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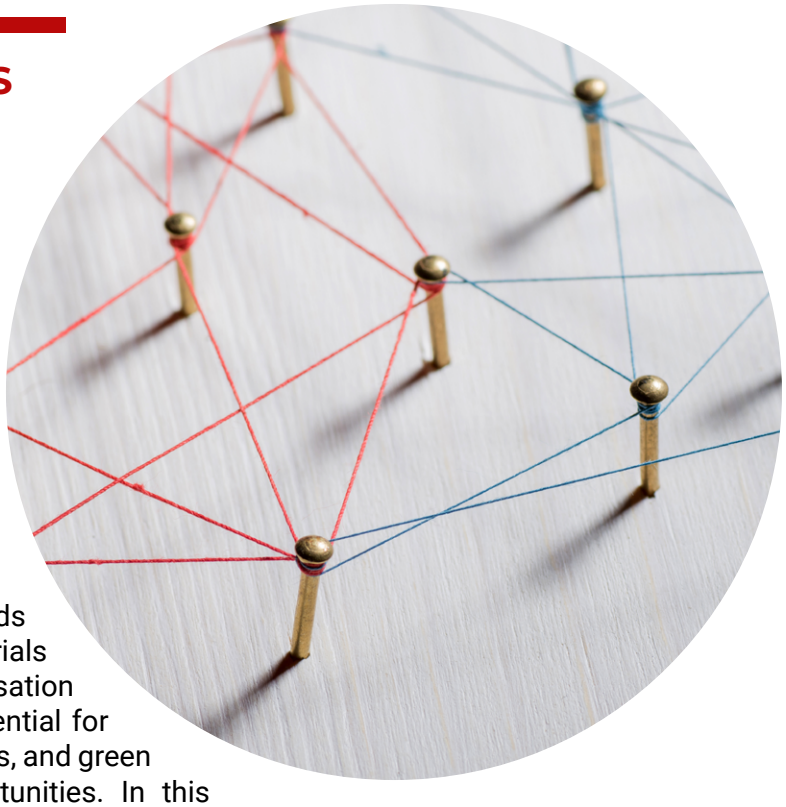
BEYOND RHETORIC: CRAFTING A WIN-WIN EU-AFRICA PARTNERSHIP

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE EU-AFRICA PROGRESSIVE NETWORK



ABSTRACT

This policy brief emerges from discussions within the EU-Africa Progressive Network. These conversations were driven by the urgent need for Europe and Africa to redefine their partnership, moving beyond historical patterns of resource extraction and export towards a relationship built on mutual benefit and shared development.

In this context, Europe's green transition needs to be considered not just in terms of raw materials needed, but also as a lever for green industrialisation in Africa. Structural transformation remains essential for socio-economic progress across African countries, and green industrialisation can provide substantial opportunities. In this discussion, sustainability and social standards are often an area of friction in EU-Africa relations; the differences stem less from the overall objectives and more from the EU's top-down regulatory approach and limited support for African countries in their implementation. Any renewed partnership must also confront ongoing challenges related to peace, human rights and democratic governance, anchored in mutual respect for sovereignty. At the same time, EU initiatives in Africa must ensure inclusive and meaningful participation by communities and be supported by robust accountability systems and a conflict-sensitive approach that fosters trust and credibility. Ultimately, only by recognising Africa as an equal partner and with the EU being transparent about its interests, while offering a value-based approach, can both continents build a win-win partnership.

EDITOR

BEATRIZ ABELLÁN
Policy Analyst on International Relations, FEPS

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

OLOF PALMES INTERNATIONELLA CENTER

FMS Foundation Max van der Stoel

Fondation Jean Jaurès

THE FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES (FEPS)

European Political Foundation - No 4 BE 896.230.213
Avenue des Arts 46 1000 Brussels (Belgium)
www.feps-europe.eu
@FEPS_Europe

FOUNDATION MAX VAN DER STOEL

Leeghwaterplein 45, 5e verdieping
2521 DB Den Haag (Netherlands)
www.foundationmaxvanderstoel.nl
@FMS_Foundation

OLOF PALME INTERNATIONAL CENTER

Sveavägen 68
111 34 Stockholm (Sweden)
www.palmecenter.se
@Palmecenter

FONDATION JEAN-JAURÈS

12 Cité Malesherbes
75009 Paris (France)
www.jean-jaures.org
@j_jaures

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Introduction

The European Union (EU) and its member states have longstanding relations with African countries. However, these relations are currently facing significant challenges in a changing geopolitical landscape. In regions like the Sahel, anti-European sentiment is on the rise. Concurrently, Russia and China have been expanding their influence in Africa, offering alternative partnerships that appeal to some African nations. There are growing calls within the EU for renewing the partnerships between Africa and Europe.

In this context, the EU-Africa Network was created in 2025 to enhance dialogue on key European policies affecting Africa and address shared challenges. The goal is to foster an open and frank conversation between European and African think tankers and policymakers, recognising the urgent need to transform how the EU engages with Africa. This transformation must begin with genuinely listening to African voices and dismantling the outdated and ill-conceived narratives that have long shaped EU perceptions of the continent.

