



The New Frontier for the EU–Africa Relationship and its Relevance for Southern Africa

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Executive summary

In late 2020 the relationship between the European Union (EU) and Africa had reached a frontier and the next phase in the relationship was very unclear. A nexus of factors, including historical events and circumstances, provide the context in which key decisions now urgently need to be taken about the future of the relationship. These factors include the international geopolitical context, the changing nature of the EU (especially in the wake of Brexit), changes in Africa and imminent changes to a key (historical) institutional vehicle for the partnership, namely the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States, formerly known as the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States.

There are also a number of other inherent issues, often problematic, that need to be addressed in order to craft an optimal way forward for the relationship. These include the multiplicity of relationships characterising the EU-Africa partnership, existing economic/trade arrangements, and different expectations and strategies on each side regarding the way ahead.

Africa needs improved capacity to coordinate and manage its relationship with the EU. Moreover, the current relationship mechanisms need to be simplified. While Africa needs to put more effort into devising its own strategy for the relationship, with clearly defined goals and objectives, there is also a need for better and more focused EU-Africa dialogue aimed at forging consensus on key priority areas and goals to be achieved.

The role of South Africa, the EU's only formal strategic partner in Africa, is of considerable importance – as is its strategic position vis-à-vis its immediate neighbours in southern Africa. South Africa's leadership position and influence in the region should be leveraged to facilitate better results from other partnerships between European and African stakeholders.

Introduction

In late 2020 the relationship between the EU and Africa had reached a proverbial frontier as the next phase in the relationship was far from clear. This Policy Insights comments on the relationship between the two regions at a time when important challenges have to be addressed – albeit during extremely uncertain times. Both sides have identified and articulated the need for stronger institutional structures to support the implementation of various joint initiatives. Both sides have been experiencing improved economic capacity which, in Africa's case, has resulted in increased macroeconomic stability and some unprecedented economic growth.¹ Consequently, this paper also aims to inform

¹ Katarina Hojje, 'World Bank Sees Sub-Saharan Africa's GDP Rebounding in 2021,' *Bloomberg*, October 8, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-10-08/world-bank-sees-sub-saharan-africa-gdp-rebounding-in-2021>.

discussions on the state of flux in the EU–Africa relationship, with some insights provided on the current context and options for the way forward.

An important EU–Africa Summit was to have taken place in October 2020, but it has been rescheduled to a new timeslot in early 2021 which will coincide with Portugal’s Council presidency.² The rescheduling of the event may, however, be fortuitous seeing as the next South Africa–EU Summit is also scheduled for early 2021. This gives South Africa, as the EU’s only strategic partner in Africa, a golden opportunity to produce some clear deliverables, especially for Africa’s benefit, in the post-summit period.

One of the most negative features of the late 2020 period was the COVID-19 pandemic and its long-lasting effects,³ including the serious economic consequences of prolonged lockdowns for EU and African economies. From the EU perspective, the fallout from COVID-19 means diminished developmental and other forms of support being channelled to Africa. Africa has sustained severe economic damage which has dulled its economic recovery prospects, despite an anticipated rebound in 2021.

The EU–African relationship: Defining the ‘new frontier’

The decisions that need to be taken about the EU–Africa partnership are far more important than simply when the next summit meeting will be held. They include how to navigate and manage the international geopolitical landscape, the changing nature of the EU itself, the evolution of Africa in the partnership, and imminent changes to a key (historical) institutional vehicle for the partnership, namely the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS), formerly known as the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (ACP), which is currently enshrined in the Cotonou Agreement of 2000.⁴

A changing geopolitical context

The turbulent geopolitical context in which the EU–Africa relationship finds itself means that Africa is, for various strategic reasons, seen to be of increasing international relevance.⁵

2 October 2020 would have been during Germany’s EU Council presidency which, taken together with South Africa holding the Chair of the African Union (AU), would probably have helped to inject special importance into proceedings. It is still possible that the intended leadership of the 2020 Summit may bring extra gravitas to the gathering (when it eventually takes place) and its results.

