



# EUROPEAN UNION AND AFRICA:

Towards a  
'Partnership of Equals?'

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**Brief**  
May 2021

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The EU's ambition to boost its role as a global player with a higher geopolitical profile has been translated into several **strategic** changes (such as the attempt for increased coordination between several policies linked to external action – such as security, trade and migration – and as per the current European Commission's priorities), **institutional** changes (e.g. the transition from DG DEVCO – Cooperation and Development to DG INTPA – International Partnerships, and approaches such as 'Team Europe'), and also in/with respect to **instruments** (including the merging of various external action instruments into the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - NDICI-Global Europe).

Currently there seems to be a consensus around the need to change the paradigm of the relationship between the EU and Africa, with both parties (re)affirming their intention to implement a more effective, equitable and strategic partnership. Despite the recurring (and recently strengthened) narrative about a 'partnership of equals', EU-Africa relations have been notably asymmetrical owing to the different levels of development, which result in different capacities and resources (human, technical, financial). Linked to this is the fact that European integration is far more advanced

than the African integration, which is reflected in the capacity of respective institutions, and results in important structural differences in mandate, status, autonomy and so forth.

The EU's approach to relations with Africa increasingly highlights their strategic nature and **mutual benefits**. This is evident both in the language of the EU's Strategy for Africa (March 2020), which succeeds the Joint Africa-Europe Strategy (JAES), and in the new framework agreement between the EU and African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries (replacing the Cotonou Agreement in 2021). In this context, the weight of history (an important element of discussions between the parties in the past) is gradually fading into a far more pragmatic approach, less firmly tied to past complexes. Although the mutual benefits narrative is not new, the focus on a comprehensive political and policy dialogue on a wide range of issues of mutual interest – present both in the new ACP-EU agreement and the current process towards a new Africa-EU strategy - is providing a **more strategic and realistic view of what can actually be achieved**.

Not only has the COVID-19 pandemic delayed several ongoing processes, but it has also highlighted elements to be improved and added new challenges to the relationship. On the European side, the need for economic recovery and the difficulties in responding to major domestic challenges might result in less political attention given to Africa in the short term. **The EU has stated that it needs Africa** to better respond to threats to Europe's security, to better manage migration in an integrated way, and

<sup>1</sup> This brief summarises the study with the same title published in May 2021. Both were drawn up by Patrícia Magalhães Ferreira and Andreia Oliveira for the Portuguese NGDO Platform as part of the Presidency Project - 'Towards an Open, Fair and Sustainable Europe in the World'.

to widen trade and investment opportunities. This has therefore led to a discourse more centred on self-interests than on solidarity. Such shift has taken place in a context where the increasing pressure over ODA budgets, and the (re)focus of donors on their domestic priorities coexists with a rise in humanitarian and development needs and the reversal of development gains achieved in recent decades. On the other hand, the pandemic has emphasized that the lack of access to public goods – especially health, but also sanitation and education, the natural resources management and environmental protection - constitutes not just an existential threat, but a shared global responsibility. The need to step up efforts for achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the interconnected nature of global challenges (for which the EU has pledged strong commitments and has somewhat become a leader) can also potentially boost relations between the EU and Africa.

Nevertheless, **the EU transition to a more geopolitical approach entails risks to its relationship with Africa.** Firstly, there is the threat that other interests - particularly in respect to security and migration - might dilute the eradication of poverty as the main goal of development policy, as set forth in both the Lisbon Treaty and the European Consensus on Development. This results from the ambition to prioritise European economic, political and security interests, by externalising internal policies and **mobilising all policies to this end, including development policies.** Secondly, and related to the previous point, the EU's current heightened rhetoric on the projection of the 'European way of life' and promotion of 'European values'

- in other words, Europe as the guardian of standards and values exported through external action - may add a new layer of complexity and difficulty to its relations with Africa, considering the record of political conditionalities, double standards and divergences over controversial aspects of the relationship. Thirdly, it seems clear that, from the EU's standpoint, the 'Chinese threat' currently marks and drives its relationship with Africa. However, presenting Africa mainly as a battleground for EU-China rivalry may not be the most effective approach for achieving a partnership 'between equals', as promoting the comparative advantages of EU's development and cooperation model could be more appealing to partners.

