

The East African Community should learn from the EU and mobilise public involvement immediately

By Democratic Audit UK

*The European Union is held up as the gold standard for successful international regional integration, but less attention is given to the somewhat undemocratic means that have seen this feat achieved. **Josie Knowles** argues that similar efforts underway in Africa – specifically the East African Community – should take note of what the EU didn't do, and look to mobilise public involvement immediately.*



What can the African Union learn from the European Union? Credit: [US Army Africa](#), CC BY 2.0

When one thinks of democracy, citizen participation – and perhaps even influence – at the national level springs to mind. Citizen participation is eventually extending beyond national elections, a mere democratic act which takes place (or for many doesn't) once every five years: a dramatic wave of interest taken in the Scottish Independence referendum debate highlights this occurrence. At the regional (sub-national) level too, democratic participation increasingly takes place through community groups, local representatives and the like. That the outcomes of such decisions take place so close to home suggests reason why citizens become involved at this level (and make sure that democratic activity, albeit formal or informal, works effectively).

But what about democracy and the supranational level? The major mechanism for citizen input to the European level is the European elections, taking place every five years. Yet, with few citizens participating in such a venture, or even being aware of their occurrence, what sort of supranational democracy can we talk of? The EU is increasingly visible in the everyday lives of its citizens, with regards social policies, an enlarged labour market, and indeed an increased number of citizens competing for such opportunities.

Yet, mechanisms for citizen involvement and education is lacking. Only recently, with the rise of polarised Euro-sceptic parties, has public opinion been taken on board by elites and a referendum mechanism (potentially) offered. But this surely isn't enough? What about citizens who are educated on the matter, who want EU membership, but want change? It seems that the journey towards European unity has dramatically progressed (or digressed) without a significant proportion of the European public on board. Those who want change have probably decided against a future in Europe, based not on what the EU stands for, but disillusionment with their European 'representatives'.

So where am I going with this? The EU is the most advanced and prosperous example of regional integration across the globe. Other examples of regional integration (in the developed and less developed world) are encouraged to 'learn' by example, the EU being a model for integration. But maybe, it should be the case that regional integration initiatives elsewhere learn from the EU's mistakes: in this case, its lacking democratic credentials.

Over the last three decades, regional integration structures have been advanced in sub-Saharan Africa as a means towards greater economic and social prosperity. As a result, there are numerous regional integration arrangements, many of which overlap, modelled on a linear (EU-style) integration agenda, i.e. the removal of trade barriers, free movement of goods and people, Customs Union and Monetary Union. The East African Community (arguably the most advanced of these structures) also has political federation as a long-term objective. That is, the formation of a unitary government, including one East African parliament and president. Champions for active democracy will be encouraged to hear that a referendum mechanism will be used to allow for such 'complete' integration. But perhaps EAC representatives should take note of the EU's inadequacies and generate a far greater democratic remit before it is too late.

Well known theories of EU opinion formation have been applied to the East African setting to understand citizen support. A study of Tanzanian public opinion towards the EAC demonstrates that public opinion is indeed structured (Knowles and Garry paper, to be presented at the annual EPOP Conference, 2014). There were two main findings (based on Afrobarometer data): economic reason is a significant determinant of support for future political federation. Further, support of a joint military indicates citizen support for a joint East African political venture. In addition to EU generated opinion theory, an application of hypotheses specific to the East African context reveal that there is a generational effect, i.e. people who grew up during the collapse of the 'old' EAC (1967-1977) are relatively more hesitant towards proposed political integration relative to the younger generation. The latter finding highlights the role of context specific attitudinal indicators.

What does this mean for democracy and supranational arrangements? Likewise to the EU, public opinion in East Africa is structured. Admittedly, there is a worrying lack of awareness (particularly in rural areas), but there is underlying reason why citizens support or oppose ideas of future political federation. However, rather than waiting until a referendum in five, maybe ten years time, the EAC should take note from the EU setting, and mobilise public involvement in the immediate term. Already, the EAC is a 'people-driven' project, but its representatives are yet to fully deliver this. EAC representatives (nine from each partner state) are not directly elected by the people and decisions are taken only at the elite level.

If mechanisms are established whereby the public of the EAC drive and are involved in the integration agenda at every step, they won't create an integration arrangement which – like in the European case – so many people are disgruntled by. Such a level of East African democracy will certainly take a lot of time and resources to manifest, but through internal and international support, the EAC has the potential to achieve stronger integration structures in the long term, and become a global example of democratic supranational decision making.

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