causes of destabilisation, forced displacement and irregluar migration." Their activities are tailored to three regions, the Sahel and Lake Chad; the Horn of Africa and North Africa. Upon his foundation, it was equipped with 2,5 Billion Euros, from which 500 Million were meant to back the individual "migration compacts" for each country.

While the EU's official documents do not really offer a clear image of how this should look like, locals can tell these stories instead. In their documentary *Türsteher Europas* ("The Doormen of Europe"), aired this month on *arte*, reporters Jan Schäfer and Simone Schlindwein meet with Ibrahim Manzo Diallo, editor-in-chief of Sahara FM. The local radio station based in Niger documents the consequences of the EU migration policies on a regular basis. "Did you journalists ask yourselves, why the government of Niger did not allow you to go further into the desert?", Diallo asks the reporters. "It's because they have something to hide: The Sahara is now a cemetery below the open sky." He shows them a photo of several decaying bodies in the mid-day sun, stretched out on the hot sand with no sign of life kilometres around them. "It's because they blocked the only road on which you could travel safely. Already our grandparents took it." With 'they' Diallo means the EU, which has worked with Niger in the context of the new Partnership Framework in order to install check-points at

former trade and transfer routes. In the earlier days, workers and also traders of the Tuareg tribes freely passed these route for business, alongside the carriers transporting migrants. Back then, this was part of a legal structure and everyone paid tax. Today, those traffickers are in prison, their vans abandoned, and the refugees in camps. Because of the road blocks, migrants are forced to take long and dangerous detours through the Sahara. If the cars break down, their fate is sealed, Diallo says.

What Sahara FM`s editor-in-chief shares with the two German reporters is the personal experience of what Vincent Cochetel, the UN Commissioner, had predicted. At a press conference in late October, the UN did not have numbers nor proof yet, but estimated that there have to be at least twice as many deaths in the Sahara than in the Mediterranean already. The UN-backed migration agency International Organization for Migration (IOM) recently stated that their Search and Rescue operations in Niger's Sahara so far saved a 1,000 lives, which, considering the difficulties of accessing and monitoring the enormous size of desert land, could just be a drop on hot stone.

To investigate the deaths, documents like Sahara FM's photo material will become crucial sources, as much as for bringing attention to the issue. But local cooperations with experienced frontmen such as Ibrahim Manzo Diallo are rare—so rare that Diallo represents the people's voice in multiple articles that have been published on the matter. He has appeared as a source in the *Washington Post*, *The Intercept*, and several German media outlets. In an investigative piece by German newspaper *Die Zeit* from last winter, Diallo recounts a then-recent arrest of a group of smugglers, whom he prefers to call 'passers,' instead. In most of the cases, the drivers usually faced three to five year jail sentences. Now, traffickers could end up with 30-year terms, the highest possible penalty in Niger's legal system. According to Diallo, the law came into effect back in 2015, but is only used since autumn 2016, when German chancellor Angela Merkel visited the country. This has led many of the old 'movers' to either be imprisoned, or to step back from their job out of fear. Now, less experienced groups are taking up the precarious business. They do not shy away from risky decisions, such as driving in small groups—a dangerous venture in case something goes wrong inside the desert.

There is no doubt that the countries in and around the Sahara are infiltrated with criminal networks that smuggle people, drugs, even organs. But at what point does transporting a person upon his wish evolve into a crime of that category? Back in the days, carriers driving goods from coastal Libya into the landlocked Sub-Saharan markets offered to take people with them on their way back. If safe roadways exist, the passengers are not put into any danger, for which the trafficker should be held responsible for.

