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Claiming parity between unequal partners: how African counterparts are framed in the externalisation of EU migration governance

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

The externalisation of European Union migration governance disproportionately impacts states based on the African continent. Much of the analytical focus amongst existing research has been on the agency of the EU and its Member-states, identifying the asymmetric and postcolonial character of these policies, as well as highlighting that the imposition of European interests on African states risks undermining their own political stability. Yet, there is significant effort spent by actors on both sides of the Mediterranean on making African counterparts visible as an equal partner – an endeavour seen not just rhetorically within speeches, but also in the set-up of key institutional fora and their membership. The article approaches the framing processes involved to trace the legitimating basis of EU-Africa relations and the externalisation of EU migration policy to African states, highlighting how African political actors are positioned as participating in what is an EU-led process.

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European Union; Africa; migration; framing; legitimacy

\textbf{Introduction}

The claim that the EU is in an equal relationship with Africa is commonly found within policy processes dealing with the externalisation of European Union (EU) migration governance (e.g. Africa–EU Partnership, 2007). Long before the so-called refugee crisis of 2015, the EU has increasingly pushed migration control as a core demand in its various negotiations with African states as well as regional organizations (Crush, 2015). The idea of equality in relations between the EU and African states and, bodies goes beyond a mere rhetorical exercise articulated in speeches to include the set-up of key institutional fora and their membership. Actors on both sides of the Mediterranean spend considerable effort on making “Africa” visible in the role of being an equal partner to the EU – meaning that the mere presence of African actors is highlighted within the process. Scholarship has viewed this drive with scepticism (e.g. Beauchemin, 2018; De Guerry & Stocchiero, 2018; Dover, 2008), certainly, with respect to the extent African political actors are portrayed as

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being on a level playing field with their Northerly neighbours. This article does not challenge that initial view, given that the power asymmetry is stark, but to leave the analysis at this point misses, we argue, an important question: how is “Africa” made visible in this process? Is the claim of equality in relations between the EU and Africa comparable to a marketing brand used by European actors to legitimise EU policies? Exploring how “Africa” is made both visible and invisible within this process helps draw out the political context in which the externalisation of EU migration governance takes place.

The externalisation of EU migration governance to third states is a well-established phenomenon often seen as motivated by a desire to shift policy formation out of the remit of both domestic and communitarian constraints (Boswell, 2003; Guiraudon, 2003; Lavenex, 2006). This process of externalisation includes a multi-actor approach in which European nation-states have traditionally sought to have third party states solve their migration problems. From the early 2000s onwards, though, the steering of this process has shifted over to the European Commission, with further involvement from many other actors including the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which became a UN body in 2016. The externalisation of migration governance, as the literature review will discuss, has sometimes been understood as a form of extra-territoriality that goes beyond the already complex issue of displacement of responsibility to other states. These developments have relied in part on a process of securitization shifting migration from a question of social policy to one of security such that extraordinary measures are first requested, then implemented, and finally become normalized (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998).

The history of European-African relations and the wide power asymmetry between the EU and African political actors means that the extra-territoriality of EU migration governance in Africa has been subject to critique that it is a form of neo-colonialism (Brambilla, 2014). To better understand how Africa is made (in)visible within the externalisation of EU migration governance, we claim that it is necessary to look at not just the rhetoric but also the institutional design of African–EU relations in this policy area.

The article proceeds as follows: first, we briefly revisit the literature on the externalisation of EU migration governance, identifying key trends and ideas, in order to place current empirical developments against a broader context. We then turn to the institutional settings guiding Africa–EU relations which serve as “texts” framing a narrative in which “Africa” is present within the externalisation of EU migration governance – as both African states and civil society. This approach implies that we do not focus on the extent to which these institutions enable an actual power balance between the actors involved; rather, we treat their formal design as an expression guiding how those creating those institutions intend the relations to be seen. We argue that there are heterogeneous and complex forms in which different African states and non-state actors are called to participate in what is an EU-led process and that recent EU efforts to further externalize its policies have triggered higher levels of Africa-based agency and resilience (see Roman this volume). In line with framing theory’s emphasis on the importance of frames to both interpret and reconstruct reality, we conclude that the narrative of equality in EU–Africa relations needs to be taken seriously as part of what makes the current externalisation of EU migration governance possible. It also structures the possibilities for agency and resistance for those actors involved in that process.
Africa and the externalisation of EU migration governance

