

Africa-EU Relations

Strengthening the continent-to-continent dialogue on sustainable development

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This paper is part of a special series on Africa-EU relations, produced by ETTG members DIE and ECDPM in cooperation with ACET.

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors.

A SYNTHESIS REPORT

In the period 2020-2021, a series of virtual expert meetings on Africa-EU relations was convened by the European Centre for Development (ECDPM), the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) and the African Center for Economic Transformation (ACET). The seminars brought together a broad range of experts representing policy, investment, research and civil society communities. The 'closed-door' meetings focused on key themes of the partnership between Europe and Africa, namely trade, investment, environment, health and digital.

This synthesis note presents one-page overviews of the main findings and recommendations in relation to the five themes, which are discussed in greater detail in the policy briefs that have been published during the past months. A link to the full policy brief is included at the end of each one-pager. These thematic overviews are preceded by a short analysis of the relationship between Africa and Europe and five proposals for strengthening the continent-to-continent dialogue on sustainable development.



THE HISTORY OF THE PARTNERSHIP

Historical legacies and the path dependencies they created have produced partially overlapping frameworks, cooperation agendas and initiatives between Europe and Africa. Key in this architecture is the European concept of Sub-Saharan Africa and the cooperation with 48 African states under the international agreement between the EU and the African, Caribbean and Pacific states (ACP). Cooperation between the EU and the North-African states is pursued under the label of Southern Neighbourhood and - with the exception of Libya - governed under bilateral association agreements.

This set-up has developed over several decades, from the 1963 Yaoundé Convention to the present EU-ACP agreement, while association agreements with the North-African states followed in the 1990s. After the turn of the millennium - and particularly the creation of the African Union in 2002 - the EU and Africa have sought to pursue a 'continent-to-continent' cooperation agenda. This added an additional layer to the relations between the two continents. Key in these efforts has been the organisation of regular summits at the level of heads of state and government, the first of which took place in Cairo in 2000.

A key milestone of the Lisbon Summit was the adoption of the continent-to-continent Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) in 2007, which was jointly prepared following the publication in 2005 of a European Commission proposal for a European strategy towards cooperating with Africa.¹ The summit also prompted closer cooperation between the African Union Commission and its counterpart in Brussels, including through an annual 'College to College' meeting.

The JAES sought to promote a more symmetrical cooperation relationship and revolved around eight 'partnerships' that were operationalised in a separate action plan. These partnerships were to be taken forward under the joint leadership of selected African and European states. This approach was not without its challenges, but the intentions behind it were clear: to ascertain that the summits generated concrete outcomes, and that these would be operationalised and sustained over time by public officials.

The regular summits, which since 2007 have sought to follow a three-year rhythm, have become highlights of the

partnership. In addition to creating considerable visibility, the summits also have provided the stage for discussion on contentious issues including trade (Economic Partnership Agreements - EPAs) and migration. They also constitute a high profile gathering of selected Heads of State. While the high-level exchanges during regular summits and other types of senior level exchanges suggest considerable political traction, the partnership seems to be stagnating in between summits.

RELATIONS IN TIMES OF COVID-19

A key innovation introduced after the most recent Abidjan summit in 2017, the first to be explicitly branded as African Union - European Union summit (with the accompanying #AUEU hashtag on social media), concerned the introduction of annual meetings of ministers of foreign affairs. Yet just like the postponement of the 6th AU-EU summit, this ministerial meeting was interrupted by the pandemic, and only reconvened in Kigali on 25-26 October 2021 after their most recent meeting in Brussels on [21-22 January 2019](#).

Renewing the political dialogue between the AU and the EU in Kigali is of great symbolic importance. The written statement to be adopted at the meeting will provide the first joint written AU-EU statement since the 2020 meeting of the Commissions of the AU and the EU and will highlight several areas of importance for future cooperation. Yet there has never been a shortage of intentions and ideas in this partnership, the challenge has rather been to translate these into tangible and mutually satisfactory initiatives.

