Kapuscinski Lecture Report:
Daniel Bach – “The EU’s Strategic Partnership with Africa: A Model Lost in Translation?”

On Thursday the 7th of April, 2011, the Society for International Development Netherlands and the International Institute of Social Studies, presented a lecture by Professor Daniel Bach of the University of Bordeaux as part of the Kapuscinski Lecture Series, an initiative of the European Commission and the UNDP.

Professor Bach’s lecture addressed the relationship between the European Union (EU) and Africa. While emerging market countries have recognized the opportunities Africa holds, Bach queried the EU’s appreciation of the strategic importance of Africa. Africa is still too often viewed as a ‘dark continent’, made up of neo-patrimonial, quasi-states which offer few prospects for development. A victim narrative has been constructed whereby Africa is believed to epitomise the pitfalls of globalisation. This has given rise to a moralistic and humanitarian approach to Africa by the EU, which while well-intentioned, has not, arguably, been in the best interests of Africa. Failing to define Europe’s geo-strategic interests in Africa has fostered the impression in EU circles that Africa is a ‘dispensable continent’ when it comes to setting the agenda of world affairs. Bach argued that the EU’s vision of Africa needs to change if Europe does not wish to be sidelined in the future development of Africa.

It is true that in recent years there has been a move by the EU to chart a new course in EU-African relations. The Joint Africa-EU Strategic Partnership (JAES) which was adopted in 2007 following the second Africa-EU Summit in Lisbon, has significantly altered the tone of the dialogue. Bach argued however that the JAES has, up till now, not been very successful. It has suffered from both a lack of funding and weak enforcement capacity. Furthermore, the African Union (AU) – the key organisation for EU-African engagement- suffers from a ‘fallacy of composition’. Its members are often also party to other organisations, treaties and frameworks which at times compete with the stated aims of the AU. Bach therefore called on the countries of the AU to rationalise their membership in order to strengthen the negotiating power of the AU.

When it comes to institutionalising a model for regional integration and cooperation, the EU model has been highly successful. The lure of the benefits of EU membership has spurred on liberalising and democratising reforms and conferred upon the EU project a sense of ownership and legitimacy. It remains to be seen however whether this model can be
transposed onto other settings such as Africa in order to serve as a catalyst for development as well as a framework for North-South dialogue. The situation in Africa is for example not analogous to that of Eastern Europe during the time of the EU’s expansion – the weakness of many African states is much greater. Region building in Africa will therefore be as much about state building as anything else.

However, emulation of the EU model for African development and EU-Africa dialogue is not simply a matter of state capacity building. Bach argued that the EU model has been undermined by the contradictory policy orientations of the EU towards Africa. Economic liberalisation and integration in Africa has for instance been undermined by EU protectionist policies and an unwillingness to treat Africa as a single market. Democratisation in Africa meanwhile has largely been sacrificed in favour of enforcement of the status quo. Lastly, the concept of ownership is pursued along narrow security parameters. In the interest of European border control, Africa is expected to regulate its migration outflows, while European peace keeping forces steadily retreat from the continent. In sum, Bach argued that the EU’s strategic partnership with Africa is not simply a model lost in translation; it is a model which has not even ever been implemented.

The choice is not between a ‘no strings attached’ versus a Washington Consensus model of engagement between the EU and Africa. What is needed is a true strategic partnership between the EU and Africa based on a dialogue of equals, articulated in a coherent set of policies. If this does not happen, the provincialisation of Europe rather than the marginalisation of Africa is at stake.

Wil Hout, Professor of Governance and International Political Economy at the International Institute of Social Studies, presented a short commentary in response to Bach’s lecture. He argued that EU policy towards Africa was still based on a ‘divide and rule’ principle. Liberalisation for instance has not been pursued coherently with many overlapping and competing bilateral and regional trade agreements between the EU and Africa. The securitisation of Europe’s foreign policy with respect to Africa, which Daniel Bach spoke of, also does not permit a harmonisation of EU and African objectives. Hout argued that the starting point of EU policy should be a clear definition of the EU’s interests in Africa so as to arrive at a consistent and credible vision of EU-Africa relations.

Following on from Hout’s comments, a panel discussion took place. Sjoera Dikkers of the Dutch Labour Party argued that the key question we should ask is: who benefits from the EU-Africa relationship? She thought that far too often the EU serves to legitimise corrupt African elites who do not have the development of their populations at heart. In her opinion, it was therefore time for the EU to formulate a strategy which puts Africans first.

Ineke Duijvestijn, Deputy Director of the Sub-Saharan Africa department in the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, questioned the EU strategy of promoting economic development
in Africa through regional integration. While this model had worked very well for Europe, she saw a number of pitfalls in applying this model to Africa, among them being the fact that no pre-conditions are set for AU membership.

Mark Schneiders, head of business development at African Development Cooperation, an investment fund for bank and insurance companies in Sub-Saharan Africa, noted that this year Africa will be the fastest growing continent, with growth figures in excess of East Asia. This dynamism is reflected in a growing middle class and a return of the Africa diaspora to the homeland. Schneiders argued that while BRIC countries were seizing the opportunities present in Africa, the EU was far too slow to recognize Africa’s economic potential.

Andrew Sheriff of the European Centre for Development Policy Management spoke about the current status of the Joint Africa-EU Strategic Partnership (JAES). He saw the JAES being hampered by reluctance on the part of both the EU and the AU to collectively articulate their interests. The result was that the JEAS has up until now engaged in only low-level projects. Sheriff also saw the gap between stated European values and implementation as damaging Europe’s credibility and soft power.

The panel discussion was complemented by questions and contributions from the audience. Bonny Haufiku, commercial counsellor of the Namibian Embassy in Brussels spoke about his personal experience in negotiating the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA). In his experience, European negotiators assumed a superior attitude, with African countries viewed as a junior partner in the relationship. Haufiku argued that it is time for Europe to listen and to conceive of a new way to deal with Africa. Another participant from the African Studies Centre in Leiden thought that the framing of the debate was problematic, given that the EU is an institutional entity while Africa is a geographic location. Daniel Bach answered that the technical reason why the debate is not framed in terms of an EU-AU relationship was due to the exclusion of Morocco from the AU. However, he conceded that the conceptualisation of the EU-African partnership is problematic if we assume African region building will mirror the European experience. Bach pointed out that there are other ways of achieving regional integration, following for example the ASEAN model with the creation of regional corridors and special economic zones. Bach thought this was probably the future of regionalism in Africa.

Daniel Hanspach, Emerging Donors Specialist at the UNDP Bratislava regional centre offered a few closing remarks. He commented that the 12 new EU member states do not see Africa as a priority area, being traditionally more orientated towards the CIS and Asian countries. This makes the job of coordinating European development policy more difficult. Hanspach thought that today’s Kapuscinski lecture had set out an excellent case for a political approach to the EU-African strategic partnership which could be complemented by further discussions from a developmentalist perspective.