The externalisation of the EU’s migration governance refers to the process by which the policies aiming at controlling immigration to the EU gradually became understood and conceived as having an international dimension and implemented outside the border of the EU. As mentioned in several EU documents, the externalisation process is part of the general EU approach on migration, and “is complementary to EU foreign policy and development cooperation” (Atassanov, Dumbrava, Mentzelopoulou, & Radjenovic, 2018; see also Boswell, 2003). This phenomenon identified in the mid-2000s is aptly explained by Lavenex as a process by which immigration control, traditionally a core aspect of state sovereignty, was first moved upwards to the intergovernmental sphere, then brought closer to supranational governance, and is gradually moved outwards towards the realm of EU foreign relations (Lavenex, 2006, p. 329). As its empirical relevance expanded, this movement was analysed by a number of different perspectives, emphasizing both political and legal issues (Carrera et al., 2018; Koenig, 2017; Slominski, 2012; Wolff, 2008; Wolff, Wichmann, & Mounier, 2009). From a critical viewpoint, the observation that the EU has grown increasingly closed to non-EU citizens has led to a critical body of research on border security and immigration to the EU (Aarstad et al., 2015, pp. 129–130), drawing not only on critical border studies (Bialasiewicz, 2012; Bigo, 2014; Côté-Boucher, Infantino, & Salter, 2014) but also on post-colonial approaches (Brambilla, 2014) and wider critical approaches to the European Neighbourhood policy (Aarstad et al., 2018).

A fundamental part of the scholarship on the externalisation of EU migration policies has emphasized the security/securitised dimension of the phenomenon. The securitization of migration in the EU has been a dominant paradigm in understanding the externalisation of the EU’s policy and has attracted a wide number of contributions, covering many of the debates that occurred over the last fifteen years (Huysmans, 2006; Lazaridis & Wadia, 2015; Watson, 2012) and using different perspectives, from risk management as a technique of government (Neal, 2009; Van Munster, 2009) to a focus on how technological developments facilitate increasing levels of externalisation (Jeandesboz, 2016; Jumbert, 2018).

Due to its obvious empirical relevance, migration relations between Africa and Europe have attracted an immense body of literature. Many different approaches have looked at the phenomenon through various prisms, from focusing on experiences of African migrants into Europe (Beauchemin, 2018; Schapendonk, 2012) to broader policy and social overviews (Andersson, 2014; Crush, 2015; Gebrewold, 2016). Whereas some authors focus on the idea of partnership when assessing EU–Africa relations on migration (Mangala, 2013), a considerable part of the literature highlights aspects of a post-colonial, imperialist nature. For example, El Qadim (2014) focuses on post-colonial challenges to migration control in the context of French–Moroccan cooperation practices on forced returns with a focus on the agencies of countries of origin. Pradella and Taghdisi Rad (2017), additionally, employ a Marxist analysis of “European imperialism in Lybia” as producing instability that becomes “simultaneously a security threat and a channel of migratory movements to European capitalism” (Pradella & Taghdisi Rad, 2017).

In the literature on EU–Africa cooperation on migration issues, insufficient attention has been paid to how the cooperation occurring between actors on the two sides of the Mediterranean sea is framed in terms of partnership, cooperation, or, in some instances, even symmetry (Lavenex & Kunz, 2008; Lavenex & Stucky, 2011). A focus on these issues
requires contributions from framing theory (Goffman, 1974). A frame analysis can be defined as being “preoccupied with how ideas, culture and ideology are used, interpreted and spliced together with certain situations or phenomena in order to construct particular ideative patterns through which the world is understood by audiences” (Lindekilde, 2017). In other words, framing theory aims to “identify schemes in which individuals perceive the world” (Volkmer, 2009), the assumption being that frames produce effects on audiences. Chong and Druckman (2007a, 2007b) argue that framing effects depend on a mix of factors including the strength and repetition of the frame, the environment and individual motivations. Indeed, the effects of framing, and the mechanisms by which they are produced are complex and multifaceted. In relation with securitization, for example, Baele and Sterck show that “EU immigration policy has an abnormally high – though not top-scale – presence of security language” (Baele & Sterck, 2015, p. 1133, emphasis in the original).

In the remaining sections of the article, our discussion on framing adds a more nuanced perspective on the critical literature that claims asymmetry, by showing nevertheless that frames themselves produce multifaceted effects. In the article we do not measure the impacts of the frames, which would require a different research design, but rather make the argument that the EU and also African political and social actors are active in claiming “Africa” is an active part of EU migration governance. In order to understand this effort of making Africa appear as a site of active agency in the externalisation of EU migration policies, we conduct a frame analysis in which the institutions through which African and EU actors interact on migration governance are treated as texts framing, in this case, the role of African actors. In addition, we note that this process extends beyond state actors to include frames that provide a role for “African civil society”.