On the *African side*, the heightened interest of other external partners has helped diversifying opportunities, and consequently has led to **greater ambition of an African position and to an increased negotiating space** - without prejudice to the EU remaining an essential partner in foreign direct investment, trade, ODA and, naturally, in dealing with the multiple crises caused by the pandemic. The EU is therefore confronted with an increased self-confidence and assertiveness of African partners, which requires an adaptation of its modus operandi. One element that might favour a more strategic relationship with European partners is Africa's greater ability to define continental priorities, policies, and programmes that are relevant to its development objectives. This results from the African Union's (AU) consolidation and increased capacity, in addition to the current process of reflecting on and reviewing its strategic partnerships that will contribute to clarifying what is expected from external partners, especially from the EU.

However, within this context one needs to be aware of (Africa's) internal divisions and its difficulty in presenting unified positions, as African states' standpoints differ substantially over the role that the AU should play and the degree of power that they are prepared to transfer to the regional/continental level<sup>2</sup>.

A more equitable and balanced partnership is linked to the **actual conditions under which the partnership is exercised. This would imply the creation and consolidation of joint-decision mechanisms at both governance and financial management levels.** However, the way in which some underlying political instruments and financial mechanisms have evolved does not seem to follow this trend. If the EU really wishes to move away from the donor-recipient dynamic, it should begin by recognising the existing imbalances and correcting them, particularly during the programming and implementation phases of cooperation programmes between both parties.

Many of the EU's initiatives for Africa continue to be **defined on a one-sided way**, with little or no consultation of African partners. One such case is the Africa-Europe Alliance for sustainable investment and jobs (announced by the European Commission in 2018) which, to a large extent, lacks the 'partnership' or 'alliance' elements contained in its title. Another case is the systematic inclusion of the securitisation of migration in the political

dialogue with Africa and in a range of European programmes, including under development assistance, and which has heightened Africa's sense that this is a 'one-way dialogue'. Although there have recently been progresses to ensure a greater level of **reciprocity** on a number of issues – as can be seen in the new OACPS-EU agreement, both with respect to the provisions on return and readmission of migrants, and to the fact that both parties may enact the provision covering breaches of core elements of the partnership (human rights, democracy, rule of law) or in serious cases of corruption –, the reality is that this is essentially a formal development, as it is highly unlikely that ACP countries would trigger any of these mechanisms against the EU.

Regarding the **continental strategy**, given that the joint governance structure of the JAES has become gradually broken, one would have hoped for a more exhaustive debate on the type of governance and strategy to be pursued, enabling participation and consultation of a wide range of (European and African) stakeholders. The process of drafting an EU strategy for Africa in 2020 was nonetheless limited by the need to comply with European technical and bureaucratic deadlines, resulting in **little participation at the European level and scarce or inexistent discussions with African partners.** In the process leading up to a new joint strategy, the EU assumed that, as in previous phases, its proposal would be the basis for negotiation and that this would be a starting point to validate priorities set by itself. Although the past has seen meagre reaction from the African side, given the difficulty to agree on common positions, it is precisely this

<sup>2</sup> There are, of course, internal divisions on the European side too, whether within the EU Institutions, within bilateral policies of Member States or between these and EU policies, which add a new layer of complexity and difficulty to coordination. This aspect has an impact on relations with Africa and is covered in the study.

attitude of presenting European positions as 'joint' agendas, strategies or plans of action, summit after summit, that feeds African frustration. With Africa's greater capacity and assertiveness, on the one hand, and the expressed aim of a more equitable partnership, on the other, the **EU needs to change the way it works and dialogues with Africa**. The EU should make greater efforts towards shared reflection and solutions, respecting the processes and timetables of the other party(ies), and leading processes that are mutual and more inclusive of the different points of view. This should result in a joint strategic framework for the partnership, with governance and objectives/goals mutually established, and focused on clear and tangible results.

