Understanding the EU's approach to a new partnership with Africa

SUMMARY

Africa has been put at the core of the Commission’s geopolitical work programme and of the French Presidency of the Council of the EU. In February 2022, a summit between EU and African Heads of State and Government will discuss ways to build a new and comprehensive partnership, based on five pillars put forward by the EU: green transition and energy access, digital transformation, sustainable growth and jobs, peace and governance, and migration and mobility. Although the proposal mainly builds on existing frameworks, its high profile and clear commitment to the African Union (AU) make it an important milestone in an effort for a deeper relationship and strengthened partnership in multilateral fora, initiated several years ago.

In order to preserve its own economic and security interests in the face of increased geopolitical competition, the EU intends to continue to be an important player on the African continent. The EU and the AU have converging interests in a number of areas, such as the fight against climate change and the promotion of a sustainable, job-creating African economy. However, they still have to find common ground on migration, security management, and fundamental values.

The comprehensiveness of the proposed strategy is challenged by the gaps and overlaps of the current variable-geometry partnerships. The coronavirus outbreak delayed the adoption of a common strategy. At the same time, it clearly highlighted the need to strengthen the links between the two continents in order to tackle the most urgent global issues. Measures to fight the current pandemic and to prevent future ones have reframed the priorities and will give new impetus to partnerships in areas such as health, the fight against climate change, and promoting the digital transformation.

This briefing updates ‘Towards a new EU strategy with Africa’, published in June 2020.

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Streamlining existing actions

The European Commission’s work programme for 2020 announced ‘a new comprehensive strategy with Africa to boost economic relations, create jobs in both continents and deepen our partnership across the board’. The Commission and the High Representative took a first step (‘towards a comprehensive strategy with Africa’) on 9 March 2020 with the publication of a joint communication, endorsed by the Council on 30 June 2020.

As the title suggests, the joint communication is not a full-fledged strategy as such, but a proposal to jointly develop a strategy with Africa. It reflects the aspirations of Agenda 2063 – the African Union’s vision for an ‘integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa’ – while at the same time presenting the axes on which the EU wishes the strategy to focus: a partnership for a green transition and energy access; a partnership for digital transformation; a partnership for sustainable growth and jobs; a partnership for peace and governance; a partnership on migration and mobility. The focus on these areas does not come as a surprise, as they were already part of the EU toolkit for its relations with Africa and several existing programmes and frameworks should serve as the foundation for the new strategy (see Table 1).

The desire for a new approach – one that turns Africa into a privileged partner in the framework of multilateralism as opposed to a mere recipient of development aid – has existed for several years. The communication underlines that the strengthening of EU-Africa relations has risen to the top of the Commission’s geopolitical agenda.

The proposed partnerships bring together nine actions within five partnerships. A tenth action encourages deepening of the EU-Africa alliance in international fora, with a view to strengthening ‘the international rules-based order and the multilateral system, with the UN at its core’.

Table 1 – Main actions proposed, with related EU and EU-AU initiatives, other international frameworks and relevant sustainable development goals (SDGs)

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<th>Proposed actions: Partner with Africa to...</th>
<th>EU and EU-AU initiatives</th>
<th>Other frameworks, SDGs</th>
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| **I. Partners for green transition and energy access** | **- Green transition priority of AU-EU cooperation** and related partnerships, such as those on food and nutrition security and sustainable agriculture (FNSSA), on climate change and sustainable energy (CCSE), on innovation and research in agriculture (DESIRA), and the Africa-EU Energy Partnership.**<br>**- AU-EU rural Africa task force**<br>**- Africa-EU high level platform on sustainable energy investments**<br>**- European Green Deal (2019) and related initiatives, such as support for biodiversity in Africa (NaturAfrica).** | **- USAID Power Africa**  
- **SDGs 2** (zero hunger),  
6 (clean water), 7 (energy),  
8 (decent work and economic growth),  
9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure), 11 (cities), 12 (consumption and production),  
13 (climate), 14 (life below water), and 15 (life on land).** |

1 – maximise the benefits of the green transition and minimise threats to the environment, in full compliance with the Paris Agreement.