Aside from more technical challenges experienced in the 'delivery' of the partnership, the 2017 summit in Abidjan also provided a reminder that a more symmetrical relationship does not necessarily mean a harmonious one. The preparation of that summit witnessed considerable tension between Europe and Africa regarding divergences and incoherences on both sides. The summit showed a substantial list of themes where Europe and Africa have different interests and priorities that are hard to reconcile, which among others includes migration, climate change and trade policy.

Beyond recognising the diverging interests as well as identifying shared objectives, there is a need to consider

1. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PRES_05_367



Recent AU Presidencies have strongly differed in their prioritisation and agendas, which has affected the consistency of engagement with Europe.



introducing key updates to the structures, methods and types of interactions - both high-level and technical - between Europe and Africa. While having been introduced in various Africa-EU exchange formats, these new forms of (virtual) interaction have not yet been applied at the highest level. In addition to convening heads of state and government from Europe and Africa in person to adopt a detailed statement prepared by public officials, the summits also provide important means for bilateral exchanges between them.

The communication innovations introduced and deepened during the pandemic now raise questions about the most appropriate and effective division of labour between physical and virtual interaction in the partnership. Provided this is pursued with dedication, the 'new normal' may actually facilitate the deepening of interactions and cooperation between Europe and Africa among a multitude of stakeholders.

RATIONALISING AND HARMONISING AGENDAS

The successful and effective application of new technological means in the partnership however hinges on both political and strategic discipline. This first of all requires a discussion on the interrelation between the EU's cooperation

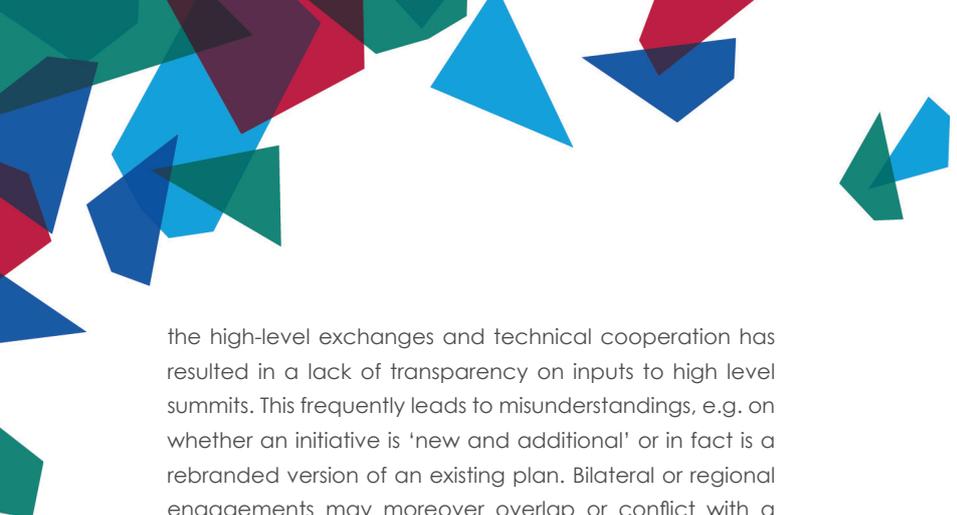
with Africa and the various bilateral Africa strategies that the EU member states have formulated. The EU's recent aspiration for more coherence under the label of Team Europe can constitute an important lever towards this end. The policy brief on investment produced in this project for instance shows that it is hard to keep track and keep up with the various initiatives on investment that are introduced. Secondly, it requires clarity on Europe's interlocutors - i.e. 'whom Addis may call in Brussels'. Presently, at least four leaders within the EU institutions are seeking to take a lead in relations with Africa: the Commission President, the Council President, the International Partnerships Commissioner, and the High-Representative for Foreign and Security Policy.

In Africa, the AU Commission provides an important steer to cooperation, but is dependent on the Presidency of the AU to provide adequate backing and impetus. Recent AU Presidencies have strongly differed in their prioritisation and agendas, which has affected the consistency of engagement with Europe. Together they could present Africa's cooperation priorities to Europe. Yet in spite of Europe's rhetoric of an equal partnership, the EU still leads in defining the agenda. The EU has produced successive strategies for and with Africa in the past decades, such as the 2015 European Trust Fund for Africa, the 2017 External Investment Plan and the 2018 Africa-Europe Alliance. In African official circles these and other initiatives seemed to have contributed to a certain degree of strategy fatigue.