3 Other negative effects include diminished international connections between the two continents and intangibles resulting from diminished activity on the part of embassies, chambers of commerce, offices, banks and government departments on both sides.

4 Council of the European Union, Cotonou Agreement, Partnership agreement 2000/483/EC (Jun. 23, 2000), [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/cotonou-agreement/#:~:text=The%20Cotonou%20Agreement%20is%20the,and%20Pacific%20\(ACP\)%20countries.&text=It%20is%20the%20most%20comprehensive,countries%20from%20Sub%2DSaharan%20Africa](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/cotonou-agreement/#:~:text=The%20Cotonou%20Agreement%20is%20the,and%20Pacific%20(ACP)%20countries.&text=It%20is%20the%20most%20comprehensive,countries%20from%20Sub%2DSaharan%20Africa).

5 This is due to various factors, including its strategic location, considerable reserves of natural resources and a growing, youthful population.

Among the factors contributing to the turbulence are new uncertainties surrounding the role of the US⁶ in the world today and the rising assertiveness of China, which has especially strong ties with Africa. An increasingly polarised global order is not only the result of the increasingly chilly China-US relationship,⁷ which is mirrored in the standoff between China and Japan, but also rising tensions between Russia and many Western countries.⁸ Other geopolitical factors that will have important consequences for the EU-Africa partnership are the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) Japan-Africa initiative and the BRICS alliance between Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, which largely has an African reference point.⁹

What is particularly notable is that the EU wishes to have a stronger geopolitical profile and presence in the world. The EU-Africa relationship goes back many years and is also extremely multi-faceted. Therefore, if it wishes to develop a stronger geopolitical profile in the world, the EU must have a strong Africa focus. In parallel to this, many (if not most) of Africa's new international partnerships¹⁰ can be perceived as being in competition to the EU-Africa relationship - both in a geopolitical/strategic sense and in a commercial sense. The EU therefore needs, more than ever before, to ensure that it remains relevant in Africa and pursues a more diversified strategy, in contrast to its primary and longstanding focus (a throwback to colonial times) on trade and development support.

A changing Europe

The nature of the EU has fundamentally changed in the wake of Brexit, with the UK no longer a member state, and now with its own Africa policies and being perceived as a competitor to the EU.¹¹ Although the UK and EU finally signed a deal in the last few days of December 2020, whether they will be able to coordinate their economic policies, particularly in relation to Africa, remains to be seen.

Brexit has also presented the EU with the challenge of having to reorganise and manage its new international status, including its influence in and partnership with Africa. The EU's diminished capacity (including financial capacity) to deliver strong results through its

6 Uncertainties in the US-Africa relationship include the possibility of cuts in AGOA benefits.

7 Growing competition between China and the US is increasingly focused on Africa in the Indian Ocean Rim region where Africa is the western boundary.

8 Turkey, Iran and North Korea and threats from radical religious groups have all featured among important factors helping to bring new levels of uncertainty and instability to the global context.

9 This positioning of South Africa in the BRICS grouping somewhat echoes the special Strategic Partner role that South Africa plays with the EU and again reinforces the country's relevance both as an African leader vis-à-vis the broader international community and in the EU-Africa relationship in particular.

10 In particular with regard to such important global players as China, India, Japan, Russia and the US, all of which can soon be joined by the UK as a potential competitor nation. A good article warning the EU of the need to become more serious about its relationship with Africa is: Shada Islam, 'Measure EU clout where it counts - and that's Africa, not the Middle East', *Friends of Europe*, January 14, 2020, <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/measure-eu-clout-where-it-counts-and-thats-africa-not-the-middle-east/>.

