EU policy towards other regions: policy learning in the external promotion of regional integration

Mary Farrell

ABSTRACT Since the 1990s, the European Union (EU) has renewed its support for regional integration in other parts of the world, and incorporated this objective as a part of European external policy. Compared to the embryonic common foreign and security policy (CFSP), the support for regional integration and co-operation has been much less controversial, having been publicly endorsed by European Commission officials, and identified in the policy publications emanating from the various Directorate Generals (DGs). This article adopts a policy learning perspective to investigate this departure in external policy by the EU, and to identify the explanatory capacity of collective learning for the core beliefs, preferences, and policy instruments eventually adopted by European policy-makers. The article identifies what types of learning have taken place, and assesses the impact of learning on the policy outputs and outcomes.

KEY WORDS EU–Africa relations; European Union; international actor; policy learning; regional integration.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, the European Union (EU) has declared its support for regional integration in other parts of the world, and incorporated this objective as a part of European external policy (European Commission 1995, 2005a, 2008a). In the midst of the more problematic and often contentious areas of the embryonic common foreign and security policy (CFSP), the support for regional integration and co-operation has been much less controversial, having been publicly endorsed by European Commission officials, and identified in the policy publications emanating from the various Directorate Generals (DGs).

The EU now has some 20 inter-regional agreements with the other major regional groupings around the world, including accords with regional groupings in Africa, Asia and the Americas (Alecu de Flers and Regelsberger 2005). While the EU continues to struggle to define its international role, and its identity as an international actor, the bloc-to-bloc diplomacy and inter-regional co-operation does in itself go some way to enhance the actorness of the EU, distinguishing the political processes involved from the more traditional (state-to-state) practices in
international relations (Bretherton and Vogler 2005; Hill and Smith 2005; Smith 2008).

The EU has supported regional integration elsewhere in the world since the 1960s. However, this support has become much more explicit since the 1990s, and this article examines the extent to which a qualitative shift in policy can be explained in terms of learning. Policy learning is understood here as a long-lasting change in the perception of policy-related problems, beliefs and attitudes of government (Bandelow 2008). The article identifies what types of learning have taken place with respect to the policy of promoting regional integration, and assesses the impact of learning on the policy outputs and outcomes. The following sections address the conditions that trigger learning in the EU context, and the constraints and limitations that may inhibit learning processes.

Recent research on the EU policy towards the promotion of regional integration elsewhere has tended to contextualize the policy from different standpoints: the export of the EU model of regional integration; the expansion of regional governance; or as the spread of European norms. Moreover, the success of European regionalism has in some cases prompted other countries to imitation, while elsewhere countries have opted for their own form of regionalism firmly rejecting any explicit attempt to replicate the European experience (Fawcett and Hurrell 1995; Hurrell 2007; Gamble and Payne 1996; Telò 2007; Soderbaum and Shaw 2003). Making case study comparisons is often difficult, not least because of the variation in the use of the term ‘regionalism’ (Hurrell 2007: 130). Among the many regionalism processes that operate, a distinction can be made between formal regional inter-state co-operation for the purposes of creating region-wide regimes and policies in certain issue areas; regional consolidation, where the ‘region’ takes on ‘actorness’ to conduct relations between the constituent member states and the rest of the world; and the informal regionalization associated with increased levels of economic and social interaction. Both formal and informal processes may over time lead to the emergence of regional awareness and a sense of regional identity, though such outcomes are never certain in even the most ‘regionalized’ communities.

Since we are concerned here with an examination of policy learning with respect to regional integration – part of the policy instruments in the EU’s external relations policy – the ‘narrow’ understanding of regional integration as inter-regional/inter-state co-operation will be adopted. However, in practice, it is impossible to conduct this kind of policy without unleashing complex and dynamic processes amidst often competing logics – the logics of economic and societal integration, of power politics, and of security (Hurrell 2007: 130). The European Commission’s definition of regional integration would seem to recognize this complexity: ‘regional integration is the process of overcoming, by common accord, political, physical, economic and social barriers that divide countries from their neighbours, and of collaborating in the management of shared resources and regional commons’ (European Commission 2008a).

The next section establishes the analytical framework based upon a policy learning perspective.
2. POLICY LEARNING – AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Learning can be an individual process, and there is an extensive literature dealing with individual learning, largely seen as the product of internal and mental processes and explained by psychological or philosophical approaches or, alternatively, as a product of exogenous processes. Recently, political science and international relations literature has focused on mutual learning, on the collective learning in organizations, recognizing that institutions can, and do, have the potential for learning (Argyris and Schön 1978; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Dolowitz and March 2000). Latterly, various areas of EU policy have been subject to analysis under a policy learning framework, including the open method of co-ordination, the European employment strategy, environmental policy, and the policy transfer by national governments as they adapt to European integration (Radaelli 2004; Nedergaard 2006; Bomberg 2007; Bandelow 2008). Greater challenges emanate from the application of a policy learning framework to the analysis of foreign policy, long recognized as an area of conceptual and political complexity (Levy 1994).