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<th><strong>II. Partners for digital transformation</strong></th>
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<td>2 – boost the continent’s digital transformation.</td>
<td><strong>- Digital Transformation in Africa and AU-EU digital economy task force</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>- EU-Africa cooperation in research and innovation</strong></td>
<td><strong>- SDGs 4 (quality education), 5 (gender equality), and 9.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>III. Partners for sustainable growth and jobs</strong></td>
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| 3 – a) [...] increase [...] sustainable investments [...]; b) promote investment opportunities [through] innovative financing mechanisms; and c) boost [...] economic integration [...] | - **Africa-Europe Alliance for Sustainable Investment and Jobs** (2018)  
- **Economic partnership agreements** and other EU trade agreements with African partner countries  
- **EU Global Gateway** for sustainable and trusted connections | - **African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA)**  
- **SDGs 1** (no poverty), 2, 7, 8, and 9. |
| 4 – attract investors [with] policies and regulatory reforms that improve the business environment and investment climate [...] | - **EU external investment plan**  
- **Africa-Europe Alliance for Sustainable Investment and Jobs**  
- **EU Global Gateway** for sustainable and trusted connections  
- **International platform on sustainable finance** | - **SDGs 1, 9, and 16** (peace, justice, and strong institutions). |
| 5 – rapidly enhance learning, knowledge and skills, research and innovation capacities, [...] protecting and improving social rights, and eradicating child labour. | - **EU-Africa economic and social stakeholders network**  
- The **AU-EU high level policy dialogue** on science, technology and innovation | - **SDGs 1, 3** (good health and well-being), 4, 5, 8, and 10 (reduced inequalities). |
| **IV. Partners for peace and governance** | | |
| Proposed Action 6 – partner with Africa to adapt and deepen the EU’s support to African peace efforts [...] with a particular focus on regions where tensions and vulnerabilities are highest. | - **AU-EU Memorandum of Understanding on Peace, Security, and Governance** (2018)  
- **EU Strategic Compass**  
- **European Peace Facility**  
- **CSDP missions and operations**  
- **EU strategic approach in support of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration of former combatants** (2021) | - **African Peace and Security Architecture**  
- AU-led ‘Silencing the Guns’ initiative  
- **AU Peace Fund**  
- **SDG 16** |
| Proposed Action 7 – partner with Africa on integrating good governance, democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and gender equality in action and cooperation. | - **AU-EU Human Rights Dialogue**  
- **AU-EU coordination on electoral processes and observation**  
- **Gender Action Plan III** (2020) | - **African Governance Architecture**  
- **EU-UN Spotlight Initiative**  
- **SDGs 5, 10, and 16.** |
| Proposed Action 8 – secure resilience by linking humanitarian development, peace, and security interventions [...] | - **EU Global Strategy** (2016)  
- **European Consensus on Development** (2017) | - **SDGs 16, 17** (partnerships for the Goals). |
Table by EPRS, based on mentions in the Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council – Towards a comprehensive Strategy with Africa, JOIN(2020) 4 final, and other EU sources.

### Building blocks and stumbling blocks

#### Health: The overlooked partnership?

The proposed new strategy was prepared and presented just before the coronavirus pandemic and emergency measures seriously hit both the EU and African economies and societies. The proposed partnerships thus needed to be reconsidered, as public health cooperation between the EU and Africa is not highlighted in the proposal; it has since been given much more attention. This cooperation on health issues builds, in particular, on the EU and Africa’s scientific cooperation.

In November 2021, the Council of the EU approved the third programme (EDCTP 3) of the European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership – an EU-supported partnership between 16 African and 14 European countries. EDCTP 3, the EU-Africa Global Health Partnership, aims to strengthen clinical research capacities in Africa, notably on the coronavirus. Developing the African pharmaceutical industry is crucial: Africa produces less than 1% of the vaccines it needs. The AU announced in April 2021 that it intends for Africa to expand its manufacturing capacity in order to produce 60% of its vaccines by 2040. This initiative is supported by €1 billion in European funds, mainly from the EU budget and the European Investment Bank, and EU Member States might also contribute. The European and African centres for disease prevention and control (ECDC and Africa CDC) announced a partnership to better monitor and respond to future health emergencies.

In the immediate fight against Covid-19, the EU is involved in COVAX, an international scheme for a fair distribution of vaccines across the world. The EU and Member States (‘Team Europe’) have pledged more than €3 billion in grants to COVAX (out of €10 billion in total, as of 9 November 2021). In addition, Team Europe has pledged to give 700 million doses by mid-2022 to lower- and middle-income countries.