However, the enemy image of the human smuggler has been crucial for the EU to legitimize its strategic turn-over. The thought of money-greedy traffickers forcing too many men, women, children onto battered boats that would sink with the first wave; or the 2016 headline case of 71 refugees, who suffocated to death, cramped into a freezer truck just about 300 kilometres off the German border—those were decisive moments in which every European channelled his anger against those unknown smugglers of human life. But although these remain to be horrific crimes, the focus on the smugglers takes away the awareness for the true driving forces behind these tragedies. Smugglers have not created the crisis, but as long as people want to cross borders, they will be around. But this is also the only basic characteristic the migrant trafficking systems in Bulgaria, Italy, Libya or the rest of Africa share. Fighting all of them with the same strategy – by imposing border controls – entirely ignores the site-specific reality on the ground. In Agadez, local businesses now depend on selling goods to transit groups, ever since tourism broke down. Stopping smugglers from bringing people through the country will not heroically safe lives like in the Mediterranean, but irritate the local micro-dynamics of each area with unprecedented consequences. The tales coming from Niger should be a wake-up call to differentiate more carefully and prevent wrong enemy images from defining the EU agenda.

European Union vs. African Union: A Double Standard

When EU leaders met in Brussels on 28th June, they argued until the early morning hours to reach a "much-needed" (*Euractiv*), "breakthrough" (*The Guardian*) deal to tackle the "vital questions" (Angela Merkel) of migration. Among strategies for handling refugees within the EU, leaders agreed to "swiftly explore the concept of regional platforms in close cooperation" with non-EU neighbours. Essentially, that would mean migrant processing centres in countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Libya,

Morocco, Niger and Tunisia, whose governments the EU would pay in return. Only two days later, African Union member representatives attended a scheduled summit in Mauritania, during which they sent a strong sign towards Europe: A "united voice" from Africa will "protect individual countries from pressure and manipulation," said AU Chairman and Rwandan President Paul Kagame in his opening remarks. Not only do most of these 'targeted' EU-neighbour countries oppose facilities of such kind, but the African Union as a whole has an entirely different take on these matters. In a decision paper dated 27th June, the Peace and Security Council of the AU does express a "deep concern that transnational organized criminal networks have hijacked the otherwise historically harmless migration routes into a multi-billion criminal industry with devastating consequences for migrants." Despite the awareness of these problems, AU leaders expressed dissent with the course the EU is taking already during a joint AU-EU summit November last year in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. "We want that the positive aspects of migration are taken into account," Olawale Maiyegun, director for Social Affairs, said on the margins of the conference. The AU is currently implementing plans for freedom of movement, abolition of visa restrictions, and a legal framework for every African citizen to settle wherever he wants. "For *this*, the Europeans should help us with their expertise—instead of undermining our goals with their desperate policies," said Maiyegun. Freedom of movement is vital for any local economy to grow. Reasonably, the AU wants the same liberties for it's people, whom the EU citizens enjoy already since decades.

It seems, as if the EU has either overheard, or simply does not want to hear these voices. What the Africans want for their own continent plays a increasingly shrinking role in the EU strategy. In the announcement of the their 2016 Framework Agreement, the Commission states that "a mix of *positive and negative* incentives will be integrated into the EU's development and trade policies to reward those countries willing to cooperate effectively with the EU (...)." This essentially means, that some countries receive more funds than others, profiled by their relevance and responsiveness to migration flows. Frankly, Paul Kagame's notion of 'manipulation' does not seem all too far off here.

Borders of Vision: From Strategies to Transactions

The gradual shift from political concepts and a grounded civilian approach to interest-specific funding contributes to an increasing loss of credibility. That the EU's foreign policy on the continent increasingly relies on its Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) is not just a symptom of this, but a core obstacle to (re-)establish any kind of legitimacy on the ground. In contrast to the CSDP missions, which essentially aim to transfer European know-how to African counterparts, the latter do not play much of a role in the activities financed by the EUTF. As Clare Castillejo from the German Development Institute has analysed, the participation of African people in EUTF projects is smaller than within even the most traditional instruments of any development aid work. Regarding organization, management and implementation, "Africans have little to say," Castillejo finds. Local ownership in this sense fails completely, but it is also no longer mentioned as a central goal. As a contrast: For projects of the European Development Fund, another important financial pocket of the EU, it is mandatory that both sides of the project cooperation are equally involved in the process. A clause like this does not exist in the EUTF framework, hence many partners already feel that European interests are more important than their own.