Ernst Haas defined learning as ‘the process by which consensual knowledge is used to specify causal relationships in new ways so that the result affects the content of public policy (Haas 1990: 23), specifying the conditions for learning in the shared understandings implicit in the notion of consensual knowledge. In essence, for Haas the policy learning depended upon the policy actors sharing a larger and common perspective that allowed them to reach agreement on policy outputs, and even identify radical solutions to existing problems.

Elsewhere in the international relations literature, attention has been given to the role of ideas in shaping and changing public policy (Goldstein and Keohane 1993). Clearly, ideas influence policy by the impact upon political actors, and new ideas can effect policy change where two conditions apply: first, when there are groups and individuals who will promote the new ideas and promulgate them by building coalitions of support; and, second, ideas need to become embedded in institutions by a process of ‘social learning’ (Hall 1993). According to Hall, social learning occurs as policy-makers seek to find new solutions to policy problems, embarking on a process of changing existing policy instruments to address these policy problems, and experimenting with new policy instruments when existing instruments are considered to be ineffective. In this trial-and-error approach, learning takes place as the policy actors identify what works and respond accordingly. Hall describes the failure to identify appropriate and effective policy instruments as opening up a window of opportunity for new ideas and new instruments, suggesting the appearance of a ‘market place for ideas’ and the contestation of different ideas and their respective policy solutions/instruments until there is an eventual victory of one idea (and the respective policy instruments). Hence, the new idea becomes institutionalized, and provides the paradigmatic framework for policy-making (Oliver and Pemberton 2001). In his analysis, Hall proposes that the process of social learning will lead to changes at different levels: changes to existing policy...
instruments (first order change); adoption of new instruments (second order change); paradigm change, with a change of goals (third order change). Third order change is the most radical for it implies a fundamental re-ordering of priorities and goals, as well as policy instruments, and it marks a sea change in the way policy-makers view the problems they seek to address.

Hall’s approach to the analysis of policy processes faces a challenge in the rather different and more complex context of European policy-making. A broader range of political actors, including transnational interest groups, supra-national institutions, as well as the array of national interest representation, complicates the picture, and requires a more nuanced understanding of the social processes embedded in policy-making and the shared understandings of the common problems facing the European community (Pierson 1998). Jeffrey Checkel adopts a constructivist approach to examine learning in the context of European integration, explaining learning as a process whereby actors, through interaction with broader institutional contexts (norms and discursive structures), acquire new interests and preferences (Checkel 2001). In this approach, what matters to learning is the role of norms and discursive structures, where norms are understood as shared collective understandings that regulate behaviour. Learning comes about when people interact and interpret the world as a socially constructed reality. Language and its meaning matter to the actors, and dominant concepts frame the arguments, even for those actors who may wish to propose counter arguments. This approach to learning recognises the struggle for power that can dominate social relations, and what matters is the capacity to promote a dominant logic of argumentation and to impress it upon the other actors.

Here we can identify certain conditions that are likely to promote learning. First, the actors share a set of normative and causal beliefs; second, the actors engage in an iterative process, a co-ordinated interaction over time. Competition among views and ideas is possible, and a struggle for power and an ensuing dominant idea (or set of ideas) is likely, as we saw above, but there should remain a shared set of fundamental, core beliefs. Third, learning occurs with the changes to actors’ preferences, when actors realize that they need to alter strategies in order to achieve certain goals, and ultimately this leads to policy change – acting according to the ‘logic of consequentiality’. Fourth, and borrowing from the sociological institutionalist literature, actors learn from on-going cognitive processes, ‘taking cues from their institutional environment as they construct their preferences and select the appropriate behaviour for a given institutional environment’ (Pollack 2004: 139) – acting according to the ‘logic of appropriateness’.

Finally, we can consider the extent of learning and the impact upon the actors’ belief systems. Beliefs can be categorized as a hierarchical system based on three levels of beliefs. At the top of the hierarchy are the fundamental, core beliefs, normative (and abstract) beliefs that are so fundamental as to be impossible to change. At the second level are the policy core beliefs that reflect the cognitive frames of reference shared by policy actors, understandings of the nature and
scope of a policy problem and of the priorities across different policy areas. Policy core beliefs are rather difficult to change, and likely only as a result of learning over a long period, or possibly due to pressure from external or unexpected shocks. The third level of the hierarchy contains the secondary beliefs, and these relate to narrower policy preferences, where the political actors can make choices between different instruments. Learning is most likely and easier at this level.

The literature on policy learning suggests that political actors (governments, the EU) can react to the success or failure of previous policy instruments; they can also take into account changes to the external (international) environment in which policy operates, and/or take advice from experts (the role of epistemic communities). Adopting the notion of a hierarchical belief system, we can see in the different literature a distinction between levels of learning – first order learning, where there is a change of policy instruments; and second order learning, where there is a change of overall goals (Bandelow 2008: 745). In the case of first order learning, the values, attitudes and perceptions of the problem remain the same, whereas new learning from experience and new knowledge produce a change of goals, thus generating second order learning.

