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The African Union and border management: Some aspects to consider

Background

The African Union (AU) houses a dedicated border management programme ([AUBP](#)) to address, consolidate and facilitate matters related to the continent's borders. The AUBP envisages a united Africa by promoting peaceful, open and prosperous borders. A number of political and legal instruments guide the AUBP in order to address rising difficulties and legacies of Africa's borders and in this regard the AU is serious about border aspects, but progress is incremental, rather than rapid and transformative.

During a recent workshop held in Stellenbosch¹ discussions focussed on learning from others and seeking out best practices. Delegates from Angola, Botswana, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, South Africa, The Gambia and Uganda as well as the East Africa Standby Force, UNODC, FRONTEX, NGO-representatives, academics from Stellenbosch University's SIGLA research institute and practitioners from the USA participated.² One outcome from the discussions relates to ideas on border management that the AU could find useful to revisit in their overall programme. In addition to two days of discussions, a morning workshop on 26 July 2019 drew the following inputs on Africa and the AU in particular.

Some critical roles to consider

Although the two day debate on borders reflected a clear securocratic narrative, everything cannot be embedded in or explained by securitising everything. Other thoughts and narratives must be considered as well to respond to and regulate or manage the multiplicity of threats, vulnerabilities, opportunities and demands borders bring about.

¹ Second International Workshop on Combatting Transnational Crime in Africa, "Border Management through Collaborative Efforts in Policy Making, Enforcement and Capacity Building", Stellenbosch, 24-26 July 2019.

² Invitees from North Africa could unfortunately not attend the event which left a void as to their views and inputs on the questions the workshop delegates considered.

On border disputes the AU's role in and dedication to prevention and mediation as a first priority must leave no room for doubt given the destruction and loss of life if prevention fails. As a second imperative, the AU should strongly reiterate its stance within a unified statement on migration and overall movement of people given its border management implications. Human movements occupy a [significant space](#) in Africa's border landscapes and thus the necessity to demonstrate AU unity on its prevention and resolution.

As the continental authority, the AUBP is best suited to direct and assist with frameworks for cooperation to settle border disputes and where possible, involve local communities in this process. The AUBP's capacity is not limitless and must therefore not be sapped by attempts at settling every border dispute, but rather consider an improved division of labour by encouraging members (national and regional) to maintain their own resolution bodies. The AU cannot and should not be the arbiter in all cases.

Legal and institutional measures underpinned by good communication serve as a triad to promote integrated border management. Here [regional bodies](#) function as catalysts to help the AU follow through on agreements and maintain common stances to facilitate cross-border movements continentally. This demonstrates progressive thought on how to promote open, peaceful and integrated borders. Assistance and drives to follow-through on agreements are critical as the continental groundwork is in place, but following through with agreements lack continuity and should be encouraged and supported at different levels.

Stimulating new thought or a rethink of border management in Africa

Who champions good border management in the AU? If it is about open, integrated and prosperous borders, who is the face of this drive that inherently proposes a turn from contested and competitive borders to soft borders stimulated by collaboration. One way to facilitate a route to bring about softer open borders, or, in their absence, improved border management, a drive for unified supportive technologies is one option.

Technologies serve as management multipliers where human resources lack expertise or are absent on the African border management landscape. Building upon technology drives, regional and interregional cooperation remain the backbone of responses to border disputes. If steeped in preventative thought and reinforced by confidence building measures and the critical component of information sharing, mitigation of border management difficulties become possible. While not new, rethinking cooperation, prevention, confidence building and information sharing contest the status quo on border management practices on the continent.

Suggested areas in need of urgent attention

Promoting good neighbourliness in bilateral, regional and interregional endeavours can only benefit border management from the bottom-up. While also preventative, good neighbourliness reinforce suggestions for regions to actively pursue best practices on refugee flows to offset permanent [refugee threats](#) and vulnerabilities by collecting and sharing more accurate information with partners. The permanency of and unexpected refugee flows call for ways to better handle the known and have contingencies to address the unexpected.