“Equality” framing in EU–Africa migration governance

The following analysis is focused on how “Africa” has been used as a frame within the institutional processes through which EU and African actors interact in migration governance. That means we do not identify power relations or the extent to which there is disparity, but rather draw out how the process is made possible through utilizing specific frames that, as will be shown, portray an image of parity between the EU and Africa. Whilst that image can be easily criticized as hiding power asymmetry, our interest is in understanding how that frame is expressed in the institutional design of EU–African relations in migration governance. To clarify, in identifying and analysing frames, we look beyond superficial rhetoric. Speeches and general statements that claim parity but with no direct impact on the policy work are, for this article, largely superfluous. Frames, on the other hand, refer to ideational concepts utilized in policy processes, including the design of those institutions.

In our analysis, we assume that, since these frames are used, they are in some way seen as important to those actors designing and operating the process through which EU governance on migration is being externalized to its southern neighbours. The research here does not pretend to be an institutional analysis of EU–Africa relations or international cooperation on migration, but by focusing on those frames that claim African–EU parity we open up an under-researched aspect that is at the forefront of the legitimating discourse constituting this complex and controversial series of policies and negotiations.
Mapping EU–African cooperation on migration

There is no single institutional body in which the EU and African states negotiate over the latter’s role in EU migration governance, making it a far from straightforward task to map the various discussions and decision-making processes involved. The emerging institutional design through which African and EU actors interact in migration governance is understood here not in terms of how power is distributed but as an act of framing and articulating a particular narrative legitimating the policy process.

Migration policy is discussed in both general African–EU state negotiations as well as in more issue-specific meetings. For nearly two decades, the EU and African states have met via a series of high-profile summits intended to cover many different areas, but with migration becoming more central in recent years. The first of these meetings (titled “the Africa-Europe summit”) took place in 2000, hosted in Cairo and organized between the EU and the Organization of African Unity (OAU), with relatively little attention given to migration beyond a general expression of concern regarding the growth in internally displaced persons in Africa and an emphasis that the rights of asylum seekers should be protected (European Commission, 2000). At the second event, in Lisbon 2007 and now with the African Union (AU) replacing the OAU, the AU and EU announced the first “Joint Africa–EU Strategy” (JAES). The 2007 JAES listed the following as its priorities:

- human rights, including children’s rights and gender equality;
- fair trade, migration, HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis and other pandemics;
- climate change, energy security and sustainability;
- terrorism, the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction and the illicit trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons;
- and knowledge – based society issues such as ICT, science, technology and innovation. (Africa–EU Partnership, 2007)

Since then, the summits have taken place in 2010 (Tripoli), 2014 (Brussels) and 2017 (Abidjan). The alternating choice between an African or European location is reflected in the name, switching between “EU–Africa” or “Africa–EU” summit, though most recently in November 2017 being titled “AU-EU summit”, framing the AU as the EU’s equivalent and representative of African states.

This last aspect is worth highlighting to the extent that the levels of political integration in the AU are much lower than the ones observed in the EU. The process by which the EU has expanded and consolidated over the course of almost seven decades is fundamentally different than the one leading to today’s AU, a much more recent and much less ambitious political entity. Therefore, indicating the existence of parity between the EU and the AU is an exercise of constitutive framing, aiming at generating the perception of equality that does not exist. Moreover, this aspect makes it problematic to treat “Africa” as a single unit of analysis. In other words, the AU does not represent nor cover the nuanced multiplicity of interests pursued by the different African states or encompass the varied agendas of many other relevant non-state actors.

African–EU civil society in Africa–EU migration governance

In parallel to the regularization of Africa-Europe summits, a civil society process has emerged with an AU-EU Civil Society Forum having been organized at all events since 2010 that replicates the “equality” frame used in relations between the EU and African states, reinforcing the validity of the latter and potentially contributing to its
acceptance. The European side of the forum is organized by the JAES EU Civil Society Committee and its steering group, which includes a disparate but prominent mixture of development and environmental groups based in European states. There is much less information on the African side of the Civil Society Committee, organized loosely under the auspices of the AU’s Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC). The official website for the JAES lists the joint AU-EU Civil Society declaration from July 2017 in preparation for the November 2017 meeting, as well as a photograph with the tag “Civil society gets a say at EU-Africa forum” (Africa–EU Partnership, 2017). However, in the aftermath of the Abidjan meeting in November, there was a new joint letter and that was not hosted on the website of the Africa–EU partnership, but available via the European Concord network of development charities, condemning the suppression of civil society (Concord, 2017). There is a stronger presence of African civil society groups in networks separate from the Africa–EU summits, such as in global networks like the Migration and Development Civil Society Forum (MADE), which exhibit a more critical stance to the relationship. However, African membership in MADE is largely based on groups located in Senegal and Cameroon, with key transit states like Niger represented by only a few groups with no sign of active engagement (MADE Africa, 2018).