3. PROMOTING REGIONAL INTEGRATION

While other areas of foreign policy have yet to be elaborated coherently, the policy on regional integration attracted little opposition at national or European level, raising no threat to national sovereignty, or to the common interests shared by the community of states. Driven by the European Commission, a number of directorates quickly adopted the regional integration policy and the changing approaches to development policy (‘trade not aid’) brought the development directorate into closer contact with external relations and trade directorates. Even if this emerging consensus across different areas of the European Commission did not dispel the normal rivalries and competition between them, there was enough common interest among the supranational bureaucracy to drive this policy forward. In practice, the EU policy (implemented largely through the European Commission) has operated not through the kind of common approach to be found in other policy areas (such as trade, competition, agriculture) but instead by a diversified strategy based on a range of policy instruments, a mix of conditionalities and incentives, generally tailored to the economic, security and geopolitical interests of the EU.

Three broad approaches to the promotion of regional integration can be distinguished, exemplified by the differences in instruments and a qualitative distinction in outcomes and strategic intent. First, the promotion of regional integration through enlargement has provided a very direct and comprehensive way of implementing this policy, at the same time spreading the regulatory system and the legal order to new member states. But the use of conditionality in the enlargement process served also to enforce the EU rules and to shape the institutions in the applicant states. Conditionality was coercive, securing
compliance to the policy outcome and to the Commission’s highly politicized demands that the individual applicant states adopt the full array of rules, regulations, standards and policies in the *acquis communautaire*.

Second, the EU can and has been able to influence regional integration in a broad and general way through normative suasion, where other regional communities adopt certain practices, institutional arrangements, or other forms of governance modelled on the European regional governance system. The role of norms in shaping outcomes has long been recognized in the literature, and even in the absence of a specific policy, agreement, or other form of intervention targeted at a region it can be possible for the EU to exert influence. In practice, the same policy approach is not adopted for all regional groupings and for individual countries, so that the EU’s effectiveness as a norm exporter is determined by the nature of each arrangement and how the target region responds to the EU. Agreements that are politically rather than legally binding tend to commit the contracting parties only if there is a strong interest at stake.

Third, the promotion of regional integration has developed through the inter-regional agreements between the EU and other regional groupings, such as the Asia–Europe meeting (ASEM) or the Cotonou Agreement with the African, Caribbean and Pacific group. The inter-regional agreements also take different forms, distinguishing between pure inter-regional co-operation (involving formal regional blocs, such as EU–Mercosur) and hybrid inter-regionalism (co-operation between a formal regional community and a group of countries that do not constitute a formal regional entity). Inter-regional co-operation takes a variety of forms and policy instruments, ranging across aid programmes, regional trade agreements, support for regional integration and more comprehensive regional strategies – sometimes embracing all of these components. Generally, the inter-regional agreements cover a whole range of issues (trade, environment, technical assistance, development, infrastructure, political reform), though the individual agreements tend also to include specified objectives, such as the Cotonou Agreement with its emphasis on the integration of the African countries into the global economy.

Inter-regional co-operation agreements are characterized by complexity and a diversity of content, policy instruments, and outcomes. European Commission official publications do, however, broadly agree on the impetus for this departure in the EU’s external relations. The genesis of these agreements is a shift in the EU’s strategic priorities, with geographic proximity prioritizing the regions of greatest importance. Newly independent states emerging after the collapse of the Soviet Union generated uncertainty about European security and a threat of instability on the EU’s eastern borders, thus posing the question of how to manage relations with these states. Ultimately, the concerns were addressed through the offer of membership. Furthermore, new geo-strategic priorities were emerging, to underline the need for new actions and programmes located in the strategic priorities of the EU rather than those of the individual states. In essence, the policy towards the promotion of regional integration
can be seen as part of a dual strategy, the preservation of regional order and the enhancement of the EU’s global presence.

In sum, the external promotion of regional integration can be used for various goals: to export the EU model of governance; to exercise international influence through the spread of EU values; and to strengthen the identity of the EU without compromising the national interests of the respective member states. Not all three approaches identified in this section are mutually exclusive: enlargement was about spreading regional integration, and also disseminating European norms to the prospective members; and inter-regional co-operation also facilitates norm transfer, though without the prospect of accession. Conditionality is used pervasively in all the European Commission’s negotiations, though its impact is highly variable across countries and regions. Similarly, the link between regional integration and development emerges in both EU–Africa and EU–Asia relations, though clearly there are significant variations not only in the underlying structural conditions but also in the receptivity to European norms and ideas.

