

A changing partnership

(MFI) The 2005 Africa-France Summit is hosted by Mali, a country often praised for its successful political transition, but which is also facing the gruelling challenge of poverty. The 23rd conference of Heads of state of Africa and France is taking place in a special context, with a unifying agenda focusing on Africa's youth. This also implies reviewing the results of African development policies.

The Summit is meeting amidst many indications that the international community now again sees Africa as a major concern – from the latest G8 to the summit on United Nations reform, from Washington to London, from Brussels to Paris, 2005 has been marked by a series of statements and initiatives reflecting the readiness of wealthy countries and international institutions to look for new solutions to the continent's ills. This renewed interest warrants hope of a real mobilisation to help Africa achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), the UN's roadmap for overcoming world poverty by 2015. These signs seem to confirm the emergence of a new vision of development assistance, closely linked to the trend towards globalisation and its associated economic strategies.

France has embarked on a thorough reform of its own development aid policy to bring it into line with this new context, implying a shift of emphasis from bilateral initiatives to more multilateral approaches. Adjustments were gradually implemented since the end of the 1990s, and the reform and modernisation of administrative structures and the aid delivery system is now nearing completion. This overhaul also implies a redefinition of priorities, although the options chosen remain essentially the same. AFD, the French development agency, has assumed, as from 2005, responsibility for a large part of the field work. These changes in working methods will require some adjustments by France's African partners; it will be up to the French to make sure that they will be well understood.

A multilateral approach that is gaining ground

The theme of the previous Summit, in 2003, was *Together in the new Partnership*. French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy stressed, on taking office in the spring of 2005, that "*Africa is a priority for French diplomacy*", and recalled the terms of this partnership which, he said, "*implies resolute support for African initiatives, and a mobilisation for this purpose of our partners in the international community, first and foremost Europe, within the framework of a coherent action.*" This approach is highlighted, on the one hand, by partnership with the African Union, the NEPAD initiative and the strengthened regional organisations, and, on the other hand, by a deliberate effort of convergence with multilateral actions, especially those conducted by the European Union.

The message seems evident: France does no longer want an exclusive relationship with Africa and hopes to explore the opportunities offered by a "multilateralisation" of relations with the continent. It will do so without denying the existence of special relationships based on "*friendship and history*". And without giving rise to the now almost ritual charge of disengagement from Africa, levelled against France for more than a decade. The adoption of such a balanced position, not always easily achieved, has become a constant feature of French policy, which is evident in the field of development and in efforts to help resolve the crises that have hit the continent in recent years: from the Democratic Republic of Congo to the Central African Republic, and from Darfur to Côte d'Ivoire. Even if the latter crisis constitutes the ultimate test, where the strong French military presence has induced many observers to refer to a French re-engagement in Africa, the signals out of Paris can be given a much more qualified meaning.

While Côte d'Ivoire remains a key issue of concern, Paris considers developments in most of the continent's recent trouble spots as broadly positive: a measure of peace has been restored in the Great Lakes region and in West Africa, where elections were organised in Liberia. In the remaining hot spots where tensions still prevail, the international community has left a good margin of initiative to the Africans themselves. And there is continued progress as regards bilateral or multilateral military cooperation with Africa.

The French also feel encouraged by the continued improvement of governance in African states. Apart from some slippages, as in Togo in early 2005, elections held over the past two years have generally

not been marred by any major incidents. And in several countries the rule of law is being strengthened through significant institution-building – parliaments, constitutional courts, regulatory bodies etc. – while progress is continuing towards press freedom.

However, in many cases the improvements are mainly of a formal nature: press freedom may still be limited or "hijacked" by political interests; frequent constitutional "adjustments" – sometimes aimed at extending the mandates of Chiefs of State – remain a matter of concern; the judiciary often does not work; and corruption remains a huge problem. However, progress in governance, on a par with advances in other key sectors of development, is considered to be of crucial importance. For donor countries are increasingly linking official development assistance (ODA) to improving democratic and economic governance.

Relations in transition

The 23rd Summit is taking place as relations between the African countries and France are in the midst of a slow, but profound process of change – a largely pragmatic form of transition. Since the early 1990s and the summit at La Baule, France has been constantly seeking to adjust its African policy to a changing context, marked by the globalisation process and the presence, henceforth of key importance, of multilateral partners in Africa. Lessons have also had to be drawn from the evolution in African states, impoverished but freed from the straitjacket of the Cold War. One significant feature has been the occurrence of crises of a kind never seen before in the continent: events in Rwanda in 1994 provided the most dramatic example of this. At the beginning of the decade, a wave of "democratisations" and national conferences swept Africa. This process of "political deregulation", which in some cases yielded positive outcomes, may have contributed to triggering some of the current crises, including the one in Côte d'Ivoire. The French and the Africans seem to have resigned themselves to what appears as an inescapable evolution – which has become the subject of an abundant literature and much controversy among analysts.

Africa may perhaps be happy to know that it is considered, notably in Paris, as "*a major continent of the 21st century*" – inhabited by a growing population that will be increasingly young and complex. The international community may help to prevent it becoming more instable and more murderous for its own children. The ambition of France, which has singled itself out by making its own diplomatic choices in the face of major world events in recent years, may be to serve as a partner *nearly* like the others – that is, one that is capable of shouldering a historic heritage in Africa that will incite her to adopt, if need be, a position that may differ from that of others.

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The Francophonie – another multilateral channel

(MFI) In matters of governance and culture, France increasingly tends to coordinate its actions with another significant actor, the International Organisation of the Francophonie (OIF), which is bound for a structural reform in 2005-2006. The growing importance of its political dimension is seen as a factor favouring the dialogue between France, a weighty member, and Africa, its centre of gravity. The multilateral approach is valid here too, and not only as an instrument for the defence of the French language. This was evident when the Francophone countries closed ranks to put up a fight for the adoption by UNESCO in October 2005 of an international convention on cultural diversity, with major future economic interests at stake, especially in Africa.

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