

Eritrea – EU Ties of Cooperation: Past Trajectory and Future Prospects



This brief article that attempts to examine Eritrea-EU ties in a broad-brush manner is occurring at a propitious time. Indeed, it is just over thirty years now since Eritrea and the European Union formally launched enduring development ties within the EU-ACP general framework of multilateral cooperation.

The EU, whether as a collective political entity or in terms of its individual member States, was largely absent, except for civil society Support groups and some NGOs, from the scene prior to that period; i.e. during Eritrea's thirty-year long epic struggle for national independence and human dignity.

The Eritrean People's Liberation Front was not recognized as a legitimate liberation movement despite Ethiopia's annexation of Eritrea in 1962 in breach of the bogus Federal Arrangement that was imposed in the first place to advance overarching geopolitical interests of external powers. The unfair political and diplomatic *status quo* changed in 1991 only when the Eritrean people achieved their independence through a long armed struggle that exacted heavy sacrifices from a small nation and re-affirmed their choice through an internationally supervised referendum in 1993.

As it happened, the European Commission subsequently opened its Delegation in Asmara in 1995. Eritrea-EU development cooperation, largely anchored on the Cotonou Agreement between the EU and the ACP countries, which brings together over 100 partner countries and around 1.5 billion people from Africa, Caribbean and Pacific, as well as subsequent instruments including the European Consensus on Development (2005) and the 2007 Africa-EU Partnership

Agreement, has remained operational in the past thirty years albeit with periodic hiccups and recurring spiral of ebbs and flows.

The primary drivers and principal causes for the checkered track-record and periodic strains in Eritrea-EU ties of development cooperation can be traced back, and attributed to, a host of philosophical, methodological, political, and geopolitical variables and parameters.

The historical baggage of the liberation period aside, the relationship started on a rocky terrain when Eritrea took the initiative, in good-faith, and sought to accede to the EU framework cooperation in the immediate aftermath of independence. The rather imprudent approach from Brussels at the time was to categorize Eritrea as a “successor State”, which was not in consonance with Eritrea’s legitimate right to, and quest for, decolonization. This untenable stance was duly rectified after appropriate litigation although it left its bad taste of innate and entrenched bias.

This lopsided political position resurfaced again during two episodes: during the 1998-2000 border conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia as well as in the recent war in the Tigray Region of Ethiopia.

In the first instance, the EU kowtowed to US historical and traditional bias against Eritrea to tacitly accommodate and even endorse Ethiopia’s breach of its treaty obligations to reject the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission’s “final and binding” Arbitral Award and continued occupation of sovereign Eritrean territories for almost two decades.

Brussels was one of the key brokers and guarantors of the Algiers Agreement, which contained explicit clauses of punitive action against the recalcitrant party by invoking the provisions of Chapter VII of the UN Charter. In the tortuous negotiations to facilitate the signing of the Algiers Peace Agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the EU was represented at a fairly senior level through the person of the then Italian Deputy Foreign Minister, Senator Serri. And yet, when the chips were down and Ethiopia flagrantly rejected the EEBC Award, Brussels kept mum primarily because it viewed the region as a principally US sphere of

influence on which its positions must be aligned with that of Washington in conflicting and controversial circumstances.

In the event, Eritrea's repeated pleas to Brussels to use its considerable leverage – EU collective and individual member State budgetary and programme support to Ethiopia were and remain massive – fell on deaf ears. The EU went further to support US engineered sanctions against Eritrea in 2009 and 2011 as well as the misguided policies of harassment pursued against Eritrea through the UNHRC in 2012 and that persists until today.

All these adversarial measures did not stem from independent EU policies; rather they were adjunct, and mostly adopted, to bolster their wider, and palpably much more important, global alliances.

The adversity did not end there. In March 2021, the EU took the unprecedented step of imposing deplorable sanctions on Eritrea's National Security Office on account of the war in the Tigray Region of Ethiopia. Whatever its biased political preferences and objectives, censoring and denouncing Eritrea belied a condescending attitude and political arrogance in a partnership that professed symmetry and equality outwardly and in very profuse terms.

In any case, the latest political position, coupled with other implementation obstacles including misconceptions on the nature and underlying rationale of the National Service, have resulted in the practical suspension of the 11th EDF development cooperation.

Benefits and Impact of Cooperation

The checkered track record of Eritrea-EU development cooperation can perhaps be likened to “an optimist versus pessimist description of a half-full or half-empty glass”. Because, irrespective of the periodic impediments and hurdles, mostly arising from pure political considerations, that have negatively affected the pace and impact of all-rounded development, trade and investment cooperation, the overall results have been substantial indeed when the cooperation programmes could be implemented smoothly without politically induced externalities.

This is both in terms of the aggregate funds allocated in the EDF cycles as well as the Government prioritized sectors to which they were funneled.

Indeed, although EU support to Eritrea's rehabilitation efforts in the first few years after independence were directed towards immediate tasks of rehabilitation, EDF allocations in subsequent years were funneled to wider programmes including renovation of physical infrastructure; support to the agriculture sector; energy and other priority areas of import. And for optimal result, previous practices of allocating funds to several sectors and programmes were abandoned in favour of concentrating each EDF cycle to a handful of priority sectors. The flexible approach increased the latitude for Government to buttress critical mass in a prioritized sector and glean higher benefits than was the case when funding was fragmented and spread over multiple programmes.

But despite these improvements, some implementation bottlenecks continued to persist due to elaborate approval and mid-term review mechanisms; and, the practice and tendency to centralize virtually all approval and monitoring processes in Brussels Committees with little latitude for the Resident Delegation.

Another factor of complication emanated from the scope and interpretation of Political Dialogue that is enshrined in the Cotonou Agreement (Article 8).

From Eritrea's perspective, this instrument is useful for nurturing candid discussion between the EU and the ACP country in question on vital issues – domestic, regional and global – to bridge different outlooks and foster consensus, in as much as this is possible and practical. This would in turn lubricate and enhance enduring ties between the parties. But the whole process lacks symmetry as the EU countries act as one block against an individual ACP member State and often infuse unequal power matrix into the process by introducing inappropriate conditionalities as well as linking continued implementation of the EDF programmes with tangible “progress” in the Political Dialogue forum.

But as intimated above, the overall benefits outweigh the various impediments which render the glass half-full.

Furthermore, and from Eritrea's perspective, the cooperation transcends the EDF cycles of development cooperation to incorporate wider areas of investment and trade. An enduring Africa-Europe cooperation must surely address a wider horizon and gamut of issues that go beyond time-bound development assistance and dependency to cultivate all-rounded ties of investment, technology, security etc.

And closer to home, the EU has tangible commercial, investment and security interests in the Horn of Africa in view of geographic proximity as well as its geostrategic importance straddling as it does a pivotal maritime route connecting Europe with Asia.

In the event, there are compelling arguments for the EU to chart out its own independent policy for the region; review and discard asymmetric and condescending political parameters into the partnership matrix; and, cultivate its individual as well as collective ties with Eritrea and the countries of the Horn on the basis of equity, symmetry and long-term dividends.

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On Apr 3, 2026