For example, the African approach to regional integration reflects much from the European experience, most noticeably in the preference for supranational institution-building, and a proposed new currency in West Africa. Inter-regional co-operation between the EU and Asia is conducted with fewer power asymmetries, and a strong commitment on the part of the Asian states generally to the principle of domestic non-intervention (Forster 2000). Though the EU continues to push the human rights agenda in bilateral and multilateral negotiations with Asian countries, the latter have not been so receptive to the explicitly normative European agenda nor to any extension of policy discussion beyond the trade and economic arena, with the result that the EU has not been able to press conditionality with the same fervour as elsewhere. However, the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) grouping has begun in recent years to address regional integration, emphasizing trade, strengthening security and addressing the ‘war on terror’ in the region, as part of a reappraisal of the regional group’s role and relevance in the contemporary Asian and global order (Conde 2007).

In recent years, much inter-regional co-operation involving the EU and other regional groupings has taken the form of trade agreements, a trend to European external policy that contrasts sharply with the failure to secure agreement in the World Trade Organization (WTO) trade liberalization negotiations under the Doha Development Round. Negotiations for a free trade area (FTA) started with the ASEAN group, with the Andean Community, and Central America. These essentially economic inter-regional agreements are supported by a range of bilateral agreements between the EU and individual countries that represent diverse strategic interests – China, India, South Africa, and Brazil rating particularly strong as important partners for the EU. This ‘search for partnership’ characterizes much of the EU’s external relations over the past five years, with the European Commission as principal actor and lead negotiator representing the member states. Mostly, the issues and agenda cover trade
and economic matters where the Commission has negotiating authority and a mandate to represent the member states.

**Regional integration – the EU representation**

In the academic literature, distinctions are made between regional integration and regionalism based on different processes, and different driving forces, though the terms can sometimes be used interchangeably (Sbragia 2008). Both imply some degree of consolidation and pooling of resources, sharing of sovereignty, and a commitment of states to political, economic, and legal objectives. The level of integration can vary, from a loose co-ordination in some area(s), including trade, to deeper integration at the political level, pooling sovereignty, and the creation of supranational institutions. As integration processes continue, a sense of identity emerges from common interests and values, and ultimately a regional (political) community acts as a subject with its own identity, an actor with capability and the structures to facilitate region-wide decision-making.

Despite the many references to regional integration in EU official publications over the past decade, the European Commission was slow to articulate a precise vision of its policy on regional integration. Instead, it appears as part of a range of policy instruments and strategic objectives, from security to trade, to inter-regional co-operation, development policy, EU–Africa relations, and EU–Asia co-operation. In *The EU and Africa: Towards a Strategic Partnership*, adopted by the European Council in December 2005, the primary goals of the EU’s Africa strategy are the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and the promotion of sustainable development, security and good governance in Africa. Regional integration introduced under the heading *Sustainable Economic Growth, Regional Integration and Trade* is linked to the Economic Partnership Agreements, and to a whole array of objectives around the integration of Africa into the global economy, support for improved governance and for compliance with EU rules and standards, aid for trade, and environment and climate policies.

In the case of EU relations with the Middle East, initiatives are very much determined by the former’s capacity as an actor reliant upon civilian power, and driven by the two geo-strategic objectives of improved political stability in the region, and the desire to reduce the economic migration from the region into Europe. EU efforts have revolved around the discourse of trade integration among the participating states, fostering intra-regional trade and policy co-ordination between the Middle East states, under the framework of the Barcelona process. In recent years, the promotion of regional trade agreements has been the EU’s preferred policy instrument, simultaneously signing bilateral trade agreements with individual countries while pushing for trade liberalization at the intra-regional level. Given the constraints imposed upon the EU as a coherent foreign policy actor, policy towards the Middle East has tended in practice to be ad hoc, with very limited successful outcomes even...
in the economic arena. Despite the EU’s continued support for and encouragement of regional co-operation and integration, the Middle East countries have had little success in intra-regional co-operation and there has been limited economic integration, sometimes characterized by tense political relations between the states.

The security imperative is less influential in shaping the EU’s relations with Asia generally. Instead, the economic rationale permeates the programmes and policies that emerged with the European Commission’s 1994 publication ‘Towards a New Asia Strategy’ that marked the European ‘rediscovery’ of Asia. Trade flows and inter-regional economic co-operation have increased significantly on a regional and bilateral basis, with a few individual countries (China, Singapore, Japan, India) taking the lion’s share of economic flows. Market access and strengthening the EU’s political and economic presence across the region as a global economic actor are the key objectives in this European strategy. Unlike other regions, the EU has tended to downplay the policy of promoting regional integration in Asia, and mainly confines this discourse on regional integration promotion to the case of south Asia, and the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) regional grouping. Instead, inter-regional co-operation is conducted in a series of fora and institutional frameworks: the pure inter-regional, or bloc-to-bloc co-operation taking place in EU–ASEAN, EU–SAARC, and the ASEM meetings; and the hybrid inter-regional, bilateral co-operation characterized in EU–China dialogue, EU–India, and EU–Japan. The ASEM (Asia–Europe meeting) continues as a forum for informal dialogue and co-operation between the EU, the European Commission, and the Asian states (Brunei, China, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam), and, while the wide-ranging agenda of topics reflects a broad-based set of interests, action is largely confined to economic, technical and trade-related concerns of all actors (Farrell 2009).

