

Opening Statement by Roel von Meijenfeldt

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**Challenges and politics of supporting democratisation processes in Africa:
setting the scene**

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The EU is the largest block of democratic countries in the world. Democracy is the EU's core value as expressed in the trademark *unity in diversity*. European peace and prosperity is founded on democracy.

The EU's external policy has the central paradigm that *a peaceful world is a world governed by democratic states*. With the implementation of the new Lisbon Treaty and the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS), headed by Lady Ashton, the EU is committed to a more coherent and effective foreign policy.

For these reasons it is timely that this meeting convenes to consider ways to make cooperation between Africa and Europe on democratic reform more effective, to contribute to a more peaceful world and to reach sustainable levels of social and economic development.

I would like to compliment the Belgium EU Presidency on its taking the initiative to provide this platform for discussion and reflection at this beautiful venue, and as co-organiser together with the Egmont Institute and L'Obersvatoire de l'Afrique, I extend a welcome to all of you on behalf of the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD), a welcome I would like to extend specifically to our colleagues and friends from Africa who travelled long distances to be with us at this conference.

The Belgium Presidency has taken this initiative as a follow-up to the discussions about drafting an explicit EU democracy support policy, a discussion initiated under the French EU Presidency, elaborated under the Czech Presidency and for the time being concluded under the Swedish Presidency, in close cooperation with the EPD network. These discussions culminated in the first ever EU policy document and EU Agenda for Action on Democracy Support as agreed in the Council Conclusions of November 2009. Granted, the Council Conclusions do not yet have the status of an European Consensus on Democracy Support, but it is nevertheless an important milestone. The focus now is on the implementation of the EU Agenda for Action - specifically on action to ensure a more coherent and effective EU approach to democratic reform processes.

The challenge of this meeting is considerable. We are not gathering to discuss the virtues and vices of democracy as such - that is by definition an on-going debate - but we are taking up the challenge in the next two days to search for concrete suggestions to improve performance in delivering support for democratic reform. These suggestions will be taken forward by the Belgium EU Presidency, I hope, to the more formal policy-making levels within the EU institutions including the third AU – EU Summit next month in Tripoli.

Without taking you into an analysis of the changing international context for democracy support, my personal experience in working on the African continent (and other continents) is that there is a lot of demand for European democracy support, that Europe has a lot to offer in relevance experience, and that Europe is expected by our partners in Africa to take a leadership role in implementing new approaches. However, this leadership is yet to happen. Hence there is definitely work to be done and no time for either complacency or cynicism.

In sub-Saharan Africa there are between 17 and 22 countries out of 48 which have reached impressive sustained economic and democratic reform performances over the past 15 years, thereby defying many conventional theories that poor countries should develop economically first before they are fit for democracy. Mali and Mozambique are good examples from two different regions on the continent. Kenya, fortunately, returned from the brink of collapse to this group of emerging democracies by recently promulgating a very modern Constitution with a mandate from its population. These countries show that development and democracy go well together and indeed reinforce each other, producing better Millennium Development Goals scores.

I would like to briefly highlight a few points relevant to our discussions at this conference:

1.

Why is democracy support misunderstood? Democracy is often conceived as a specific model however thinking in models may be counter-productive. Democracy support should be conceived in terms of 'design'. It should be considered as a process to institutionalise universal values in the governance between states and citizens, a process to improve the social contract between people and their state.

2.

People often speak of democracy promotion, but I always ask myself why promote democracy when it is an universal value? In all surveys, wherever in the world, people consistently aspire to be governed democratically, even when they are dissatisfied with the performance. Promoting democracy feeds the misconception that you can push it down someone's throat. It results in such concepts as 'regime change' which are eagerly exploited by autocratic leaders whose business it is to block democratic reform. That's why I welcome the EU choice to speak of *democracy support* and *democracy building* and not use the term democracy promotion. A lot will be gained if we use the language and develop the proper instruments based on the well defined common values, norms and central principles in the EU Agenda for Action for Democracy Support.

3.

Democracy can not be exported. The EU combines 27 member states, all democratic, but not one has the same democratic institutional architecture. So what are we going to export, except tapping in the vast body of knowledge of how to shape democracy in various ways depending on the specific historic context, population composition, geography and other relevant factors.

Supporting democracy is not preaching, is not prescribing, but, on the basis of respect for other countries' specific context and historic trajectory, is an *invitation* to cooperate in facilitating support for building democracy. Key concepts in democracy support, as the EU Agenda for Action acknowledged, are *ownership* of the reform process, *inclusivity* and *dialogue* to build trust (or social capital) among the key players of both the state, political society, the private sector, civil society and academia.

4.

In practical terms, democracy support starts with recognising the ownership of the analysis and the agenda for reforms. If that analysis and agenda is genuinely locally owned and produced through inclusive processes of dialogue between the main African political, civil society, private sector and academic players (as opposed to being driven by external consultants), the chances

of reform being implemented increase significantly. For democracy to work, democratic values have to be internalised, hence the process of reform is as important as the content of issues at the agenda. It is supporting the growth of substantive democracy rather than formal or electoral democracy.

Support for reform agendas produced from within, domestically, through an inclusive process of national 'horizontal dialogue', offers many potential benefits. It can inform the agendas for the formal dialogues of the EU with its African partners ('vertical dialogue', at the national level with international level), while it can provide the framework to harmonise EU and EU Member States assistance. In this way it can redress the fragmentation of assistance as it is often provided and the assistance can be better targeted to strategic areas in the democratic reform process. Therefore, it can become an important step towards the stated objective of greater coherence and effectiveness of EU democracy support. It all centers around local ownership of analysis and agenda.

5.

Conceptually, the EU external policy is supposed to be value driven but in practice it is often rather pragmatic. Realistically speaking, there will always be a difference between what foreign policy should be and what it can be or what it is in practice. The famous trade-offs. The EU may use its leverage when it comes to maintaining international agreed HR treaties and conventions, but it may be less inclined when, for example, Europe's energy or security interests are at stake. Cooperation on democracy support ought not to suffer under these two opposing strands of foreign policy and the mixed messages send to our partners in Africa (and elsewhere).

Fortunately, there are new specialised European agencies delivering operational democracy support, such as the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD) and its affiliated organisations, which can work alongside the official EU institutions but somewhat more in the background and independent from other interests pursued in foreign policy. It is a field in which public-private cooperation can be instrumental in achieving the objectives of the EU Agenda for Action on Democracy Support. This is another practical issue that warrants reflection and elaboration during the conference..

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I look very much forward to our discussions and recommendations for improving the cooperation between Europe and Africa on democracy support. It is an area of work in which the return on your intellectual and political investment can be quite high.

At the same time, I hope this conference will also be an investment in a growing policy community of Europeans and Africans policy makers, academics and implementers interested in and committed to the advancement of democracy.

I wish you an open and honest exchange of ideas and experiences during the next two days. The Chatham House rules shall be applied, meaning you'll be not quoted. Hence, feel free to engage in discussions!

Thank you.