11 Clearly the UK/EU role in Africa must be coordinated as much as possible, especially for the sake of Africans. Nevertheless, commercial rivalry is bound to grow and help destabilise other forms of coordination.

partnership with Africa will negatively impact the partnership, especially when the added burden of the COVID-19 pandemic is factored in.¹²

The UK's role in Africa is of particular importance, given the UK's historical ties with many African countries, including some leading economies on the continent, such as South Africa. The fact that South Africa is a dominant player in Africa and has a strong profile internationally¹³ will be a key factor in the EU-Africa partnership going forward.¹⁴

A changed Africa

For Africa, the complex global situation poses even greater challenges because of the continent's expanding interests and needs. These include intraregional and continental integration, together with a broadening, yet increasingly focused, development agenda. The Europe-Africa relationship nevertheless remains important for both sides, with the challenge of achieving optimal utilisation of resources being offset by expanding opportunities and options for collaboration.

Over the past two decades, African countries, often buoyed by strong economic growth rates, have taken meaningful steps towards realising sustainable economic gains, accompanied by expanded institutionalised frameworks and organisations. Those deserving special mention include the African Union (AU)¹⁵ and its Agenda 2063 programme and regional economic communities, which have become key proponents of integrated regional economies that are so crucial for Africa's development. Of particular importance is the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement brokered by the AU, which entered into force on 1 January 2021.¹⁶ By enhancing their capabilities to engage with the EU (though still far from adequate), African countries will have more options and will be more likely to succeed in various areas.

The shift towards a more multi-faceted type of relationship gained momentum after 1994 with the normalisation of EU-South Africa relations, when the South African economy and society as a whole opened up to more diverse relationship possibilities and types. The integrated and relatively well-developed southern African bloc – and especially the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), which is dominated by South Africa – is well placed to yield positive spin-offs for Africa through a strong EU-Africa relationship.

12 For further details on how Brexit impacts the UK's international cooperation, see Andrew Sherriff and Emmanuel De Groof, 'Brexit & International Development Cooperation,' *ECDPM*, September 11, 2018, <https://ecdpm.org/dossiers/brexit-international-cooperation/>.

13 Examples include South Africa's position in the AU, BRICS, the India-Brazil-South Africa partnership and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

14 New competition between the UK and EU would be tragic for Africa, especially as issues of future coordination of UK/EU development assistance for Africa are still largely unknown and to be decided upon. Competing economic relations would add confusion to the current uncertainties in the EU-Africa relationship and to some extent this is already evident.

15 The 2002 successor to the Organisation of African Unity.

16 The implementation date of 1 January 2021 helped to make late 2020 a significant time for Africa and its EU partnership.

End of the Cotonou era

The expiry of the EU-ACP/OACPS framework in 2021¹⁷ is very significant in many ways and allows for a new beginning for the institutionalised relationship between the EU and the ACP countries. Insofar as sub-Saharan Africa is the main component of the ACP, the new arrangement will largely be linked to the new EU-Africa partnership.

What poses a particular challenge is that the existing partnership is complex and multi-layered. Its successor is expected to continue being a crucial foundation for Africa's relationship with the EU, entrenching the EU as a key trade and investment partner and the major source of donor funding to sub-Saharan Africa. Developments in the OACPS arena can therefore either bring clarity or confusion to the EU-Africa partnership, although the AU is now the EU's formal dialogue partner on EU-Africa relations. Importantly, too, the AU combines both North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, thereby helping to straddle a divide that has hampered the pursuit of a truly pan-African development programme.¹⁸

Longstanding issues and challenges

The current situation highlights a number of important issues, some of a longstanding and challenging nature, which must now be addressed in order to bring about an optimal post-2020 partnership. Among the issues of special significance is the multiplicity of partnerships making up the EU-Africa relationship, existing economic/trade arrangements and the transmuting expectations of both parties, along with their strategies for the way ahead.

Multiplicity of EU-African partnerships and the need to refine institutional relationships

Europe and Africa engage in multiple interactions and partnerships, and there is a need to coordinate them. The fact that partnerships often run parallel to, and/or duplicate, one another is a key challenge in Africa's relationship with Europe, and especially the EU.¹⁹ This is particularly evident in the AU vis-à-vis the OACPS framework, which is of paramount importance to the EU-Africa relationship.