The “parity” claim in African–EU institutional relations over migration

At the broad level of African–EU institutional relations, the frames utilized focus around a narrative in which there is parity between both the two regional blocs – the focus on regional blocs shifting from the OAU to the AU – but that goes beyond states to include civil society supposedly representative of the two sides of the relationship. There is an overt effort to frame this partnership as between states but also mirrored within civil society relations, though it becomes clear that the level of civil society involvement is extremely low for EU groups compared to the potential number of groups that could be involved, and this level is almost non-existent for African groups.

Trans-Mediterranean collaborations more specific to migration governance have taken place since the mid-2000s, with a series of bilateral agreements made on sea border controls between European and African states – for example, Spain and Morocco (2003), Italy and Tunisia (2004) and Italy and Libya (2007), and many others since then. Also, in 2007 a migration-specific process was organized by two African, two European states – the Euro-African Dialogue on Migration and Development, created by France, Spain, Morocco and Senegal. This “dialogue” was later renamed the Rabat process and appears today as an ambitious African–European intergovernmental collaboration, boasting 60 partner countries with a near equal distribution between African and European states. The membership structure of the Rabat process is particularly illustrative of the “African–EU parity” frame. The list of 60 partner countries is based on 27 African states, 31 European states (including non-EU states Norway and Switzerland), as well as the European Commission and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). In addition, Algeria has observer status, and the website for the Rabat process notes that Egypt and Libya were “dialogue partner countries” until 2014.
The distribution of European and African representation in the Rabat process is made more complicated by the fact the latter is supported by a secretariat provided by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) – a body that began as a non-governmental organization but now has a substantial secretariat of 200 persons, meaning it is comparatively well resourced, and is governed by seventeen member-states largely from Central and Eastern Europe (ICMPD, 2018). The ICMPD’s primary role is to facilitate regional cooperation between states to better manage migration with no remit to ensure equality between those states. However, the disparity between the ICMPD’s membership register and that for the Rabat process makes the emphasis on equality between African and European states in the latter significant. While the rhetorical devices explained above indicate an attempt by European actors to claim that Africa has equal agency and representation in these processes, a simple overview of the institutions involved challenges any initial impression supporting that claim. To be clear, ICMPD is not predominantly focused on Africa. The organization is charged with implementing the Rabat and Khartoum processes which each emphasize a near 50–50 ratio of European and African state actors. That such an easily questionable claim of “African–EU parity” is at the forefront of the membership structure for the Rabat and Khartoum suggests this frame is only needed at the immediate level of the Rabat process but is not required at a more substantive level at the point of implementation, as shown by the contrast with the ICMPD.

The Rabat process is formally focused on migration to Europe from Central, Western and Northern Africa; whereas migration from Eastern Africa and the Horn of Africa falls under the responsibility of the similarly embryonic Khartoum process (also known as the EU–Horn Africa Migration Route Initiative) with specific focus on trafficking in human beings and the smuggling of migrants (Khartoum Process, 2018). The two processes fall under the general umbrella of the Africa–EU Migration and Mobility Dialogue, again utilizing a frame around Africa–EU parity.

While the documents and the different institutional setups referred to here have different natures and fulfil different functions in guiding EU–Africa relations on migration, they have in common an explicit endorsement of the “partnership” or even “equality” framings. This indicates that these framings do not emerge in isolation, nor that they are a product of spontaneous or individualized behaviour. Rather, they correspond to a broader approach materialized by the May 2015 European agenda on migration and further endorsed in the aftermath of the peak of the migration to Europe in 2015. In concrete, the European agenda on migration points to a forthcoming summit in La Valetta with “key partners, including the African Union, to develop a common approach with the region addressing the causes of irregular migration and the protection of people in need, as well as smuggling and trafficking of people” (European Commission, 2015, p. 5). For the purpose of our article, it is relevant to point out that the European Commission considered it important to single out the AU as a key partner in developing a “common approach” to migration management.