In contrast to the case of Africa, discussed in detail in the next section, the mix of bilateral/multilateral co-operative agreements continues to characterize the EU’s relations with most other regional communities, and the extent to which emphasis is placed upon the promotion of regional integration per se varies considerably from region to region. The next section takes a closer look at the case of EU–Africa relations, where the policy of promoting regional integration has perhaps been pursued most explicitly and where ‘the Economic Partnership Agreements remain high on the agenda and, when concluded on a comprehensive regional basis, will be the cornerstone of EU support for regional integration’ (European Commission 2008b).

4. EU–AFRICA RELATIONS: POLICY LEARNING OR ADAPTATION?

Inter-regional co-operation between the EU and Africa has a long history, based upon an institutionalized framework that predated any other inter-regional co-operation policies currently implemented by the EU. Stemming largely
from colonial ties, the Lomé Agreements provided an institutionalized basis for policy towards the African countries, and a formal framework for the conduct of inter-regional dialogue between what the European side declared as ostensible ‘equal partners’. For three decades, the institutionalized framework supported high-level talks between the political representatives of the EU (including member state representatives, and the European Commission) and their counterparts in the countries of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) region.

The Cotonou Agreement of 2000 marked a departure from its predecessor in several respects. Growing criticism of the Lomé Agreements for the failure to deliver real results (market access for ACP producers, development and modernization of primary production among the countries of the region), combined with a more critical concern within Europe towards the need to secure ‘value for money’ led to a reappraisal of the agreements. Growing donor fatigue and increased public concern about the effectiveness of European aid expenditure and the appropriate use of public finance in the recipient countries, combined with the shift in EU development policy towards an emphasis on ‘trade not aid’ as a key route to development, brought European policy into line with the international institutions, notably the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. By the mid-1990s, there was a strong international consensus favouring a neo-liberal approach to development and the support for market-based activities.

The Cotonou Agreement reflected these various concerns, emphasizing trade liberalization (dropping the non-reciprocity of the predecessor Lomé accords), with the specific proposal for regional economic integration agreements between the EU and groups of countries within the ACP bloc, and in parallel, the establishment of regional integration among the countries of the ACP region. These regional economic integration agreements, now commonly referred to as Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), constituted a departure from previous policy in their emphasis on broad-based economic liberalization – across countries, products, sectors and markets – as well as a broader policy agenda that included competition, trade and environmental considerations, trade and labour standards, consumer policy and consumer health, the protection of intellectual property rights, and standardization and certification.

In parallel with the EPA negotiations, the European Commission was actively developing an Africa strategy, with the publication of the EU Strategy for Africa in 2005, followed soon after by the Joint Africa–EU Strategy adopted at the Lisbon summit meeting in December 2007 (European Council 2007). The joint declaration issued in Lisbon referred to the intention ‘to build a new strategic political partnership for the future, overcoming the traditional donor–recipient relationship and building on common values and goals in our pursuit of peace and stability, democracy and rule of law, progress and development’. The intention is to develop a long-term strategic partnership, proposing specific strategies in the following areas: peace and security; governance and human rights; trade and regional integration; key development issues.
This joint strategy goes far beyond the parameters of previous EU inter-regional co-operation to propose an expanded institutional framework, with the African Union as the voice of continental issues and the most important institutional partner for the EU. Emanating from this strategy and new institutional framework is an interconnected set of policies and action plans with specified timeframes and indicated outcomes, exemplified in the First Action Plan (2008–2010) which sets out eight lines of action covering areas such as peace and security, trade and regional integration, democratic governance and human rights, the millennium development goals, and migration/mobility/employment.4

5. HOW REAL IS THIS POLICY CHANGE – WHAT LEARNING CAN BE IDENTIFIED IN EU–AFRICA CO-OPERATION?

With the Joint Africa–EU Strategy, EU policy appears to have moved away from the policy content and the general approach adopted under the earlier Lomé accords, and even the Cotonou Agreement. Regional integration remains a key component in the new strategy, and is presented as a dual approach: regional integration linking the EU and the African countries through the EPAs, and regional integration among the African countries. How far can we discern policy learning on the part of the EU in the evolving EU–Africa inter-regional policy?

The post-Cotonou regime rests upon the dual strategy of sub-regional integration, and the integration of Africa into the global economy (European Commission 2005b). Development strategy is here based upon the principle that trade, not aid, is the route towards economic and social progress, and the reduction of poverty (European Commission 2005a). Close examination of the discourse suggests that regional integration is here understood as economic/trade liberalization, something that the EPA negotiations have in fact revealed (European Commission 2008a).