As of 6 December 2021, 353.4 million doses had been shared, of which 118 million had been delivered (54.8 million doses to African countries). In addition, the EU’s humanitarian assistance supports the rollout of vaccination campaigns in fragile African states, particularly in humanitarian and conflict areas that are difficult to access. However, Africa CDC regretted that pledges by the EU and donors are either not delivered or are delivered at too short notice for African countries to plan effective vaccination campaigns. It has also happened that vaccines with too short a shelf life had to be returned or destroyed by African countries which had received them.
Sustainable development, trade, and jobs (partnerships I, II, III)

In line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its own commitment to climate neutrality by 2050, the EU encourages Africa to base its development on a green transition. Given that research is pivotal to this aim, the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre has been working for a long time with African partners to help tackle vulnerability to climate change and harness their potential in sustainable energy resources. In December 2021, the EU launched the Global Gateway, seen by analysts as an EU alternative to China’s Belt and Road initiative. Under the Global Gateway, African countries will benefit from €3.5 million to improve energy efficiency and sustainability (and additional grants and loans in the digital and transport sectors). For its part, the EU hopes to secure access to strategic minerals that are key to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Partnering on green transition requires the reduction of negative spillover effects from EU countries into African countries; such spillovers can negatively affect African countries’ performance towards achieving the SDGs. For example: several researchers contend that the new sustainability standards set by the EU ‘farm to fork’ strategy might reduce EU agricultural production, leading to higher food prices globally, which could increase food insecurity in African countries dependent on food imports; access to strategic minerals can be detrimental to the human rights of miners and their communities, which the conflict mineral regulation in force since 2021 endeavours to prevent.

EU and African leaders agree there is a need to promote an environment that enables business development. This appears to be key for creating jobs – primarily targeting young people and women – at a pace commensurate with Africa’s rapid population growth, although the extent to which this would reduce or increase migration to the EU is subject to debate. The proposed new strategy with Africa refers to the Africa-Europe Alliance for sustainable investment and jobs launched in 2018. This Alliance aims to stimulate investment and facilitate business by improving education, lifelong learning, political stability and security. The European Commission forecast that the Alliance could help create 10 million jobs by the end of 2023, with the support of the external investment plan which is designed to leverage public and private investment by providing technical assistance and new guarantees to cover potential default by borrowers.

The proposed strategy focuses notably on the digital transformation of Africa. The joint communication points out that ‘a 10 % increase in digital coverage could result in an increase of over 1 % in African GDP’. Digital transformation requires the fostering of digital infrastructure and the enhancement of digital literacy, as already highlighted in the 2017 ‘Digital4Development’ policy. The High-Level Forum Africa-Europe 2018 on ‘Taking cooperation to the digital age’ and the EU-AU Digital Economy Task Force – a platform of donors, civil society, and businesses involved in the digital sector – have highlighted the need for private investment in the digital area as part of the Africa-EU Alliance for sustainable development and jobs, and improving the regulatory framework could help increase the market share of European IT businesses. The broader use of digital facilities also requires a secure legal environment, something that has deteriorated in recent years, as several African governments have shut down the internet amid social protests or during election periods.

The EU considers trade liberalisation to be a way to foster economic diversification and job creation in African countries, as the Commission’s communication on the trade policy review (18 February 2021) reiterated. EU trade rules have to be compliant with those of the WTO, which allows preferential treatment of vulnerable developing countries: this is translated in the EU’s generalised scheme of preferences (GSP), from which the majority of African countries benefit. The Commission has recently proposed to ‘fine tune’ the EU GSP in order to preserve its benefits while requiring the beneficiaries to comply with a greater number of international conventions. In addition, the EU has negotiated economic partnership agreements (EPAs) with regional groups of African countries. While this type of free trade agreement provides for safeguards, such as a phased-in liberalisation of trade on a sector-by-sector basis, EPAs have encountered strong resistance from some African countries, such as Nigeria and Tanzania, which consider that the conditions set out in the EPAs would make it difficult for them to develop competitive industry and to guarantee export
duties on raw materials. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa warned that the African EPAs could have a negative impact on intra-African trade, in that it could create competition between the sub-regions. The proposed new strategy with Africa relies on the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) – the AU initiative to enhance industrialisation and trade in Africa – to help bridge such gaps and enable trade negotiations on an equal footing.