While the current situation offers the chance to completely restructure the partnership, it is now generally accepted by both sides, despite some opposition, that it will continue to provide for the three ACP country blocs, albeit with a looser relationship between

17 The successor was originally intended to enter into force in 2020. See: ACP Group (African, Caribbean and Pacific), *ACP Negotiating Mandate for a Post-Cotonou Agreement with the European Union*, ACP/00/011/18 Final, 107th Session of the ACP Council of Ministers, Lomé (May 30, 2018). https://www.bilaterals.org/IMG/pdf/istock_000019322566xlarge_edit_custom-9d4c4a33422ae3c4775983ae0de71646537c78c4-s900-c85.pdf.

18 According to some, the pan-African continental approach also has downsides as it often does not allow for sufficient attention to be given to the specific interests of each of the two main groupings on either side of the Sahara.

19 The multiplicity and overlapping of many intra-African entities compound the problems further.

these groupings.²⁰ At the end of 2019, the EU replenished its funding to the ACP, which was renamed the OACPS with the Secretariat becoming the Secretariat of the OACPS. This demonstrates that the group is not about to disappear,²¹ despite a push by some stakeholders for its complete restructuring and the African segment linking up with North African states and henceforth dealing with the EU in the context of the EU-AU Partnership.²² The EU-AU Partnership occupies (what some see as) a paramount coordinating position, even if activities are focused at lower levels, such as at the EU-ACP (and EU-South African Strategic Partnership) levels.²³

Southern Africa is a particularly important component of the EU-Africa partnership, although its multiplicity of EU cooperation formats is very complicated, with some focusing only on South Africa. South Africa is only partially included in the ACP grouping, focusing on political dialogue. This is a *sui generis* case which potentially affords South Africa the flexibility to broker deals between all parties and provide options for the EU-ACP relationship that offer a 'bridge' to incorporate ACP Africa into the broader EU-Africa partnership. South Africa's position in the African and international contexts could similarly be used to promote greater coordination between the multiplicity of EU-Africa relationships,²⁴ which is especially relevant for the EU-Africa economic relationship.

Important vehicles for EU-North Africa relations include the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), but much still needs to be done to better structure the relationship – especially given the need now for the ENP to coordinate both with the EU-AU Partnership and many continental, intra-African initiatives, including the AfCFTA.²⁵ Other important structures include the EU's 1995 Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Euromed) and the 2008 Union for the Mediterranean which was formed to promote integration between the EU and other Mediterranean littoral countries, including those in North Africa.

20 The current format has gained much support from certain ACP stakeholders, although others perceive the basic nature of the ACP aspect of the EU-OACPS relationship to be too reminiscent of colonial times.

21 Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (ACP), '9th ACP Summit of Heads of State and Government' (Nairobi, Kenya, 9–10 December, 2019), <http://www.acp.int/content/9th-acp-summit-heads-state-and-government-0>.

22 On 19 March 2018 the AU took a decision to use the post-Cotonou process to craft a new framework for EU-Africa cooperation on the basis that the AU was now representing all of Africa. See: African Union (AU), *Decision on the African Common Position for Negotiations for a New Cooperation Agreement with the European Union*; African Union, Executive Council, Eighteenth Extraordinary Session, 19 March 2018, Kigali, Rwanda: Ext/EX.CL/Dec.1 & 2(XVIII), (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2018), https://au.int/sites/default/files/decisions/34054-ext_ex_cl_dec_1-2xviii_e26_march.pdf.

23 This is of core relevance when considering the way forward and the current situation exemplifies the overlapping multiplicity of arrangements. See: Maurizio Carbone, 'Caught between the ACP and the AU: Africa's relations with the European Union in a post-Cotonou Agreement context,' *South African Journal of International Affairs* 25, no.4 (2018): 481-496, <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/173831/>.

24 Its strategic relationship with the EU would be particularly relevant, as would its 2021 chairmanship of SADC following its 2020 AU chairmanship. In doing this, it could help to address the general need for improved coordination between Africa's regional, continental and international relationships, with those of the RECs being especially challenging.

