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Eurafrica revisited: towards a new agenda between Europe and Africa in the 21st century

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Panelists:

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Moderator:

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Introduction

Monday 13 May 2019, the Community of Sant'Egidio (CSE) Belgium, in cooperation with the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM), gathered a diverse group of experts and policy-makers from Africa and Europe in Brussels, to discuss the status and future of EU-Africa relations. On the eve of the European elections, panellists engaged in interesting, and at times out of the box, reflections on the nature of the transcontinental relationship; its merits and flaws, and the challenges for creating a more meaningful, mutually rewarding partnership of equals, amidst a rapidly changing geostrategic context.

Based on over half a century of ties of friendship with the people of Africa and the active involvement of the CSE, notably through interreligious dialogue, development projects and mediation endeavors, the Community developed a deep connection with Africa. Acknowledging the 'signs of the times' (*Hilde Kieboom*), the CSE therefore felt the need for a **reflection on the future relationship between Europe and Africa**, in order to develop new ways of understanding and cooperation.

The debate summarized below therefore aims to identify different perceptions of i) the current state of affairs in Europe-Africa relations and ii) the scope for a stronger transcontinental partnership in a globalized world. Before doing so, we would like to engage in a reflection on the concept of 'Eurafrica' against the context of ongoing policy-discussions about a revisited EU-Africa partnership.

Mounting momentum: Eurafrica and the future of EU-Africa relations

The concept of '**Eurafrica**' dates back to the interbellum and refers to the German idea of a strategic alliance between Europe and Africa, one in which the former would use the latter mostly as a source of raw materials to strengthen Europe's strategic and economic power in the world. The concept evolved throughout the different stages of decolonization and inspired the 1964 Yaoundé Convention, forging the first institutionalized cooperation agreement between the nascent European Economic Community (EEC) and the eighteen Associated African States and Madagascar (AASM).

Today, 55 years after the first Yaoundé Convention, the 'Eurafrica' concept is being revisited in the context of a new strategy to guide EU-Africa relations. The idea is that, in a multipolar world, with new emerging economic and military powers and intensified attacks on multilateralism, Europe and Africa, through the EU and the AU as their respective representative continental bodies, should **foster closer strategic relations** across different areas of global governance. The 21st century concept of 'Eurafrica' therefore goes well beyond development aid and trade deals, and extends to a full and ambitious cooperation in the political, economic, energy, security and culture fields.

Over the last few years, the EU has indeed indicated a renewed, more holistic interest in Africa. President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker, in his [2018 State of the Union](#), recognized Africa as Europe's 'twin continent', which didn't require charity, but 'true and fair partnerships', based on reciprocal commitments to go beyond a donor-recipient approach. To enhance the EU-Africa partnership, the Juncker Commission introduced a new [Africa-Europe Alliance for Sustainable Investment and Jobs](#). By using the [External Investment Plan \(EIP\)](#) launched in 2017, to mobilize over €44 billion by 2020 in both public and private investments, the Alliance aims to help create up to 10 million jobs in Africa in the next 5 years.

The so-called 'equals alliance' aims to complement other long-standing and institutionalized partnership-agreements and policy tools, most notably the 2007 [Joint Africa-EU Strategy \(JAES\)](#), which at the time marked the beginning of 'a new phase in Africa-EU relations', also with the intention of moving beyond a donor-recipient relationship. Moreover, the proposals for a new [Multi-annual Financial Framework](#) for the period 2021-2027 identify Africa and the Neighborhood as strategic priorities and propose a strengthening of the EU's external action overall. Finally, it is worth noting that any type of reflection about the future of EU-Africa relations should take into account the ongoing discussions about the [future of EU-ACP relations](#) after the Cotonou Partnership Agreement (CPA) expires in 2020. Indeed, the renegotiation of the cooperation arrangements between the EU and the ACP Group offers a critical opportunity for the EU and the AU member states (MS) to fundamentally rethink their relationship and to address the complex and fragmented nature of the EU's current foreign policy framework vis-à-vis Africa. It is important to highlight that, notwithstanding the vision the European Commission has developed with regards to the

Eurafrica partnership, it rather is the Council that is marred by its unagile decisionmaking procedures to move forward, be it on this matter or with regards to the larger positioning of the EU as a credible and swift actor of foreign policy