As regards governance and management mechanisms, in the case of the ACP-EU partnership, **the EDF budgetisation** is a key factor for which future implications have yet to be clarified. While ACP countries would like to ensure the principles of joint management that have governed the implementation of this instrument, that seems unlikely under governance, programming, and implementation of NDICI-Global Europe (which brings together the resources for the EU's external action), as the funding allocation will now be decided entirely in line with the EU's financial management and programming procedures. These changes may contradict some of the development effectiveness principles, for which predictability, ownership and joint responsibility are essential pillars; the negotiating process of the EU's new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) was a missed opportunity to

strengthen these principles<sup>3</sup>. The investment mechanism of the **European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+)**, previously divided between Africa and the Neighbourhood countries, has become an integral part of NDICI-Global Europe and will now have worldwide coverage, guided by the general priorities and programming of the external action instrument. Although formally partner countries could be consulted via the EFSD programming discussions, all decisions emanate from the European institutions alone, as partner countries are not present on the strategic board of this fund (though there may be the possibility of becoming observers of the EFSD+, the EFSD successor). Other **blending facilities managed by the EIB as part of partnerships with Africa** - such as the Africa Investment Platform, which replaced the EU-Africa Infrastructure Trust Fund (EU-AITF) in 2019, or the ACP Investment Facility, under the Cotonou Agreement - have governance bodies that include EU representatives only (EC and Member States), unlike previous instruments. The recent proliferation of more flexible and unplanned mechanisms such as **trust funds**, to be moved into the new 2021-2027 MFF, also affects the predictability of development assistance for partner countries. Additionally, these are not subject to close monitoring or supervision, as they are not scrutinised by the European Parliament nor do they involve a wider consultation process

<sup>3</sup> This is in addition to the fact that the EU has not seized the opportunity to move towards a more unified approach to Africa, that is treating the continent as a whole, since North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and South Africa have all benefited from different policies, agreements and instruments so far. This fragmented approach may make it harder to find synergies (e.g., between the EU-ACP agreement and the EU-AU relationship), and to provide coherent support for Africa's continental integration (e.g., contributing to Africa's strategic priorities, such as the African Continental Free Trade Area).

with partner countries. Potentially, all of this means that partner countries will be further distanced from the decisions that will impact them.

Regarding **peace and security**, the Africa Peace Facility (APF), which existed since 2004, is now incorporated into two global funds: the larger component of peacekeeping operations becomes part of the new European Peace Facility (EPF), and support for institutional capacity-building and the Rapid Reaction Mechanism are incorporated into the NDICI-Global Europe instrument. While this makes sense considering the European aspiration for increasing flexibility and promptness in its Common Foreign and Security Policy, it may also mean: (i) a dilution of Africa within the framework of that policy, as assistance in this field will target all regions that EU Member States want to support, increasing the discretionary nature of decisions and competition between geographical priorities; (ii) the possible weakening of the African Union leadership role and unpredictable funding in this domain, as the EU is abandoning its longstanding approach of channelling most of funding for peace and security in Africa via the AU (given that the EPF will enable direct financial and military cooperation with governments, regional organizations and ad-hoc coalitions that do not require AU approval or involvement); and (iii) a missed opportunity to introduce more reciprocal decision-making, supervision and management, as the approach set out by the EU gives the African Union no formal role in supervising or in decision-making on EPF funds (unlike the previous APF), where the EU and the United Nations have seats on the board of trustees

of the AU Peace Fund - and the AU would certainly prefer the EU to channel the EPF's financing for Africa through this fund.

One of the most highlighted points in recent discussions about the EU-Africa partnership is the need to strengthen **multilateralism and a rules-based international system, which both sides recognise as being increasingly threatened**. The aim is for both parties to seek more coordinated positions, both in joint responses to growing and complex global challenges, which are common concerns, and in more coordinated efforts in multilateral fora. Although this concern has already existed since the 2007 Joint Africa-EU Strategy, the search for joint positions has resulted in scarce joint declarations so far, namely on climate action and the 2030 Agenda, and which have not required major negotiations or trade-offs between diverging interests. There is also a significant trilateral cooperation at the United Nations level focusing on peace and security issues, but that could also be reinforced and broadened in several ways.