STRENGTHENING THE DIALOGUE: KEY AREAS OF POTENTIAL GROWTH

1) Openly discuss and negotiate deals between diverging agendas and interests. Despite the strong public declarations on equal partnership based on joint interests, European and African interests do not always converge. Examples such as green growth and migration suggest that in some cases these interests may even clash, while in recent years aspects of identity politics have become more pronounced in the relationship. An equal relationship allows for these differences to be included on the agenda and discussed openly (though not necessarily publicly) and to engage in dialogue so as to strengthen agenda convergence over time.

2) Assess progress towards agreed goals by improving joint monitoring. Fragmentation at both



the high-level exchanges and technical cooperation has resulted in a lack of transparency on inputs to high level summits. This frequently leads to misunderstandings, e.g. on whether an initiative is 'new and additional' or in fact is a rebranded version of an existing plan. Bilateral or regional engagements may moreover overlap or conflict with a 'whole of AU' or 'whole of EU' approach. The nature of the relationship and the legal entities involved means that this fragmentation will remain a fact of life, yet the EU and AU are well-placed to seek and maintain an overview of all engagements. This joint monitoring should be a major area of public investment and should also provide a means to determine whether the cooperation between all involved states and Unions on both sides constitutes more than the sum of their individual parts.

3) Strengthen joint communication. Cooperation successes should not only be jointly monitored, but also jointly owned and communicated. Past experiences underline that the political economy of the relationship has made for strategic communication that does not necessarily lead to implementation. There has moreover been poor communication on progress made in ongoing initiatives, to the extent that a perception has been created that the high-level summits have a key role in acknowledging successes and confirming cooperation that already exists.

4) Adjust timelines, structures and processes for articulating strategies. Despite the new pandemic conditions, 2020 saw a return to a familiar debate in which the EU was perceived as pushing an agenda, and the AU was perceived as lacking a proactive role. This debate is in part a consequence of the highly transparent nature of EU policy processes, whereby the Commission makes its proposals publicly available to enable a broad-based debate. Another reason is the structured nature of that process, where the timing for publishing proposals may be appropriate from a European perspective (i.e. to allow adequate time for consultation), yet from an African perspective may be perceived as coming too soon and in a too detailed form.

5) Show a willingness to learn and better use knowledge institutes. Neither Europe nor Africa has a blueprint for what carbon-neutral societies and economies will look like, or how the 4th industrial revolution will unfold. Cooperation on green transitions and digital futures therefore provide opportunities for joint learning and joint knowledge production by European and African



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think tanks and academics. Another example concerns the gains made by African states in developing digital policies and strategies, and the potential this gives for interaction with leading EU member states in this regard - in effect the differences within Europe and Africa on digital transitions may be as significant as those between them.

CONCLUSION

More than two decades after the inaugural Africa-EU summit in Cairo, the partnership between Europe and Africa has withstood (partially self-imposed) heavy weather. Yet it has also seen considerable successes, notably in the area of peace and security.

During these two decades, both the global role of Europe and of Africa has evolved tremendously. At least on paper, the case for cooperation in today's multipolar and increasingly contested global order seems as crucial as ever. There are concrete opportunities for reinforced cooperation in all thematic areas that have been explored as part of this project, and it is this tangible cooperation that the overall partnership - and summitry - should serve and invigorate.

Trade

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is an ambitious economic integration initiative. It can play an important role in helping African countries diversify their productive capacities and integrate into regional and global value chains. The AfCFTA can also support Africa's COVID-19 recovery, and increase its economic resilience to future shocks.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

- How to muster institutional capacity and political will at national and regional level to foster implementation?
- How to ensure coherence of regional and continental trade relations?
- How to bridge regional disparities and encourage leadership and commitment from the big member states to implement what is agreed?
- How to create opportunities for all and compensate the losers of regional integration?
- How to address non-trade barriers to intra-african trade?
- How to stimulate private sector participation to bring the agreement to life?

