

Promoting Regional Integration in Africa: The EU as an External Actor

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Regional economic integration has featured high on the African political and development agenda. Building on earlier endeavours, the 1991 Abuja Treaty foresees the establishment of an African Economic Community through the gradual integration of formally recognised Regional Economic Communities (RECs). The promotion of regional integration also appears as an important dimension of donor policies towards the African continent, especially for the European Union (EU). European engagement at the regional level has a long history and while it has mostly occurred through support from the European Commission, EU member states have recently stepped up their regional activities. However, overall progress in the implementation of the African integration agenda is limited and intra-regional trade in Africa remains generally low. This paper discusses the European response to the African regional integration agenda and the terms of the EU's engagement to support its implementation, notably through the Aid for Trade initiative. With a particular focus on the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the paper thereby seeks to identify the enabling factors and bottlenecks to the promotion of regional integration in Africa by an external actor such as the EU. Ultimately, it addresses the question as to whether regions in Africa are and can drive the terms of their economic integration processes.