25 Among the extensive publications on EU-North Africa relations, a good overview is given in: Silvia Colombo, 'A Tale of Several Stories: EU-North African Relations Revisited,' *ECDPM Great Insights magazine* 7, no.4 (2018), <https://ecdpm.org/great-insights/north-africa-hope-in-troubled-times/several-stories-eu-north-africa-relations/>.

Challenging economic issues

Economic issues remain of great relevance to Africa's partnerships, as is well illustrated by the fact that former French colonies in West and Central Africa have long used the CFA franc. Historical EU-Africa arrangements are crucially important, especially the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) that the EU has wanted to conclude with various ACP regions since 2006. Realising their effective positioning in the future EU-Africa relationship will be challenging, especially as they now also need to be coordinated with the AfCFTA which went live recently.

The finalisation of EPAs has proved difficult in the face of fluctuating demands and the fact that Africans have generally been critical of what they perceive to be the EU intentions.²⁶ The so-called EU-Southern African Development Community (SADC) EPA is the only regional EPA in Africa to have been finalised. Yet the only SADC states in this EPA are those making up the Southern African Customs Union (SACU)²⁷ and Mozambique, prompting many to refer to it as the 'EU-SACUM' EPA. Angola has, however, recently initiated a process of accession to the current EU-SADC EPA, thereby broadening its base. The EU has also concluded EPAs with individual countries in Africa.²⁸ The AfCFTA is an important new development, which must be synergistic with other EU-Africa economic partnerships.²⁹

The EU-SACUM EPA is very relevant for the crafting of all EU-Africa economic partnerships as it is an African regional EPA that has already provided a bridge between the SACU grouping, including South Africa, and a non-member, Mozambique. The South African component, in particular, helps to make the EU-SACUM EPA a possible vehicle for creating EPAs in other African regions and coordinating them under the auspices of the AfCFTA. Many benefits could ensue³⁰ in view of the expanding EU-Africa agenda and the need for greater African input therein.

The policy stances of both parties

How the parties' respective political positions impact their relationship is crucially important. The African position is unclear but the EU's interest in Africa clearly escalated between 2017 and early 2020. In 2017, when the EU-Africa Summit was called the AU-EU Summit for the first time, both sides agreed to strengthen their partnership with a stronger

26 Among other things, they tend to accuse the EU of divide-and-rule tactics which hamper Africa's need to develop more sophisticated supply chains.

27 The members of SACU are Botswana, eSwatini, Lesotho, Namibia and South Africa.

28 Seven EPAs are in operation, involving 32 out of 79 ACP countries. These include 14 Caribbean countries, 14 African countries and 4 Pacific countries. Another 21 countries have concluded regional EPA negotiations that are yet to be implemented. Other ACP countries benefit from privileged access to the EU via the EU's Generalised System of Preferences (GSP), mostly using the Everything But Arms (EBA) scheme. Source: EU Commission, 'The Cotonou Agreement,' <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/development/economic-partnerships/>.

29 The AU's chief negotiator on post-Cotonou structures, Carlos Lopes, contends that the AfCFTA should be the main instrument in an Africa-EU free trade agreement. See: Carlos Lopes, 'Free trade can break old Europe dependency,' *The Nordic Africa Institute*, May 21, 2019, <https://nai.uu.se/news-and-events/news/2019-05-21-carlos-lopes-free-trade-area-can-break-old-europe-dependency.html>.