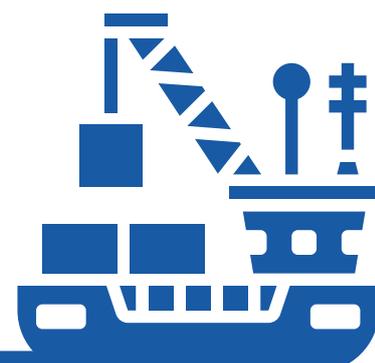
WHAT IS THE WAY FORWARD?

The AfCFTA provides a strategic opportunity for the EU and Africa to **enhance a political partnership** based on mutual experience sharing and to **strengthen links between businesses** in Africa and Europe.

The AfCFTA is not a panacea and **considerable accompanying measures, reforms and investment** are also needed. The EU can support African Union (AU) member states to pursue the **complementary economic reforms** that will yield the biggest gains.



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SO CONCRETELY?

- Present trade-related support from the EU as ACFTA support and target it as support to Africa's post-pandemic economic recovery.
- These reforms include reducing the costs of logistics, improving infrastructure, streamlining non-tariff measures, improving the investment and business climate, and advancing training and education for a skilled workforce.
- Trade-related support should be implemented in a way that is supportive of the national, regional and continental dynamics of economic integration.
- Special emphasis should be given to supporting the business environment and the development of productive and trading capabilities, as Africa's private sector has a crucial role in translating the AfCFTA's institutional framework into practical action on the ground.

The full paper is [available here](#).

Digital

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

Digitalisation will transform and revolutionise our economies and societies, and influence the way we work, live and interact. Digitalisation creates numerous opportunities. Yet, if poorly managed, digitalisation can also lead to job losses and fears among citizens and lawmakers regarding data protection, ethics and privacy, freedom of speech, surveillance, and monopolistic tendencies.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

- How to ensure the requisite digital capabilities and skills without which Africa will miss the many opportunities that technologies and digitalisation offer for development and improved well-being?
- How to prioritise and organise data governance, as ensuring data sovereignty is essential for all parties but most importantly for Africa?
- How to instill the importance of data and manage its commodification in areas such as health, education, research, industrial innovation and agriculture?
- How to foster improvements in innovation ecosystems, particularly to realise a safe and secure digital single market (DSM), which is a common goal of the AU and EU?

WHAT IS THE WAY FORWARD?

If the AU and EU jointly prioritise and realise a **Digital4Development (D4D) strategy**, they can foster a digital partnership that will lead to **inclusive digital economies** and greater **human well-being** on both continents.



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SO CONCRETELY?

- The EU can strengthen its geopolitical position by harnessing its expertise, leveraging policies and regulations, and boosting investment in the AU's digital ecosystem. Combining its ability to set global standards and accompanying investments will allow the EU to navigate the intensive global competition for ideas, systems and markets in Africa.
- For the AU, working in a digital partnership with the EU provides opportunities to advance Africa's aspirations for a DSM, data sovereignty, regulation and governance in relation to digitalisation.
- Good and transparent relations between the private sector and regional and continental institutions in both Africa and Europe are key.
- Dedicated fora should be created for the AU and EU to transparently and openly discuss bottlenecks and geopolitical implications of digitalisation.
- Robust analysis and evaluation of the why and how of digitalisation, innovation and recovery efforts work or do not work could provide key insights.

The full paper is [available here](#).

Environment

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

Green transition combines the climate agenda with an innovative socio-economic project for job creation and sustainable growth, which are interests shared by the two continents. Both AU and EU are committed to implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Climate Agreement.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

EU and AU approach green transitions from very different angles. Whereas the **EU** has a **major historic responsibility** and continues to have very high per capita emissions, **African** countries have contributed little to climate change but are **severely affected by its consequences**.

The AU's Agenda 2063 gives strong priority to **poverty reduction and climate adaptation**, whereas **the European Green Deal**, which is an ambitious agenda to transform Europe into a carbon-neutral continent by 2050, **has a limited social dimension**.

WHAT IS THE WAY FORWARD?

