

# A Discreet Look at Africa from Mexico

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Today, Africa's integration into the international system looks like a series of ambiguous mechanisms, plagued by the incoherence, contradictory objectives and unclear spaces in which African international relations—as some call them—play out. This forceful statement can be backed up by the observation that, for several actors in the international community, Africa continues to be the unknown, and is considered at times to be a single sovereign state seeking to make its way out of isolation.

Also, post-independence Africa—the end of the 1950s to the early 1960s—was marked by the design of new kinds of relationships between African countries and the former metropolises. These relations were first forged among individual governments and, later on, broadened out to regional groups.

For example, for Africa, today the European Union is a very important economic and political reference point because it is its first trade partner and the destination of 51 percent of the continent's exports. For a long time, the United States considered Africa to be a group of small, poor, authoritarian states unimportant in the international scene; since the end of George Bush, Sr.'s administration, the U.S. committed itself to democratizing Africa. Equally, in broad strokes, African-Asian relations, led by China's African policy, currently focuses on three main areas of cooperation: political solidarity, economic cooperation and socio-cultural relations.

This article will not attempt to deal with the very ambiguous topic of the historical links between Mexico and Africa that go all the way back to the painful experience of slavery,

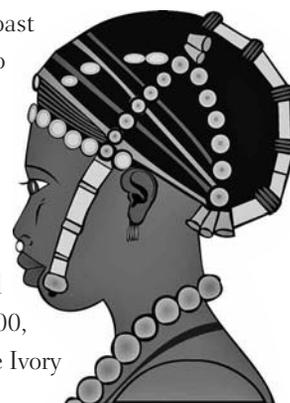
which brought so many Africans to Mexican shores through the port of Veracruz. Rather, we are interested here in looking at the more formal, structured relations between Mexico and Africa.

## AFRICA IN SEARCH OF MEXICO

It is important to remember that the first African country to establish formal relations with Mexico was Ethiopia in the 1930s and 1940s. In the framework of these diplomatic relations, a certain number of young Ethiopians had the opportunity to study medicine in Mexico under the auspices of cultural cooperation agreements.

When most of the African countries achieved independence in the late 1950s and 1960s, relations between them and Mexico became clearer. In this period, the African countries' priority was to achieve increasing international recognition of their new political status and existence. Egypt and Algeria each established embassies in Mexico. Financial difficulties forced the rest of them to maintain relations with Mexico through their diplomatic missions in Washington or Cuba.

Later, Gabon, Nigeria and the Ivory Coast opened embassies in Mexico, but unfortunately, for political-economic reasons, they lasted no more than three years. In that framework, students from the Ivory Coast and Nigeria began coming to Mexico for their education. In the early 1980s, first the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and then Morocco established embassies in Mexico. In 1994, after the abolition of apartheid, it was South Africa's turn. In 1997, Angola also opened its own embassy; in the first half of 2000, Nigeria followed suit; and in 2008, the Ivory Coast did the same.



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In the last two years, Angola, Egypt, Ethiopia, Equatorial Guinea, Kenya, South Africa and Tanzania have approached Mexico to find out about its experience in implementing social development policies and the fight against poverty. To date, Egypt and South Africa are carrying out studies to implement models similar to Mexico's internationally recognized Opportunities Program.

In 2008, Mexico received visits from high-level officials and delegations of businesspersons from Angola, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Kenya, Libya, Morocco, Nigeria, Namibia, Ivory Coast and South Africa, among others. These visits' objectives were to analyze forms of cooperation in the fields of trade and the economy, energy, infrastructure, health, the fight against poverty, human resource training and sports.

#### MEXICO'S MEASURED STEPS TOWARD AFRICA

First of all, it is important to mention that Luis Echeverría was the first Mexican president to stand on African soil. His visit included Tanzania, Ethiopia, Egypt and Senegal. In every country, Echeverría, together with local leaders like Tanzania's Julius Nyerere, made the proposal to begin multi-sectoral cooperation with Africa. Thus, at the end of his term in 1976, the Mexican government awarded a considerable number of African students scholarships to study at universities and technical colleges so they could participate in their countries' development.

To reformulate African-Mexican relations, President Ernesto Zedillo's National Development Plan (1995-2000) proposed that "in relation to Africa, Mexico needs to contribute with its presence to international cooperation with that continent and renew its traditional links, including reopening diplomatic missions."<sup>1</sup> The aim was precisely to reformulate an increasingly structured framework for relations between Africa and Mexico.