30 These include improved integration of African regional economies and stronger synergies on a broader basis, with improved capacity-building and opportunities for inclusion in global trade supply chains.

economic agenda.³¹ In September 2018, the EU Commission unveiled a new Africa–Europe Alliance for Sustainable Investment and Jobs. Its agenda included the strengthening of trade and EU investment in education and skills.³² Against this backdrop, the EU–South Africa Strategic Partnership has remained critically important but it is often seemingly underutilised.³³

In March 2020, the EU proposed the basis for a so-called ‘new’ comprehensive strategy with Africa, focusing on intensified cooperation in five key areas with related ‘actions’ largely focused on business development.³⁴ A key consideration is how relevant these EU proposals are to the African agenda and how well they align to Africa’s needs, including the need for capacity-building.³⁵ African perceptions of the EU frequently dictating the terms of cooperation, which cater specifically to EU interests, need to be addressed through increased EU outreach activities. In addition, the EU needs to be more receptive to meaningful consensus-building in programmes of action.³⁶

The EU–Africa relationship: The way ahead

Numerous factors determine the way ahead in a dynamic process.³⁷ However, of special importance is the fact that Africa’s capacity to coordinate and manage a more complex EU–Africa relationship is still inadequate,³⁸ and this must be addressed. Nevertheless, African countries have been signalling that they want a partnership with the EU that is more focused on delivering tangible results in support of priorities such as those outlined in the AU’s Vision 2063. For example, Africa wants realistic solutions to EU–Africa problems like

31 An interesting review of the relevance of EU–Africa summits, albeit with a focus on their exclusion of certain African leaders, is given in: Jo-Ansie van Wyk, ‘Sanctions and Summits: Sanctioned African leaders and EU–Africa summits,’ *South African Journal of International Affairs* 25, no.4 (2018): 497–515, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10220461.2018.1544929?journalCode=rsaj20>.

32 The Alliance proposed by Jean-Claude Juncker, Commission president, focused on: boosting strategic investment and strengthening the role of the private sector to create jobs; investing in people by investing in education and skills; strengthening the business environment and investment climate; and tapping the full potential of economic integration and trade.

33 After a gap of some years, the seventh summit of the EU–SA Strategic Partnership was held in Brussels in November 2018, revitalising the partnership and with probable spin-offs for the EU–Africa relationship, at a particularly opportune time in the regions’ histories.

34 These are: green transition, digital transformation, sustainable growth and jobs, peace and governance, and migration/mobility. These were accompanied by 10 related ‘actions’, which were largely economic in nature and included facilitating investment into Africa and improving Africa’s business climate. The new EU–Africa economic programme includes a new External Investment Plan (EIP), launched in 2017, which promises to provide more than €44 billion in public and private investment.

35 The European Commission stated that the EU had set out practical ways to work together on the abovementioned five issues that address key global concerns. See: European Commission, ‘Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Towards a comprehensive Strategy with Africa’ (European Commission, Brussels, JOIN, 2020), https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/communication-eu-africa-strategy-join-2020-4-final_en.pdf.

36 Such perceptions were clearly on display when the EU high-level delegation to the AU in March 2020 was reportedly told by the AU that Africa would prefer to find its own way ahead and to formulate an agenda of priorities for EU cooperation. See: Amanda Bisong and Chloe Teevan, ‘Von der Leyen in Addis Ababa: Seven ingredients for a successful first date’, *Euractiv.com*, December 6, 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/africa/opinion/von-der-leyen-in-addis-ababa-seven-ingredients-for-a-successful-first-date/>.

37 For a good overview of the challenges, see: Luckystar Miyandazi, Philomena Apiko, Tasnim Abderrahim and Faten Aggad-Clerx, ‘AU–EU relations: Challenges in forging and implementing a joint agenda,’ *South African Journal of International Affairs* 25, no.4 (2018): 461–480.

38 This is especially so, when compared to the EU’s capacity.

migration and immigration, and trade and investment, as well as a willingness to negotiate on issues requiring mutually acceptable outcomes.