Migration and security issues (partnerships IV and V)

The EU is putting forward a migration control policy that responds to the concerns of EU citizens. For their part, African countries, especially those that reap economic benefits from emigration, criticise the growing impact of EU migration policy on development cooperation. Since the Valletta action plan of 2015, a common approach has emerged to tackle the root causes of illegal migration, based on converging interests in the fight against transnational criminal networks. However, some studies – notably on the case of Niger – show that this fight could lead to further destabilising of local economies, where people's livelihood depends in part on revenues from the provision of goods and services to migrants in transit. Disagreements over irregular migration also emerged in the context of the negotiations for a new agreement between the EU and the Organisation of African, Caribbean, and Pacific States (OACPS). While the OACPS wanted returns to be on a voluntary basis, the negotiated EU-OACPS agreement initialled in April 2021 instead aligns with the proposed new EU pact on migration and asylum, as it recalls – including in its 'Africa' protocol – the obligation for any EU or OACPS country to accept the return and readmission of their nationals.

On peace and security, the proposed strategy recommends restructuring the EU's cooperation with African peace efforts, strengthening it in those parts of Africa where tensions are highest. This includes a review of existing EU regional strategies for the Sahel (adopted in April 2021), the Horn of Africa (adopted in May 2021), and the Gulf of Guinea, and developing similar strategies for Libya and the Great Lakes. The AU welcomes EU aid on security matters provided it respects the principle of finding African solutions for African problems, a strong stance the AU tries to convey to its international partners for addressing conflicts and coups on the continent. This is a challenge, since the AU peace and security architecture is mainly financed by non-African donors, particularly the EU. The proposed strategy aligns with the European Court of Auditors' recommendation to 'foster AU ownership of the APSA and refocus EU support' from APSA's operational costs to targeted capacity-building programmes. Since 2021, the European Peace Facility (EPF), an off-budget instrument, has taken over, from the EU's African Peace Facility (APF), the funding of the military components of the AU's peace support operations, while the EU budget (NDICI-Global Europe) funds the civilian components of these operations.

Multilateralism (action 10)

Criticism of global governance and the role of multilateral institutions has gained momentum since populist leaders took office. Against this backdrop, the EU and the AU reaffirm their belief in the principle of multilateralism – enshrined in the Treaty on European Union, Article 21, and the AU's Constitutive Act, Article 3. Both blocs have a common interest in seeking convergence in the UN and other international fora. They act jointly in areas such as climate change (although observers found the convergence was looser during COP26 in 2021 than in previous climate change conferences) and migration and security (e.g. the AU-EU-UN taskforce on Libya). The UN Secretary-General, the leaders of the AU and the European Commission have affirmed their joint commitment to promote an effective multilateral system. The EU is also committed to promoting Africa's role in international relations by strengthening African regional organisations. However, in multilateral fora, the positions of African countries and the EU are not aligned on all issues. For example: the AU's backing for the withdrawal of some African states has challenged the role of the International Criminal Court; many AU member states do not wish to recognise LGBTI rights as part of the 'common values' between the two blocs, and in July 2016 all African members of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC)
either abstained or voted against a resolution establishing a mandate for an independent expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

One comprehensive strategy for diverse partners

The proposed EU strategy for Africa centres primarily on the African Union and focuses on the structures put in place by the current Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES). However, important aspects of EU relations with Africa fall outside the scope of the JAES. The EU has relations with African regional economic communities, which have loose relations with the AU, and other blocs of countries, such as the G5 Sahel – particularly in the context of its integrated strategies for the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Gulf of Guinea. The European Neighbourhood Policy towards north African countries is implemented mainly through bilateral agreements. Political dialogues on migration involve the EU and African countries in various configurations, such as the Khartoum and Rabat processes, which also involve Norway and Switzerland. Sub-Saharan African countries and the EU are bound by the EU-ACP agreement, which also involves Caribbean and Pacific countries (a new ACP-EU agreement has been negotiated but has not been adopted yet). The future partnership will comprise common principles (a framework agreement) and three distinct and binding regional pillars, including one for Africa, whose strategic priorities (inclusive and sustainable economic growth and development; human and social development; environment, natural resources management and climate change; peace and security; human rights, democracy and governance; migration and mobility) are in line with the partnerships proposed for the new EU-Africa strategy. EU financing for Africa is also diverse, although the new NDICI-Global Europe instrument of the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework groups several previously distinct instruments, including the bulk of the previously off-budget European development fund. It will dedicate at least €29.18 billion to sub-Saharan Africa and €19.31 billion to the EU Neighbourhood, which includes north African countries. This is complemented by thematic and ad hoc funding (to address ‘global challenges’, support human rights defenders, or respond to emerging crises) that will benefit Africa. In addition, a variety of instruments, such as the EU emergency trust fund for Africa (EUTF Africa) and the external investment plan, gather participants from the EU and Member States for targeted actions or to leverage private investments.