African and European countries/institutions have taken markedly distinctive stances on a wide range of matters. This is evident in direct negotiations or at the international level – such as regarding sexual-orientation and gender identity issues, other human rights-related subjects, and international law (e.g. on the International Criminal Court) – and on trade and migration<sup>4</sup>. As regards the global governance system – namely the

<sup>4</sup> Since 2015, at the Valletta Summit, it has been clear that the European agenda is focused on security and migrant return and readmission, whereas African partners tend to stress issues of facilitating legal migration and linking migration with economic growth and job-creation. In December 2018, African countries voted massively in support of the UN Global Compact on Migration, whereas several European countries abstained or voted against it.

United Nations, international financial institutions (such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) - both blocs acknowledge the need for reform, but differences between European and African countries have prevented joint political initiatives. The response to the pandemic has also exposed the divergences between the so-called developed and developing blocs of countries, being illustrative of how the multilateral framework tends to be favoured mainly in situations that do not involve any real relinquishing of power – as seen in the divergent positions at the WTO regarding the temporary suspension of patents for the COVID-19 vaccine.

While the division between the European and African sides is often linked to the fact that they belong to different development groups, **there is room for shared agreement on specific matters, on a case-by-case basis**. This depends on political will and leadership in both parties, and on a more systematic incorporation of issues of common concern and global issues into the partnership's political agendas, and their dialogues, instruments, and mechanisms (within both the EU-ACP framework and the continental partnership), with a view to reciprocity, based on issues of mutual interest and benefit. Furthermore, the EU countries/institutions should not merely seek for the alignment of African positions with the European leadership, but also be ready to support more African positions at the United Nations and in other multilateral fora – particularly on crucial issues for Africa's development, such as illicit financial flows and foreign debt. In addition to this, existing **international frameworks could be recognised**

**and strengthened as effective basis for EU-Africa relations**, which is not currently the case<sup>5</sup>.

Finally, EU-Africa partnerships increasingly need to evolve towards **decisions focused on or targeting European and African citizens, so that they can have a positive impact on people's development and well-being** – which is, after all, the ultimate goal of the relationship. On the one hand, the view on human development expressed in the formal partnerships seems merely to reflect an instrumental approach to sectors such as education and health as vehicles for economic growth. The pandemic has further highlighted the existing linkages between human, economic and environmental development, and the governance dimension, therefore emphasising the need for integrated approaches that do not approach the first dimension merely as an instrument for the latter. While the Planet, Prosperity and Peace dimensions continue to be, in one way or another, very much present in the new partnerships, the 'People' priority of the 2030 Agenda may be somewhat dissolved within the provisions established for the new partnership. *On the other hand*, the space for **dialogue with citizens and civil society** from both continents to identify the real development needs and possible solutions is insufficient. EU-Africa partnerships

<sup>5</sup> The EU strategy for Africa is a good example of this, as some of the thematic priorities put forward – i.e. those that may be seen as more innovative in comparison with previous frameworks, such as the Green Deal and digitalisation - are internal EU priorities mainstreamed into its external action. Although these are priorities shared by Africa, as they correspond to undeniable challenges for the continent's development, African stakeholders would welcome the approach to these issues within the multilateral and international-law framework, as they consider that these frameworks better serve the rights and interests of the poorer and more vulnerable countries. Thus, within the scope of green transition, the Paris Agreement should be the concrete framework for the relationship in this field, with all that its 'shared and differentiated responsibilities' approach imply, rather than the European Green Deal.

have indeed included dialogue mechanisms for consultation, namely with civil society organisations as key players recognised in their own right, but when put into practice, they have worked more often as a form of policy validation than of open discussion, they were not always structured or timely, nor allowed for significant representativeness. Despite several formal declarations, the relationship with civil society still relies on a meagre basis of trust, particularly regarding the role civil society might have both in channelling citizens' voices and in implementing cooperation programmes. The revitalisation of EU-Africa relations through partnerships with ACP countries and the AU provides **relevant opportunities to establish more effective mechanisms for consultation and dialogue with civil society**, provided that both parties have the political will to do so.

Portugal has played a significant role in EU-Africa relations, with many of the relationship's milestones achieved under (and driven by) Portuguese presidencies of the EU Council, and the country has also served as an honest broker to support the needs and interests of the low-income and more vulnerable countries. As an EU Member State, **Portugal has the chance of encouraging a paradigm shift** towards a more inclusive, fair, equitable and sustainable relationship with Africa.