"The effectiveness of the EUTF is secondary to the political message it contains," Castillejo writes. Born out of the political dilemma that EU-leaders had found themselves in 2015, the Fund is now actually taking away big chunks of political accountability. By pooling investments for the private sector to install surveillance and border control technology all across Africa, several steps of legitimation vanish. While the CSDP missions require the approval of all Member States through a Council Decision, the Trust Fund is led by a composition of EU staff, EC representatives, European External Action Service members and all donors (Member States and others). This way, one would argue, fast and more efficient decisions are possible; while others would point to more fragmentation, even intransparency, in the process of tackling issues of extreme sensibility.

Therefore it is of no surprise that harsh accusations against the EU slowly surface: With the tool that the Fund provides, projects in countries with weak human rights legislations can be pushed forward much more easily. The EU could not send an official training mission to Sudan, whose ruling president is pressed with charges for

genocide by the International Court of Justice in Den Hague. But in the context of the Fund, the Union's ambitions to cooperate more effectively with the Sudanese border authorities are an open secret. While the EU denies working together with the infamously cruel Sudan Rapid Forces (SRF) militia, it is them who control the country's borders with Libya. According to the *arte* reporters, the SRF in 2016 proclaimed the arrest of 700 refugees, right when the EU and Sudan were at the height of their negotiations. "We're doing Europe's job right here," SRF members reportedly announced. "Indications like these bring forward severe ethical concerns, both for the EU citizen and their African counterparts", Castillejo notes, as well.

These days, the EU has taken further steps to increase what is referred to as the 'flexibility' of projects supported by the Trust Fund. In a speech delivered to the European Parliament in Strasbourg on 3rd July, President Jean-Claude Juncker announced the conclusions of the recent Council Summit. The leaders agreed to stock up the EUTF once again, with a good 4.1 Billion Euro. "This wasn't the original plan," Juncker commented. But according to him, 500 Million Euro of that money will be taken out of the European Development Fund. While Juncker assured that these are loose reserves, the concern of ending up with less money for projects addressing poverty, health or education is valid. Whatever Juncker referred to as being the 'original plan'—it is worthwhile to at this point remember the initial strategy the EU did focus on not all too long ago. A vision of supporting nations in finding peace, stability and prosperity—these are targets the EU could promote openly and with transparency. But sponsoring European companies to install border and surveillance technologies in countries with questionable leadership is a very foggy procedure, most likely to happen outside the realm of any political and social debate.

Conclusions

African countries have long struggled with severe indications of underdevelopment and therefore have always received international aid. But with the migration influx in Europe, another narrative became more prominent: Africa is not only poor, but its circumstances has people fleeing in the hopes of a better life. This realisation escalated into the continuously growing demand for immediate political action with *visible* results. But in Africa, meanwhile, some realities have stayed the same. Any

strategy for improvement in the country cannot ignore the fact, that Africa needs the basics first. Before equipping countries with fingerprint technology, its citizen should learn how to read and write, get access to media and societal debates, in order to have a chance to shape the country's future before others do. This is not only the EU's responsibility, but calls upon humanitarian and civilian organisations and international media, who can help giving voice to the vast amount of unknown local communities and actors. It is relevant to include Africa into the global civil society, so that its people can find forms of participation and expression independent from their government's progress or social status. Only this way, damaging, black-and-white perceptions such as 'all traffickers are criminals' or 'borders will prevent movement' can be dispersed. Last but not least, we should give the Africans a chance for the same freedoms we enjoy. Despite the EU's current move towards closing its own borders, we should not hinder the African Union from pursuing a model based precisely upon those values, the EU always proudly represented.

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