A priority for Africa is that steps need to be taken to promote trade, investment, infrastructure and capacity-building, with a special emphasis on strengthening small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Ways must be found for the EU–Africa partnership to identify and leverage areas of convergence between African and EU priorities. There are many possibilities, but the fact that Africa lacks a specific strategy for the EU–Africa partnership currently undermines Africa’s chances of benefiting from the partnership.³⁹

The fact that the formal frameworks designed to drive the EU–Africa partnership are divided up between at least three main vehicles deserves serious attention.⁴⁰ The EU and Africa need to find mutually acceptable ways of bridging varying institutionalised formats and engaging in better, more coordinated dialogue to achieve mutually agreed outcomes. For this to happen, Africa should possibly have better-formulated position papers on partnership priorities, which ideally are linked to key African priorities and projects.⁴¹

The need for improved focus and coordination is critically important in the current climate of dramatic institutional change.⁴² Enhanced coordination between Africa’s relationships with the EU and with countries such as India, China and Japan could facilitate enhanced cooperation on broader global issues. The role of private-sector interests in Africa and African partnerships specifically is particularly important, with public–private synergies being of increasing relevance.

In all the above cases, South Africa comes to the fore, as does its potential to play a constructive role in mapping out the way forward. South Africa could play such a role on a number of different levels, particularly given the varied nature of its interactions with stakeholders, as well as in a broader international context.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

The EU–Africa relationship is entering a new phase and various issues need to be addressed in order to put the relationship onto a strong trajectory and deliver optimal results. Political interests, economic development, commercial benefits and sustainable social

39 The EU has stated that it is interacting with a variety of stakeholders on the Comprehensive Strategy with Africa but details are often unclear.

40 As regards trade, for example, the EU–OACPS, EU–AU and EU–South Africa relationships should consider both the AfCFTA and the EPAs where the EU–SACUM EPA remains of special relevance.

41 Coordination at all levels is very relevant especially as Africa still lacks the vast capacities available to the EU to help support the partnership. The number of issues needing interaction, attention and discussion are too many and too detailed for a quick agreement and associated actions.

42 Improved, ongoing, interactive and focused consultation on selected issues could possibly help compensate for Africa’s weak institutional capacity. The fact that the EU, AU and OACPS are all undergoing major changes in terms of organisational structure and, for the EU especially, membership adds to the current institutional challenges.

improvement are all key considerations at this time, with improved conditions for business-led growth now being a core objective. Other priorities of both sides are strengthening regional integration and building regional value chains, developing local content, promoting manufacturing/industrialisation, improving infrastructure and creating more employment opportunities for SMEs.

Clearly, improving Africa's capacity to manage its relationship with the EU is a priority, as is the introduction of mechanisms to coordinate and streamline the various facets of the relationship. While Africa must put more effort into creating its own strategy to underpin the relationship, with clearly defined goals and objectives, there is also a need for improved and more targeted EU-Africa dialogue aimed at both parties reaching consensus on the subject matter and priorities defining their relationship. Given the importance of both the AU and the OACPS, it is imperative that both these bodies feature in the improved coordination process.

The key role played by South Africa, the EU's only formal strategic partner in Africa, is a testimony of its considerable strategic importance, both in the partnership and in the southern African region as a whole. South Africa's status should therefore be effectively leveraged to help facilitate and deliver mutually beneficial results for all concerned in the broader EU-Africa relationship.⁴³ South Africa's strong position both on the continent and internationally further underlines the pivotal role that the country plays – evidenced in particular in the first decade of the 21st century when it mobilised Nepad policies and resources to promote the concept of an African Renaissance.

South Africa's strong support for changing the international order, which is still dominated by the global North, is illustrated in the country's voluntary membership of the BRICS grouping. This may not appear to resonate with the quest to encourage Africa's leadership to become more closely aligned with the EU. Nevertheless, it is precisely South Africa's ability to act as a bridge-builder and 'balancer' that is needed in Africa.⁴⁴ If it is not opportune for South Africa to play this overarching role, the EU may need to develop a strategic relationship with another prominent African country – Kenya being one of the most likely alternatives.⁴⁵

South Africa can use its position of leadership to better mobilise opportunities presented in the immediate, surrounding region and in the SACUM EPA⁴⁶ and also to ensure that resulting projects and initiatives are aligned to AfCFTA goals and objectives. Priorities should

43 This must obviously be done in a partnership manner with other African countries to help prevent any perceptions of a South African hegemony, while also bearing in mind that the South African role is especially relevant in a sub-Saharan African context.