**In sum, in order to change the paradigm and improve EU-Africa relations towards a meaningful partnership that meets the aspirations, interests and needs of both parties, especially in the pursuit of fairer, more sustainable and equitable development, and bearing in mind the above analysis, the recommendations are:**

**1.** That the EU-Africa relationship evolves towards greater joint cooperation, mutual benefits and responsibility, less asymmetry and greater inclusiveness, specifically:

**1.1.** That the opportunity presented by the renewal of the Africa-EU partnerships allows for the establishment of a **relevant and meaningful dialogue and of a consultation process between the parties** intended at building a **joint and shared vision**, before setting up the instruments to implement it.

**1.2.** That a **governance structure** for the Africa-EU partnership is defined based on joint mechanisms and in lessons learnt from the JAES experience.

**1.3.** That the implementation of the jointly agreed partnership's priorities is based on **principles, commitments and provisions of multilateral/global frameworks**, namely the principle of 'joint but differentiated responsibilities', the implementation of

the Paris Agreement and the promotion of all the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development dimensions.

**1.4.** That concrete mechanisms are established for **the consultation and engagement of European and African civil society** in EU-Africa partnerships. This implies identifying and putting into practice structured dialogue and participation mechanisms that provide civil society with the agency that it can and should have in promoting sustainable development, investing in its role as a partner for political dialogue and for programme implementation and monitoring.

**1.5.** That all efforts are made to create greater complementarity, coordination and coherence between the various instruments and partnerships with Africa, particularly between the AU-EU and ACP-EU frameworks, and between the various bodies, policies and instruments that deal with Africa at European level.

**1.6.** That the rhetoric on a more equitable partnership is translated into **greater reciprocity** in governance/management of the existing instruments (the AU should have a seat on the European Peace Facility just as the EU has on the AU's Peace Fund; joint governance should be sought for blended-finance instruments and other investments managed by the EIB, amongst other examples).

**1.7.** That **opportunities are seized for increased joint action at multilateral level**, which implies not only a systematic search for agreed positions on a case-by-case basis, but also that the EU is ready to support more African positions at the UN and other multilateral fora (especially on crucial issues for African development such as, inter alia, illicit financial flows, external debt or taxation), and to bolster African participation in global governance mechanisms (the UN Security Council, financial institutions, global public goods).

**2.** That the integrity, operating space and overarching goals of European development policy are preserved, namely:

**2.1.** That the EU **preserves the core goals of its development policy**, aiming for the global eradication of poverty in all its dimensions. This aim should not be lost within a redefined and wider vision of cooperation, as it may risk hampering progress towards the SDGs or even altering perceptions of the EU added value as a development partner. This includes safeguarding the central focus of poverty eradication also within the new external action instrument, the NDICI-Global Europe.

**2.2.** That the EU establishes concrete mechanisms to ensure **greater Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development**, particularly ensuring that other policies (on migration, security, trade, etc.) do no harm for African countries' development, by paying real attention to the priorities of partner countries and avoiding conditionality of development assistance.

**2.3.** That the EU **does not jeopardise the development effectiveness principles** in its relations with partner countries. This means ensuring, amongst other things, some of the joint management principles previously included in the EDF, notwithstanding its budgetisation, to ensure that partner countries have a word in the financing options that will impact them. This participation and ownership premise – which should not call into question the increased transparency intended with this budgetisation process – should be extended to national programmes and to the new financial instruments and trust funds, which tend to distance partner countries from decision-making even further.

**2.4.** That the necessary diversification of development financing sources and support to different actors does not lead to a **diversion or decrease of EU development aid funds**, effectively concentrating these flows in African countries with the greatest

needs, fragilities, and vulnerabilities (which is not currently the case).

**2.5.** That **human development** is given greater centrality in development policies, regardless of other strategic considerations or sectoral priorities, thus matching Africa's needs (on health, education, suitable skills, employment, institutional capacities, etc.), capitalising on EU's added value as a normative power, and simultaneously contributing to the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda.

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**Research and Writing:** Patrícia Magalhães Ferreira e Andreia Oliveira

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