How can we explain this shift in EU–Africa relations from the Lomé accords to the post-Cotonou regime using the policy learning analytical framework? Within the historical institutionalist perspective, it is institutions that affect policy outcomes, since they mediate political struggles rather than actually reflecting the distribution of political power and, once in place, can take on a life of their own and determine the scope and pace of political and policy development (Pierson 1998). The European Commission, acting on behalf of the member states to manage EU–ACP relations, presided over a very stable policy regime for several decades until it was eventually forced by external pressures to re-evaluate the nature of this policy and the policy instruments. Historical institutionalism explains this stability in terms of path dependency, where institutional dynamics and preferences ‘lock in’ policy into a certain framework and direction.

The shift of policy in the post-Cotonou regime, with its emphasis on reciprocal trade relations between Europe and Africa, regional integration among the
African states, and inter-regional integration in the EPAs mark a widening in the range and scope of policy instruments, departing from the earlier policy period with its reliance on aid and technical assistance policy framed by the discourse of the development debate. Forces for change, in the shape of new ideas on development through the market (the trade not aid approach) and the growing public discontent over the ‘waste’ of public finances allocated to development, combined with the EU concerns to improve the co-ordination and effectiveness of European policy all provided appropriate conditions for the reappraisal of policy.

Post September 11 2001, the European discourse broadened to emphasize security, and the Security Strategy adopted by the EU Council of Ministers in 2003 identified a number of security threats, among which violent conflict in sub-Saharan Africa was included (EU Council 2003; Olsen 2009; Sicurelli 2008). The European Security Strategy emphasized that ‘security is a precondition for development’, and it advocated regional integration as an important vehicle for promoting both security and development. Meanwhile, responding to the impetus towards improved co-ordination and coherence across the policy spectrum (trade, development, security), the European Commission published the ‘European Consensus’ on development in 2005 (European Commission 2005a). Against this background, emphasizing the links between security and development, trade and regional integration, and following the consensus among the European actors (the EU institutions and the member states) on development priorities and instruments, the EU Africa Strategy was published in 2005. Amidst a flurry of activity for the EU, and attempting to face down growing criticism of the Commission’s negotiating tactics and the general scope and content of these EPAs, the Lisbon EU–Africa summit meeting proposed an even more ambitious programme for a long-term strategic partnership (European Council 2007).

What does this pattern of policy development suggest in terms of policy learning? Can we discern learning in the trajectory of policy development and the instruments adopted by the European authorities? What level of learning is taking place, and what are the conditions that trigger learning in the EU context? According to Ernst Haas, international organizations are important innovators in international life (Haas 1990). The conditions identified by Haas that are conducive to learning include a stable coalition of like-minded states, and sufficient shared consensual knowledge to evaluate beliefs about appropriate causes and solutions to existing problems:

learning may involve the elaboration of new cause–effect chains more (or less) elaborate than the ones being questioned and replaced. The resulting conceptualization of the world may be more (or less) holistic than the earlier one. It may imply progress or regress, depending on the normative commitment of the observer or the preferred reading of history. . . . The problem has to be ‘taken apart’; its parts have to be identified and sorted into patterns different from the ones that had been featured in an earlier
Both external and internal triggers to learning about the policy towards promoting regional integration can be identified. As lead actor representing the EU, the European Commission was well placed to become a learning organization – it had led the negotiations with the ten accession states for the 2004 enlargement; it has developed a larger role as the external representative of the EU; and it has played the leading role in managing and developing EU–ACP relations for many decades. Moreover, the European Commission is very active in the strategy to enhance the EU as an international actor and global player. In the context of promoting regional integration externally, and inter-regionalism generally, the European Commission is the leading actor in dialogue with other regional groupings. Among the member states, there is broad consensus around the goal of making the EU an international actor, and as the discussion above suggested, the EU member states have come to share consensual knowledge around the appropriate set of development policies, and, more recently, the set of policies around which to conduct EU–Africa relations. This broad consensual knowledge does not preclude differences between the member states – after all, development policy is an area of shared competence where both the member states and the EU conduct development policies, the main requirement being to ensure co-ordination between the national and supranational levels of policy.

What type of learning can be identified in the context of EU–Africa co-operation? And in the promotion of regional integration within Africa? We have seen the policy change in response to external pressures – the growing disillusion with the Lomé approach (the volume of ACP exports to the European Community had halved from the 1970s to the end of the 1990s); criticism of the development assistance on several fronts (the failure to deliver development outcomes, and the misuse of development aid by corrupt governments); and the change in development discourse internationally, led by the international institutions under the so-called Washington Consensus. While the EU showed some flexibility in its dealings with Africa (particularly the recent Joint Africa–EU Strategy), the lessons learned by the EU in general and the European Commission in particular during the course of the enlargement negotiations with the ten accession countries were much in evidence when it came to the EPA negotiations – conditionality clauses included reference to normative principles, and aspects of regional governance.