44 A very good exposé of issues relating to South Africa's international leadership is given in: Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, 'South Africa's Changing Role in Global Developmental Structures – Being in Them but Not Always of Them' (Discussion Paper, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), Bonn, 2019), https://www.die-gdi.de/uploads/media/DP_4.2019.pdf.

45 This is based on a variety of factors and despite Kenya already having a strategic partnership with the US with which it is now negotiating a free trade agreement.

46 The issues related to the EPA could range from broadening local participation in the GI Protocol with expanded GI products for the SACUM region to the need for regional, homogenised criteria for compliance with EU food health standards.

include non-controversial projects of mutual interest, such as key African infrastructural projects, especially those supporting regional integration and the development of transport corridors.

South Africa could, for example, broker the development of a diplomatic troika mechanism, acting in the capacity of the African 'balancer' and, together with the EU and UK, promote constructive coordination in support of Africa's interests. Such a role can also help to bring more sophistication and a higher-level dialogue to facilitate the transition of Africa's EU/UK relationship to a 'partnership of equals'.⁴⁷

South Africa's 2021 chairmanship of SADC and its designated role as leader of the AfCFTA negotiations will further strengthen its current and potential leadership roles and responsibilities.⁴⁸ In particular, South Africa can promote both compromise and consensus between all stakeholders in the EU-Africa partnership and act as a bridge between this and other Africa-international partnership programmes. The EU-South Africa relationship can therefore be more optimally used to test mutually acceptable forms of cooperation and economic partnership strengthening in a variety of emerging areas, including the EU's Green Deal and digital transformation.

The EU must help to promote local African capacity with a special focus on SME development under the auspices of relevant programmes, as discussed above.⁴⁹ In many cases, South African inputs can be coordinated with those of the EU and other relevant third parties, especially from the region.

There is an extensive range of opportunities that have the potential to deliver mutual benefits. They cover areas such as: good governance and sustainable development; developing local Geographical Indicator (GI) agri-products; improving regionally integrated food health management systems that are compatible with EU standards; the green/circular economy; clean/sustainable energy; developing and utilising digital technologies; safe and effective mobility; and the blue economy. Resilient, sustainable, urban and rural development in southern Africa, which is aligned to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the AU's Agenda 2063, is one of the key (and mutually beneficial) outcomes that countries in southern Africa should promote and actively work towards.

Coordinating trade and investment policies with development projects and developing priority infrastructure that supports both these and broader African objectives, including enhanced regional integration, should be key priorities. The latter could also include encouraging greater institutional cooperation among a wider range of African stakeholders; education and capacity-building, especially among SMEs; job creation, which is critically

47 This would be a departure from the old relationship between unequal players tied to a donor-recipient format.

48 Perhaps also relevant is the fact that the AfCFTA Secretariat is led by a seconded South African government official.

49 This has been confirmed in many discussions, including ones with Ms Nomvula Makgotlho, Chief Director: Supplier Development and Market Access, SA Department of Small Business Development, on 16 March 2020 and Ms Bernadette Zeiler of the Johannesburg Chamber of Commerce and Industry on 9 September 2020.

important in Africa and especially in the post-COVID-19 period; cooperation on multilateral economic and trade issues; and enhanced capital mobilisation for infrastructural projects, sustainable rural development, agricultural development, food security, manufacturing and resource/agri-processing, health, sustainable/green energy, security issues, climate change and the environment, and the blue economy.

It is essential that southern Africa finds effective, interactive channels to strengthen and deepen its partnership with the EU, while also leveraging the mutual benefits presented by the EU-Africa partnership. In this, South Africa's special role must be widely acknowledged and strongly supported.

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Cover image

5th AU–EU summit leaders gather for the family photo during the 5th AU–EU summit in Abidjan, Ivory Coast on November 29, 2017 (PHILIPPE WOJAZER/AFP via Getty Images)

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