Current state of Europe-Africa relations

Discussants were generally keen to acknowledge the **need for a significant re-think of Europe's strategic relations with Africa**, both in terms of narrative and institutional arrangements. Regarding the latter, various participants criticized the current EU policy-framework for Africa as a fragmented patchwork, a 'cacophony' (*Geert Laporte*) of overlapping strategies, tools and initiatives, many of which did not fulfill the high expectations (e.g. the JAES and the CPA). In order to address the challenges in EU-Africa relations, panelists further noted the need for both continents to engage in a long-term commitment to foster the right type of **governance** conditions for inclusive and sustainable growth trajectories. The timing for such a re-think of EU-Africa relations, amidst different tracts of ongoing negotiation processes at the EU (MFF, EU-ACP), was deemed pressing - especially considering the proactiveness of other global actors in Africa - in particular China - not to mention the rapidly changing economic and political dynamics in many parts of Africa. 'Now is a good time to rethink our relations', one participant argued, 'to really think outside of the box and to make it a truly win-win relationship'. (*Suhayfa Soobedar*)

While both the EU and Africa have called for a **partnership of equals**, away from the prevailing donor-recipient logic, aid flows remain a major concern for many on both sides of the relationship and developing a mutually beneficial development narrative has proven challenging. On the African side, intercontinental cooperation have clearly enhanced over the years, think for example through the 2018 [African Continental Free Trade Area \(ACFTA\)](#). However progress on regional and continental integration remains difficult and donor-dependency persists. Regarding the drafting of a win-win development narrative, it was noted that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) offer a valuable framework for both parties to work towards common goals, hold each other accountable and tap joint resources. Some argued that EU Commission President Juncker, through the EIP and the 2018 Africa-Europe Alliance, had indeed launched a **genuine 'paradigm shift'** (*Patrick Develtere*) already, away from a vertical relationship based on aid, towards a more horizontal partnership of equals. Notably the EIP is expected to contribute to this, as an investment vehicle which aims to mobilize private investments in Africa, focused on strengthening both Africa's hardware (e.g. infrastructure) and its software, its people and its business environment . In concrete terms the EU will make substantial investments in vocational training and an Erasmus+ programme which aims to support 105 000 African students and researchers by 2027.

Other panelists showed more **skepticism towards the new Alliance** and its potential to contribute to a new type of transcontinental partnership. Several participants noted in this regard that the EIP and the Alliance were plans made in Brussels, developed without substantial prior consultation with African stakeholders whatsoever. The plans insufficiently incorporate the different views on the future of the African continent and fail to take into account the different realities across the various regions and countries. Others reminded the participants of previous EU-Africa initiatives such as the 2007 JAES and the 2000 CPA agreement which both claimed to introduce an innovative type of partnership, on a more

equal footing, going beyond a donor-recipient logic. This raised questions of **what will be different this time**, what – besides rhetoric – leads us to believe that this is the type of initiative that can introduce a truly mutually beneficial partnership between Africa and the EU? It was further argued that the EU's renewed interest in Africa was predominantly fear-driven, out of concerns over the instabilities driving **migration**. 'It is worrying that we (the EU, red.) seem to think that we can "buy" stability in these countries' one panellist added.

A true partnership of equals moreover, requires action beyond rhetoric, beyond aid and investment. What Africa needs is the political and economic **space for self-development**. Some of the members of the panel argued in this regard that, until this day, the EU maintains a considerable number of, sometimes senseless, technical barriers and bureaucratic hurdles for African producers to overcome in order to gain access to the single market. Going beyond the rhetoric of a partnership of equals therefore requires the EU to create a level playing field, especially in trade matters: 'if you want market access in Africa, we should get market access in the EU'. It was noted that the experiences of negotiating the [Economic Partnership Agreements \(EPA\)](#) between the EU and the different Regional Economic Communities (REC) of the ACP Group arguably did more harm than good in this regard, as some felt they perpetuated this type of unequal treatment. Likewise, the EU is perceived as a rather demanding partner, not only in terms of techno-bureaucratic rules and procedures, but also in terms of normative political conditioning. A partnership of equals therefore implies that Africa can raise similar demands and questions vis-à-vis the EU: 'Will Africa still be a priority when the new European leadership will be installed later this year'? (*Suhayfa Soobedar*)

On **demographic changes**, perceptions differed about whether Africa's unparalleled population growth is to be seen as a problem or an opportunity. Some argued that, while demography is a sensitive subject and an area in which external partners have little say, it does affect the EU. Notably because Africa lacks the socio-economic infrastructure and industrial productivity to support such demographic changes -they are part of the same vicious circle indeed- population growth is likely to result in increased migration, especially amongst young people. Others tempered such concerns, referring to home-grown solutions and African ingenuity to support growing populations. Others noted that if Africans will make up 25% of the world's population by 2050 as predicted, that would restore its global population share to what it was before the massive slave trade of the 18th century, adding to the sensitivity about Europeans openly addressing it.