Using Peter Hall’s hierarchy of levels of change consequent upon social learning (referred to earlier in section 2), we can identify both first order and second order learning – changing existing instruments (from Lomé to Cotonou) and the adoption of new instruments (EPAs, regional integration, trade and development assistance, conditionality and the essential elements clauses). The first and second order learning in Hall’s analysis has much in common with the ‘adaptation’ that international organizations make, as described by Ernst Haas:
successful adaptation implies the willingness to reconsider the tie between means and ends, and to reformulate the organization’s program accordingly. Successful adaptation may also call for adding new purposes or dropping old ones, without also involving a searching examination of assumptions about cause–effect links.

(Haas 1990: 36)

In fact, Peter Hall’s third order change has much in common with the true learning that Haas considers to be fairly rare – for both authors, this type of learning involves a paradigm shift, a re-ordering of priorities and goals, as well as new policy instruments. According to Haas, this type of learning is uncommon, and most of the time organizations engage in adaptation, either in the context of incremental growth, or in a more complex political environment with many actors and unordered policy preferences (which he characterizes as turbulence).

Useful though these categories are, it is difficult to discern higher level learning without looking at the extent of learning and the impact upon actors’ belief systems. Following this line of analysis, we can distinguish the three levels: fundamental, core beliefs (normative, and thus impossible to change); policy core beliefs – the cognitive frame of reference shared by policy actors, which can change over a long period of time, or more rapidly in response to external pressures; and secondary beliefs, linked to policy preferences where actors make choices between different policy instruments. In the case study of EU–Africa co-operation, the promotion of regional integration has produced the type of first and second order learning (including the adoption of new policy instruments) but the EU has retained its fundamental core beliefs, notably the values associated with its identity as a normative actor – the promotion of democracy and the rule of law, the protection of human rights, and the pursuit of multilateralism as an appropriate forum for international decision-making (Scheipers and Sicurelli 2008; Laidi, 2007).

6. EXPORTING GOVERNANCE OR NORMS?

Regional integration policy is nested within a broad range of policy instruments, where there is a heavy emphasis on trade, technical assistance, and development aid. Inter-regional institutional ties are much more recent, and the historical colonies links have moved in quite different directions, with the EU gradually picking up a series of external trade links shaped by pragmatic economic considerations and post-colonial ties. Despite a renewal of the EU’s engagement in Asia, and a resurgence in the EU’s Asia strategy, this has not been accompanied by the type of activity and scope of policy action that we saw in the context of EU–Africa inter-regionalism. Institutional ties are growing in order to support a very broad range of intergovernmental co-operation, without specifically targeting the promotion of regional integration as a policy priority (Balme and Bridges 2008).
The EU’s reluctance to give prominence to regional integration as an appropriate policy for the Asian countries to follow can be attributed to several reasons. Power asymmetries between the EU and the Asian region are much less significant than between the EU and Africa, so the EU is unable to make use of the conditionality argument to the same extent. Regional economic integration within Asia is very much driven by the rational calculations made by the states in the region. As the EU is gradually learning, the kind of cost–benefit calculations being made in Brussels of closer European co-operation with emerging Asian powers and fast-growing economies are something which the Asian states have been engaging in for quite some time. However, the Asian states are better able to withstand the pressures of the EU than the African states, and resist any attempt to propose a regional integration model designed by European architects. Even bilateral negotiations can come under criticism where the agenda includes anything other than the strict trade clauses that Asian states expect, as the EU found to its cost when negotiating with India for a free trade agreement which included human rights clauses that India objected to in what it considered a trade agreement.

Regional integration is strengthening in Asia, and in other parts of the world, though its popularity ebbs and flows with the tide of political opportunism and rational calculation among the participating actors, as well as external incentives/pressures (in the wake of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, there was a resurgent interest among states in Asian regionalism). For the EU, the promotion of regional integration is a way to validate its own internal coherence on the international stage, and there is no doubt that the European model retains some attraction. Promoting regional integration allows the EU to pursue the larger goal of influence as an international actor, and is particularly appropriate as a policy instrument for a European political community that has yet to define a common foreign policy. The policy displays the reverse image of the EU, drawing attention to the EU as a value-based political community while at the same time allowing that political community to act as a single actor on the global stage.

There is a learning through socialization embedded in this policy, for the European actors and also for the EU’s partners in the dialogue. Until now, learning was largely confined to state actors and to the EU bureaucrats, since non-state actors and civil society were marginalized in the negotiation processes, from the enlargement negotiations through to the EPA negotiations and inter-regional co-operation generally. Indeed, this comparatively narrow set of actors undermines the possibility for higher-level learning, and promotes what Haas described as habit-driven policy learning within a pretty stable context of actors and policy preferences. However, the growing dissatisfaction with the EPAs among European and African non-state actors did result in an international mobilization of critical opposition, though without halting the programme (European Commission 2008b).