- Acknowledging the different perspectives provides a starting point for identifying priorities for AU–EU cooperation on developing green transitions.
- Fostering a frank dialogue on the strategic objectives and interests of both parties and building trust, jointly identifying common interests.
- Defining more clear strategic objectives by the AU and member states, promoting socially inclusive green transitions and cooperating with the EU on green transitions.
- Cooperating on green transitions provides opportunities for joint learning and joint knowledge production by European and African actors



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SO CONCRETELY?

- Invest in green energy infrastructure, recycling and remanufacturing; create jobs, train skills, adjust taxation, support diversification
- Avoid creating new trade barriers, use proceeds of Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM)
- Prioritise scientific research, build linkages between farmers and researchers, promote policy coherence, increase private sector investment
- Consolidate different frameworks, develop a joint comprehensive AU-EU climate strategy, focus on sustainable energy and food systems, include the blue economy
- Invest into innovative finance mechanisms to increase grant based adaptation funding for Africa.

The full paper is [available here](#).



Health

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for greater investments in health systems as well as for an **integrated approach to health security** at all levels. Yet, health is currently competing with many other strategic priorities, including the green and digital transitions and migration. The EU and Africa must work together to seek long-term solutions to transform health systems, the way they collaborate and the way they approach health. Against this backdrop, this seminar focused on West-Africa to explore the relevance of a **health system approach**.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

- A chronic underinvestment in a coordinated health system approach.
- Lack of capacities and institutions that can reduce the risk of new infectious diseases and increase resilience when pandemics arise.
- When crises recede, financial investments and the institutionalisation of long-term approaches tend to wane (the so-called cycle of panic and neglect).

WHAT IS THE WAY FORWARD?

- Build on and expand local expertise and structures.
- Use the political momentum to stimulate preventive investment.
- Cross-sectoral cooperation at all levels is required.



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SO CONCRETELY?

- **Multidisciplinary research that is sensitive to African national research agendas will be paramount**
- **Emergency Operations Centers can strengthen the capacity of governments to respond to public health emergencies and ensure effective coordination at different levels**
- **The Team Europe approach – which should lead to more complementarity and coherence – and its support to research and health systems, can play an important role in this regard.**
- **Acceleration of ongoing reforms and putting prevention at the top of the political agenda at all levels, not least for the economic benefits of prevention and preparedness.**
- **Policy makers, civil society organisations and global health experts should ensure that there is continued focus on global health and stronger health systems.**
- **Collaborative structures should be maintained and a long-term and preventive application of the One Health approach should be institutionalised at national, regional and global levels.**

The blog is [available here](#).

Investment

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

The COVID-19 crisis has emphasized the dire need to **support and facilitate sustainable investments to promote an inclusive, gender-sensitive and green recovery**. The partnership between the EU and the AU and their respective member states provides the strategic and institutional framework to address in a collective manner the challenge of stimulating sustainable investments.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

Investment is lacking in many key areas, including infrastructure, climate change, digitalisation and connectivity, sustainable agriculture and industrialisation, in particular in local production capacity, value chain development and access to finance for micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs).

The African continent is still characterised by **limited economic integration and low levels of internal trade**. Other major challenges that negatively impact investment are the rising debt issue, the inadequate national and regional investment climate, and the predominance of the informal economy.

WHAT IS THE WAY FORWARD?

- Identifying conducive processes and mechanisms through which the AU-EU partnership could most effectively promote and facilitate sustainable investments, public and private, domestic and international investment.
- Setting up joint processes and mechanisms that reflect **full African ownership** and move beyond a donor-recipient approach. To this end, the parties should ensure sufficiently representative and inclusive AU-EU investment consultation and decision-making processes.



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SO CONCRETELY?

A joint Africa-Europe partnership for sustainable investment could include:

- Explicit Africa-Europe branding
- Establishment of joint investment platforms (on infrastructure, private finance, with thematic or sectoral focus)
- A joint platform of financial institutions for development to share knowledge, build capacity and facilitate cooperation,
- A joint mechanism to pool institutional financiers
- A stakeholder platform on investment facilitation
- Collaboration among African and European Investment Promotion Agencies (IPAs).

The full paper is [available here](#).



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