Institutional cooperation remains at the heart of good border management practices and the AU must be seen at the forefront of emphasising this principle. Institutional silos operating at entry and exit points are out of step with the wider notion of the AUBP. In response, the AU has to serve as the

continental lead to promote reforms for a layered strategy where multiple institutions all play their designated role to satisfy departmental, as well regional or even continental ambitions.

Turning attention to technology

Unified technologies within regions go a long way to satisfy continental ambitions on constructive, open and prosperous borders. Regions ought to be first respondents in pursuit of the AU's BP and technology can assist in this. One primary outcome of employing technologies is assistance with human flows and to filter out security risks. Tied up in human flows are high-value human clusters related to economics of for example the all-important [tourism domain](#) related to Africa's natural wonders³ that is an industry particularly sensitive to the standards and practices of border management.

African pockets of excellence and progress must be shared and used as vehicles to inspire other regional and national actors as to its success. One most crucial line of thought here is that where technology becomes a successful multiplier, its use, as well as long term utility including upgrades must be a priority. The practical use of technologies and prudence where to embed, must trump the attraction of brilliant technologies that are of little use to overall regional or AU aims on border management.

Ideas on and opportunities for training and education

Training and education is another facet of efficient border management and in Africa this matter receives much attention. Given the regional emphasis on border management, schools or institutions for training must share common curricula at the regional level. The said training and educational programmes should be progressive for incoming practitioners and guide their advancement to management levels at national and regional levels and eventual graduation to continental level expertise. This progression must preferably be an orchestrated norm within and between regions.

[ECOWAS](#) and [Kenya](#) with its Border Police institutions serve as cases in point, but room for horizontal and vertical integration remains. Thus the suggestion to set up common curricula as well as cooperative regimes on practices, management along with planning and implementation at national, regional and AU levels. This is also a forward looking approach to share national proficiency and knowledge bilaterally and regionally to eventually bring collective regional knowledge to the AU through not only skilled, but also experienced bureaucrats.

It is also useful to reconsider and promote exposure to regions outside Africa and their use of training and education. [FRONTEX](#) in Europe holds key practices on cooperative multinational training approaches and is probably a willing partner to assist African countries, regions and the AU. If aligned with existing African practices to promote learning, one outcome could well be shorter learning cycles and timelines culminating in better outcomes of educated border officials.

Concluding remarks

The above discussion is future-oriented and therefore more optimistic about ideas and outcomes. It thus avoids merely listing failures, threats and an unwillingness to shoulder the task of sound border management policies, strategies and eventual practices at national and regional levels. The discussion

³ Africa probably harbours the last frontier of wild mega beasts on the globe. This unique and globally strategic asset is intermixed other natural tourist attractions that require intra-continental travel, conservation and the imperative to avoid restrictive border management practices, if not cultures.

is also bottom-up as no influential policy-making individuals participated in the discussions and influenced or bifurcated the ideas put forward.

At the level of the AU the one prominent and necessary outcome ought to be a continental champion and centre of excellence for accomplishing its Border Programme in order to move from paper-commitments to implementation of its programmes. In practical terms such a centre cannot meddle in the work of member states, but rather be the coordinating body to harmonise the work of the RECs towards good border management and craft alignment with the outcomes of the overall AUBP. Given the number and diversity of African countries, regional intermediaries remain suitable agencies to implement and oversee continental and national initiatives involving the AU, African countries, international organisations, as well as non-state actors such as NGO's, civil society groups and even local communities in border areas. If open, prosperous and peaceful borders entail an opposing narrative to the status quo, the art remains how to attract a critical mass of African states and regions to support and execute the alternative paradigm to hard, competitive and conflict-prone border landscapes.

Recommended Reading

Castillejo, C. *The European Union Trust Fund for Africa: A glimpse of the future for EU development cooperation*, German Development Institute. Discussion Paper 22/2016.

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