However, as Hilda Varela mentions in her article "Crónica de una política inexistente: las relaciones entre México



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y África, 1994-2000" (Chronicle of a Non-Existent Policy: Relations between Mexico and Africa, 1994-2000), those relations have turned out to be marked by low-profile, discontinuous diplomatic activity, since Mexico has deliberately and persistently avoided getting involved in Africa. Instead, it has opted for passiveness, though taking advantages of some political moments—that would not involve any great political commitment—to act on the African continent.<sup>2</sup>

Given the lack of a structured framework of Mexican relations with Africa over recent administrations, those with the power to design strategic foreign policy guidelines have constantly clashed with a few Ministry of Foreign Relations officials who do not share that acritical view.

#### TOWARD A NEW ORIENTATION FOR MEXICO'S AFRICAN POLICY

Today, to broaden, diversify and deepen Mexico's political, economic and cooperative relations with African institutions and countries, Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Relations is implementing a series of measures aimed at opening new spaces for political action using both bilateral and multilateral mechanisms for dialogue. It is also seeking to strengthen trade links, foster investment and promote mutual understanding.

As a part of this new strategy, Mexico attended the ordinary sessions of the Executive Council of Ministers of the African Union, the regional body in which Mexico has been an observer since 2005.

In precisely this same vein, in March 2007, Mexico reopened its embassy in Ethiopia, the country where the





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African Union is headquartered. Simultaneously and for the first time, Mexico presented its credentials to the governments of Angola, Djibouti, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Namibia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Zambia.<sup>3</sup> This new policy will make it possible to increase political contacts with different countries on the African continent and increase trade opportunities and multi-sectoral cooperation. Honorary consulates have also recently been established in Botswana and Sudan as new ways to promote Mexico's interest in Africa.

To strengthen political and cooperative ties, recently there have been meetings to establish "mechanisms for consultation on issues of mutual interest" with Algeria, Egypt and South Africa; a letter of intent on health issues has been signed with Tanzania; important environmental cooperation agreements have been signed with Kenya and South Africa as has an agreement for the First Work Program 2008-2009 Regarding Water Resources with Morocco. Along these same lines, Mexico signed a memorandum of understanding between its diplomatic academies and those of Algeria, and established mechanisms for consultation on issues of mutual interest with Ethiopia, Kenya and Rwanda as a legal framework to foster a more solid political dialogue and identify concrete opportunities for cultural, academic, scientific and technical cooperation.

Three years ago, Mexico also declared an "Africa Week" in the month of May, during which the great wealth of African culture is exhibited in the country. During the last two Africa Weeks, a Mexico-African Countries Technical Cooperation Fair was held for the first time,<sup>4</sup> as well as a Trade Opportunities Seminar with the participation of Mexico's honorary consuls in Africa. In this framework, the Mexico-United Nations Population Fund Trust Fund was created to foster Mexico's technical cooperation with Africa around issues of population and development strategies, sexual and reproductive health, gender and institutional skills building.

To close the 2008 Africa Week, Mexico's Senate and Ministry of Foreign Relations organized a seminar entitled "Africa and Mexico: Shared Past, Present and Future." The sem-

inar's objective was to show the shared culture and history of Africa and Mexico and to analyze Africa's political, economic and socio-cultural situation. Outstanding participants included several Mexican officials and almost the entire African Diaspora in Mexico.

#### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Despite Mexico's new way of seeing Africa, we can say that with its fewer than five embassies in a continent of 54 countries, it still has a long way to go to efficiently examine the enormous multidimensional opportunities the African continent offers. The African countries, for their part, would also gain from looking increasingly to Mexico. Meanwhile, Mexico continues to ignore several African countries, and we end by asking ourselves if Hilda Varela's statement that Mexico's African policy is "neither good nor bad, but simply is not foreign policy" is correct or not. In the meantime, relations between Mexico and Africa could increase if they have mutual interest, which they actually do, but which is not acted upon very much. **MM**



#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Poder Ejecutivo Federal, *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 1995-2000* (Mexico City: SHCP, n/d), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Hilda Varela, "Crónica de una política inexistente: las relaciones entre México y África, 1994-2000," *Foro Internacional* 166, vol. XLI, published by El Colegio de México (October-December 2001), pp. 912-930.

<sup>3</sup> Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, *Avanzan las relaciones de México con África, Medio Oriente y Asia Central*, press release, January 3, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> This fair was held for the first time from May 20 to 25, 2007 at Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Relations building. It was a space in which the Mexican government could build closer ties for cooperation with the African countries, fostering dialogue in areas such as science and technology, encouraging the exchange of knowledge, experiences and innovations, and strengthening national capabilities to the benefit of our countries.