[Europe and Africa in a globalized world](#)

When it comes to cooperating in multilateral fora, it seems that **much potential remains untapped**. While both the EU and AU rhetorically remain big proponents of the multilateral system, and while the AU does in fact constitute the largest group in terms of UN membership, cooperation between the two groups at the multilateral level has been limited so far. It thus remains to be seen in how far this potential can be translated to meaningful cooperation and many agreed that the EU needs to invest far more in its multilateral cooperation with Africa, particularly in its economic diplomacy, e.g. at the WTO, where African proposals for reforms to the global trade system tend to be backed by the BRICS but not by the EU.

Globalization and multilateralism are being challenged however, not least by different forms of ‘resilient authoritarianism’, e.g. in China and Russia, each with its own views on globalization, and its own agenda for reshaping the multilateral system around respective nationalist interests. This begs the question whether the EU and Africa are becoming somewhat of an endangered species in their pursuit of multilateral cooperation. ‘Perhaps we will face strategic marginalization together’ (*Mario Giro*), pointing to the urgency of enhanced EU-Africa cooperation at the global level.

Indeed, it was broadly acknowledged that **Europe’s place in the world and vis-à-vis Africa** is changing. While the EU is still generally perceived as a trusted and progressive international actor, upon which many rely as a proponent of multilateralism and value-driven international cooperation, some argued that its global relevance as a strategic partner is declining. Europe’s economic power and resilience were questioned in particular, while the EU’s clout and that of its Member States as military-strategic allies was said to be decreasing as well. Towards Africa, the EU share of total African exports remains largest, but has declined significantly, from close to 50% in 2001 to 36% in 2017. Likewise, while Africa continues to be the world’s fastest growing region for foreign direct investment (FDI), the EU’s share in FDI in the continent is decreasing. One participant observed that Africa had changed without Europe noticing it, ‘it has been too self-centered’. The presence of new players on the continent moreover, has given some parts of Africa considerably more leverage in their dealings with a demanding EU counterpart. Indeed, ‘**Africa is not waiting for Europe**’ (*Mario Giro*), it is carving its own path, both in terms of economic transformation and in multilateral affairs.

Given these changing realities, bilaterally and in the global political economy, many emphasized the need for the **EU to become more proactive** in its dealings with Africa. While EU policy towards the African continent had in previous years often been paralyzed by a fear of the past, afraid of being perceived as neo-colonialist, the European Union now sometimes gives the impression of being somewhat afraid of the future. Compared to other actors such as China, the US and Russia, the EU seems at times rather complacent in its Africa policy. One panelist (*Patrick Develtere*) noted that no EU representatives had met yet with the DRC’s new president Felix Tshisekedi, for example, while other states were keen to be the first in line to approach him. It was further noted that being more proactive would inevitably lead to more competitiveness, and does not mean the EU should refrain from being critical or holding African leaders to account for their actions. Participants were keen as well to identify opportunities for closer transcontinental collaboration, as some African countries have grown increasingly uncomfortable in working with e.g. China. Particularly on security issues, China’s increasingly interventionist approach to protecting its overseas economic interests, offers an opportunity for the EU to work with the AU to try and address this when it involves African interests. (*Jonathan Holslag*)

For the EU, being more proactive further implies being more straightforward and explicit about stating its **interests and added value as a close and trusted partner**. It was said that Europe and Africa constitute a ‘community of fate’ (*Patrick Develtere*), where both sides depend on each other’s success in order to prosper.

Finally, it was agreed that the historical and cultural ties between the two continents, as well as their geographic proximity effectively render Europe and Africa ‘twin continents’ with an unparalleled connection to one another. To further deepen the relationship between the two continents however, some plead for a **‘whole-of-society’ approach** (*Michael Kwizera*) to involve different types of civil society stakeholders in EU-Africa cooperation. African youth in particular have to be more involved in the policy-making regarding the continent’s future, particularly given the aforementioned demographic trends and the urgent need for jobs and measures to tackle growing insecurity and (youth) migration. Overall, there was a strong consensus amongst participants about the need to raise awareness and change perceptions amongst people on both sides of the partnership. With already more Africans than Europeans speaking European languages, it was argued that Africa’s cultural influence will only increase further, generating new and different perspectives of the continent around the world but especially in Europe.

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