European Parliament's position

The European Parliament shows continuing interest in the EU’s relations with African countries. In particular, a 2017 resolution already focused on areas very similar to the proposed partnerships of 2020 – economic development (via trade), good governance (including human rights), human development (through public services for education, health, access to water and sanitation, gender equality, science, technology and innovation), security and the fight against terrorism, migration and mobility, and the environment (including climate change). The resolution of 25 March 2021 on the sustainable and inclusive development aspects of the proposed new strategy with Africa supports the comprehensiveness of the strategy, provided it includes a monitoring mechanism involving civil society, local authorities and national parliaments. It calls for the partnership to prioritise human development and human rights, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, paying particular attention to youth, especially children in conflict areas. Parliament highlights the need to adapt the partnership in the light of coronavirus impacts – which risk widening inequalities, increasing food insecurity and poverty, and aggravating insecurity in Africa – and calls for closer cooperation in key areas such as security, agriculture and health, to better anticipate future health crises. The resolution regrets that EU-Africa relations have been dominated by the migration issue and suggests that a renewed partnership help tackle migration’s root causes and deliver on an effective visa and legal migration policy. Parliament insists on the need to dedicate adequate resources to the strategy’s objectives; this includes supporting increased domestic resource mobilisation in Africa, through the fight against corruption and tax evasion. Parliament also points out that most EU Member States have not reached the 0.7 % of gross national income (GNI) target for official development assistance (ODA) and that some have even decreased their ODA. A vote on future EU-Africa trade relations is being prepared under the lead of the Committee on International Trade (INTA), for which the Committees on Agriculture (AGRI) and Development (DEVE) have drafted opinions. Both insist that the future relationship must give African countries the
means for sustainable development, including through fair and ethical trade. **DEVE** welcomes the reform of the [EU scheme of generalised preferences](https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/regionalschemes/gp/) and calls for economic partnership agreements to support the AfCFTA and the development of African value chains. **AGRI** notes 'the global implications of the common agricultural policy and agricultural trade on the SDGs' and calls for 'stronger policy coherence at EU level in the context of agri-food trade'.

**Outlook**

Many commentators welcomed the EU proposal as a **genuine**, even if **unilateral**, initiative for more **balanced relations**. A number of NGOs have called for more involvement of African and European **civil societies** (including diasporas) and **local governments** in shaping and implementing the strategy. Some observers note that the **strategy** is needed for the EU to face the 'geopolitical competition' from China, Russia, Turkey, India, and the post-Brexit United Kingdom, at a time when individual EU Member States have a **growing interest** in Africa. The High Representative and the Commissioner for International Partnerships acknowledge the need to focus more on 'what is **distinct** about the EU ... human development and sustainability [and] the right of people to shape their own lives in freedom and with their rights protected'.

The EU presented the main lines of its proposed strategy at the **10th AU-EU Commission-to-Commission meeting**, in February 2020. It will only become a strategy **with Africa** – as opposed to a strategy **for Africa** – if African and EU Heads of State or Government commit to common guidelines and actions; such a declaration is **expected** at the end of the forthcoming AU-EU Summit. However, declarations at AU-EU Summits are **not binding**, and their implementation depends primarily on each individual country. In addition, the AU-EU Summit, initially planned in 2020 in Brussels, has been postponed several times. The pandemic and **agenda issues** might not be the only causes for its postponement; observers argue it might also reflect the **discontent** on the African side about the EU agenda. At the AU-EU Commission-to-Commission meeting in February 2020, Moussa Faki Mahamat, AU Commission Chair, stressed that the EU should not impose its values, and should take into account **differences** – he cited 'international criminal justice, sexual orientation and identity, death penalty, centrality of the African Union in certain crises' – in order not to hinder cooperation. Carlos Lopes, AU High Representative in the negotiations with the EU, is critical of the EU policy for Africa, notably in the areas of **trade and investment**, and of EU countries' 'fixation on the migration "threat"'; however, he acknowledges African countries need external support to face the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Following a series of preparatory meetings, the AU-EU Summit is now expected to take place on **17 and 18 February 2022**, with strong involvement from the current **French Presidency** of the Council of the EU. The European Parliament held a **high-level meeting** on Africa-EU relations on 10 February 2022, ahead of the AU-EU Summit.

**FURTHER READING**


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