There is no indication that the EU is seeking to export the EU model, and such an ambitious agenda would undoubtedly challenge both the political
capacity and resources of the EU. The European Commission acknowledges that in a very pragmatic way: ‘The EU does not try to impose its system on others, but is not shy about its values … open markets, economic growth and a political system based on social responsibility and democracy.’ In true realist style, the Commission affirms that ‘enlightened self-interest just as much as global solidarity’ is a cornerstone of EU external relations policy generally, where ‘supporting economic development and political stability in the wider world is an investment in one’s future’ (European Commission 2007).

The promotion of democracy walks a fine line with the imposition of democracy, and the risk of undermining the EU’s credibility is high. Moreover, persuading other regional groupings to accept the notion of primacy of the supranational legal order, or the formal equality between member states, is a tall order in a region where a regional hegemon may take a lead role in interstate relations. That leaves the option of promoting regional integration as a way of exporting (European) regional governance, and European norms. These goals were most clearly and effectively realized in the case of European enlargement, where accession states are required to comply with the acquis communautaire as well as meeting the Copenhagen criteria. Elsewhere, the export of regional governance standards and European norms can be, at best, partial in so far as the EU is a non-state actor with restricted capacity in the institutions of global governance.

Turning to the identity of the EU as a normative actor, and to its self-portrayal on the international stage, there remain some questions over the political capacity of the EU to transfer norms internationally, notwithstanding the consistent efforts to incorporate normative values in the growing number of international agreements. The success of the strategy of promoting EU norms internationally depends in large measure upon the willingness of the rest of the world to endorse these norms, and this is also linked to the EU’s credibility with other international and regional actors. So far, the EU’s normative identity tends towards a self-referential identity, and without the recognition of other actors and their endorsement of the normative values to the extent of creating a consensual knowledge shared by all political actors, the goal of norm promotion remains restricted to the EU’s immediate sphere of influence, and the areas in which it can exercise authority by virtue of superior power (Mayer 2008). In the present situation, the most likely option for policy learning in this area of EU external relations remains the first or second order learning described by Hall.

7. CONCLUSION

This article sought to apply a policy learning framework to the EU’s promotion of regional integration, and to contribute to an understanding of the dynamics of policy learning in the context of the EU’s external relations. First, it offered an analytical framework for the adoption of the policy learning approach, identifying the key contributions in the literature with particular relevance for the issue
under examination. The different types of learning, and the conditions under which learning take place, are highlighted with a view to considering the learning possibilities in what is arguably a complex area of European external relations. The complexity of this policy area is exemplified in the discussion on the diversity of policy approaches used by the EU (section 3), while the case study of EU–Africa inter-regional policy exemplifies both the possibilities and the limitations of promoting regional integration elsewhere (section 4).

This study has sought to extend the policy learning framework to an analysis of external relations. It highlights the importance of understanding the capacities for learning in the context of external forces and influences, and also the limitations of a policy learning framework that fails to take account of the power dynamics between international political actors. This is a policy issue area where states and the EU are still the primary actors, though the situation is beginning to change with pressures from non-state and civil society actors to be involved in the process – indeed, the EPA negotiations mobilized a large transnational civil society opposition to the European Commission’s proposals. As other studies have shown, the possibility for policy learning is greatly enhanced with more diverse political representation. Finally, the study has highlighted the degree to which learning remains limited by the political and institutional capacity of the EU, and to this extent there remains a varied range of constraints on the capacity of the EU as an international actor.

**Biographical note:** Mary Farrell is Reader in European and International Politics at the University of Greenwich, UK.

**Address for correspondence:** Mary Farrell, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Greenwich, Old Royal Naval College, Park Row, London SE10 9LS, UK. email: M.Farrell@gre.ac.uk

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

For constructive and helpful comments I would like to thank Tony Zito, the internal reviewers and two external referees.

**NOTES**

1 The research for this article is based on a number of interviews conducted with various European Commission officials from DG Relex, Trade, and Development over the period October 2006 to March 2008, and a reading of policy documents and secondary sources. While recognizing the diversity of approaches across the different DGs in the European Commission, this article presents the overall institutional position, and reflects the strong overlapping concerns and positions on development, trade, and security in the evolving European policy after the 1990s.

2 The Cotonou Agreement covers relations between the EU and Sub-Saharan Africa while relations with the countries of North Africa are based on the Euro-Mediterranean

3 The Africa–EU Strategic partnership, however, applies to the whole of the African continent.

4 The eight partnership and priority actions are: Africa–EU partnership on peace and security; Africa–EU partnership on democratic governance and human rights; Africa–EU partnership on trade, regional integration and infrastructure; Africa–EU partnership on the Millennium development goals; Africa–EU partnership on energy; Africa–EU partnership on climate change; Africa–EU partnership on migration, mobility and employment; Africa–EU partnership on science, information society and space.

REFERENCES