The joint Valletta Action Plan
In the aftermath of the November 2015 migration-specific Africa–EU high-level Valletta Summit on Migration, the Rabat and Khartoum processes became jointly responsible for the implementation of the agreed text of the summit – the Joint Valletta Action Plan (JVAP). The 1Valletta Summit also resulted in a €1.8 billion EU Trust fund for stability
and for addressing root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa (the EUTF for Africa). The EUTF for Africa is governed principally by the European Commission and is not in any formal way collaboration between the EU and African actors, with an institutional structure, focused instead on EU Member-states. Whilst EUTF for Africa documents refer to, for example, “strong partnerships with local stakeholders”, this is at the order of rhetoric rather than a frame evident in its institutional design. The exception can be seen at the more detailed level of implementation projects, being that these show a mix of being partnerships with both European development agencies as well as some organizations based in African states. The EUTF initiative has been criticized in a European Parliament commissioned report as lacking democratic oversight and abusing the logic of a “crisis” to go outside core principles of good governance (Carrera et al., 2018).

The EUTF for Africa is the main financial mechanism within the European Commission’s Migration Partnership Framework, which in its title emphasizes the partnership frame. There is no more detailed institutional guidance on what constitutes partnership other than that it involves multiple forms of actors, including the private sector, and some form of relationship between European and African states (European Commission, 2016). To be clear, this is a European Commission process in which African actors are given agency only in their capacity as potential recipients of financial aid and, therefore, may act at the implementation level. Given the practice of the EUTF for Africa to date, as said, this is overwhelmingly dominated by the national agencies of EU Member-states (European Commission, 2019). Announced in November 2017, a joint AU-EU-UN Task Force has been set-up with a specific focus on Libya and with an interest in migration control (European Commission, 2017). In what manner this initiative interacts with other stated forms of collaboration between the EU and African actors remains unclear, but it provides another overt expression of the EU–Africa partnership frame.

The examples provided above constitute instances of the framing strategies by which the European and African actors, mostly state but also non-state actors, portray their migration governance relations in terms of a partnership. These developments have some contact points with the logic through which the EU has established partnerships with pivotal global and regional actors, and that seem to constitute a crucial part of the Union’s increasingly eclectic approaches to tackling the globalized multipolar world (Ferreira-Pereira & Vieira, 2016, p. 3). Whereas this article is not focused on evaluating the substance of EU–Africa relations, it aims at highlighting the framing process and the contrast between practice and the rhetoric of “equality”. As “schemes in which individuals perceive the world” (Volkmer, 2009), these frames shape the public perception of the nature of the relationship between African and European actors in the field of migration. According to the literature on framing effects, their impact on public opinion is dependent on a number of factors. Chong and Druckman (2007a, 2007b) have suggested that they depend on a mix of factors including the strength and repetition of the frame, the competitive environment and individual motivations. In the case under analysis, an “equality” frame has been employed on a recurring basis not only as a discursive resource in the strategic documents that guide the EU–Africa migration governance relationship but also in the formal set-up of the institutions that sustain them. Additionally, the framing strategy has stretched beyond the state level to include civil society organizations. We do not assess the motivations behind the framing strategy evidenced here, and indeed it remains to seem whether such frames (can) contribute to more equal and fair relations between the two
parties. But by providing an illusion of evenness and masking the sharp power asymmetries between the parties, the “African–EU parity” frame makes it easier for African state actors to adhere to this strategy. Being framed as equal partners with the EU, African states would logically find it easier to sell the related policies to their domestic constituencies and boost their own international status. The EU benefits by having a more willing partner, but also less vulnerability to European civil society criticism were it to act in an explicitly unilateral manner.

**Conclusion**

The externalisation of EU migration governance makes extensive use of a frame broadly categorized here as “equality” in EU–Africa relations in this policy field. This goes beyond the rhetoric of diplomacy or policy speeches to include institutional design. As such, institutions and their membership structure are used as “texts” to communicate this frame.

Frames play an important role in politics, shaping both how actors perceive policy problems and solutions, but also as the lenses through which actors see one another and are able to act. The visibility of “Africa”, with all its different state and non-state actors, within the framing of agency in the EU’s externalisation of migration governance is repeated in multiple settings, indicating that it constitutes an explicit political option. Equally, framing African counterparts in parity with the EU entails some consequences. Even if any associated agency is minimal, adopting this frame requires, for example, that the EU accepts that African states and civil society have a normative say over what has become one of the union’s core policy areas. In turn, the EU must see that the “African–EU partnership” frame brings with it certain benefits that nevertheless outweigh those costs. How the EU evaluates the costs and benefits of specific frames is not easy to measure, particularly where the value of the “equality” frame is dependent upon treating it as a substantive fact rather than a claim. As a short article we have also not been able to address the effects or reception of the frame, or how the African counterparts – both states and civil society – may negotiate and resist this framing process, including where it both constrains and enables forms of agency by weaker actors. These are questions for further research. What we have shown here is the existence of this process which, we argue, needs to be first identified as such if research is to understand the conditions through which contemporary EU policy in this now dominant area is made possible.

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**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
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