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The African Union's Public Diplomacy ^[1]

The African Union (AU) was officially launched in 2002 in the city of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It was deemed the successor to the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to focus more on the “cooperation between African states to drive growth and development and to fulfill the promise of Africa’s potential.”

The primary vision of the African Union is to embody an “Integrated, Prosperous and Peaceful Africa,”, as well as to become a regional body that brings a sense of belonging to the people in Africa and within the entire African diaspora.

The AU consists of 55 member states that make up the African continent and is one of the most diverse organizations in the world with over seven official languages. How has the vision of an “Integrated, Prosperous and Peaceful Africa” been implemented, and what role does the Union’s public diplomacy have in achieving such a vision?

Agenda 2063

Agenda 2063 and “The Africa We Want” initiative was launched by the AU in 2013 during the 50th golden jubilee celebrations of the formation of the OAU. It incorporated the theme of Pan-Africanism and the African Renaissance to lay out the official “long-term developmental and integration plan” for Africa, with aspirations to be implemented by the year 2063.

According to the Agenda’s official overview, it seeks to be “a complete manifestation under the ideals of unity, self-determination, freedom, progress and collective prosperity” promised under Pan-Africanism and the African Renaissance. The initiative is marketed prominently on the AU official website and features its own directory page with links to the overview, goals, flagship projects, and other details, along with using the hashtag #Agenda2063.

This key cornerstone project details the real fabric of the AU’s public diplomacy and how the message solidifies the Pan-African vision of “an Integrated, Prosperous and Peaceful Africa.” The evaluation of its success comes into play with targeting a youthful audience, linkage with other global partnerships and evolving into developing a more prominent digital media presence.

Target Audience of Africa’s Youth

Targeting Africa’s youth in its public diplomacy initiative of Agenda 2063 was the key aspect of the flagship program. It is crucial to factor in this population, as Africa has the youngest population in the world “with more than 400 million young people aged between 15 and 35 years.” The AU Agenda 2063 implements various youth development programs such as the African Youth Charter, Youth Decade Plan of Action, and the Malabo Decision on Youth Empowerment.

In addition, the agenda also established the AU Diaspora Youth Initiative, which is a “mission to the European Union to foster collaboration between diaspora youth organizations in Europe and their contribution to Agenda 2063.”

This is an example of how the AU appealed to a more youthful audience to work in other organizations outside the continent. The Youth Initiative is also active on social media and has both official X/Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn accounts; however, their total number of followers comes around to about one thousand.


U.N. Linkage

Building on this focus on Africa's youth was pivotal into securing a partnership with the United Nations on implementing Agenda 2063. This was shown when the AU established a linkage to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015.

The African Union-United Nations framework for the implementation of Agenda 2063 is “to list the conditions for cooperation between the two organizations to promote inclusive growth for Africa's sustainable development and transformation.” The main aspect of the Agenda 2063 that solidified the UN's support was the target audience of Africa's youth.

AfCFTA and FDI

Another aspect of Agenda 2063 that was essential to forging relationships with global partners was the African Continental Free Trade Area program (AfCFTA) in 2018. This project of Agenda 2063 is also heavily promoted on the AU website and has the slogan, “Creating One African Market” over the numbers 2063.

The main attractive quality of the mission is that it forms the largest free trade area in the world with a population of around 1.3 billion people combined with a GDP of approximately \$3.4 trillion U.S. dollars. A report  published by the World Bank in June 2022 listed the benefits from the expected increase of foreign direct investment (FDI) under the agreement. The report also indicated a rise in Africa's exports to the rest of the world of 32% by 2035.

Trading under the AfCFTA Agreement began in January 2021, and as result, Africa's FDI has steadily increased with countries such as China and the U.S. The notion of increased FDI from China has raised questions, however, and could lead to future conflict related to Africa's potential over-dependency on China for its development. However, from a public diplomacy perspective, it has been successful in forging better relations among superpowers to develop a stronger presence within the global market.

A Unified Image for Africa

Since the AU was established in the heart of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 2002 there has been a steady evolution of its public diplomacy practice. The foundations of envisioning a more hopeful, Pan-Africanist vision helped guide its messaging to foster in a new future for the continent. The launch of its main policy, Agenda 2063, displays the real evolution of the AU's public diplomacy strategy in terms of bringing in the demographic of Africa's youth, linkage with the U.N.'s Sustainable Development Goals, and attracting foreign investment from the AfCFTA.

The level of success of the implantation of these aspects of their initiatives in Africa, however, is difficult to measure. While foreign direct investment has increased since the launch of Agenda 2063, evidence of their goals in delivering an “Integrated, Prosperous and Peaceful Africa” has been not yet been measured.

However, with the rise in digital diplomacy and strong national branding techniques, the AU

promises to be an organization that has potential to compete with the international sphere in delivering a personal, unified image for Africa and attracting a prominent global audience.