The network comprises around 30 researchers and policymakers, from Africa and the EU, with a diverse profile in terms of expertise, roles and geographical origin.

Three key priorities were selected by the group to reflect on both areas of connection and friction:

1. advancing green industrialisation in Africa and the green transition in Europe;

2. upholding robust social and environmental standards; and

3. navigating peace, human rights and democratic concerns in the EU-Africa partnership.

These intertwined themes reveal both opportunities and challenges as both continents confront urgent global issues, such as climate change, sustainable development, and peace and security challenges.

These issues are prominent in today's geopolitical context, highlighted by the 2025 G20 summit under South Africa's presidency and the seventh African Union-EU summit in Angola. Both events emphasise the urgency of revitalising the EU-Africa partnership through sustainable industrial cooperation, enhanced accountability frameworks and respect for African sovereignty amid increasing global competition. Aligning strategically in these areas offers the promise of a balanced partnership that supports Africa's socio-economic development while responding to the interests of the EU for its green transition.

This policy brief summarises the core ideas discussed during the EU-Africa Progressive Network's group sessions and offers targeted recommendations primarily for European decisionmakers – including EU institutions and member states – as well as broader suggestions for strengthening EU-Africa partnerships, drawn from participant discussions and written contributions.

1. Building progressive EU-Africa dialogue on new clean economic models for human rights and wellbeing

The EU-Africa Progressive Network launched the discussion based on the principles of mutual understanding and collaboration between African and European policymakers, researchers and experts. At present, green and decarbonisation policies often represent a point of tension between Europe and Africa. Although both regions have formally committed to addressing climate change under the Paris Agreement, their economic and industrial starting points differ sharply. Europe's economy

and industrial capacity were built over two centuries, with unbridled use of fossil fuels and other polluting practices, often relying on the extraction of resources from its colonies. By contrast, African countries were systematically constrained in their development, with colonialism playing a decisive role in shaping extractive institutions and underdevelopment.

Today, Africa is most exposed to the impacts of climate change caused by European historical activities. This is a reason why, as the global community faces the urgent challenge of reversing climate change, the "polluter pays" principle, which holds those most responsible for emissions accountable, and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, which recognises Africa's lower historical contribution compared to Europe, were established as a guiding framework. Most African countries have adopted nationally determined contributions, which are each country's own climate action plans under the Paris Agreement, setting out their pledges to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to climate change. The EU seeks to advance its green transition and decarbonisation agenda. While Africa asserts its right to development. This unequal history of emissions and divergent levels of development is one of the most significant challenges in the dialogue on decarbonisation and green transition between Africa and Europe.

From the European perspective, the green transition is closely tied to a geopolitical agenda – competing with China, Russia and the USA for access to critical raw materials (CRMs) and control of supply chains, including those in many African countries. Energy is considered through a security and strategic autonomy lens. For African countries, by contrast, their resources are, above all, a question of driving socio-economic development and industrialisation to catch up with high-income economies, including in the EU; energy debates focus on issues of access, availability and affordability above all, whether from renewable or fossil sources.[1]

Although these differences might initially seem like obstacles in the relationship, they also open up possibilities for complementarities, where each side can contribute what the other lacks. For such a partnership to be truly effective, the EU will need to move beyond finger-pointing and the imposition of top-down standards from Brussels onto Africa.

While the EU's priorities will continue to focus on decarbonisation and Africa's on socio-economic development, more can be done to foster a genuinely effective partnership. This requires acknowledging the diverse realities across the continents – 55 African countries and 27 EU member states – and tailoring approaches that reflect this complexity. It also means avoiding extractive practices under the justification of competitiveness with respect to China and other powers, while being transparent about European interests.

Key question: How can we build EU-Africa synergies that avoid historical exploitative patterns, while catering for African priorities and European interests?

One of the fundamental points is the need to acknowledge Africa's long history of mineral exploitation by Western actors, which has left lasting impacts on economic development and local industry. In recent decades, China has also significantly deepened its involvement in the extraction of African minerals, both leveraging economic and strategic interests to secure access to key resources. These models of extraction keep Africa dependent on exporting raw materials, with external actors reaping the benefits of processing while African countries bear the environmental costs and remain unable to fully develop local industrial capacities. As

a result, finished products made from Africa's own resources are often imported at high prices, perpetuating unequal economic relationships.

Some African governments are now prioritising partnerships with China over European countries, valuing its transactional approach, which generally avoids the political conditionalities attached to Western aid and investment.[2] However, while the Chinese model is less restrictive, it remains largely extractive and frequently does not generate significant local value addition or quality jobs.

In response to China's Belt and Road Initiative, in 2021, Europe launched the Global Gateway as a new development instrument aiming to set itself apart by emphasising sustainability, governance and transparency. The initiative focuses on building strategic corridors to secure CRM supply chains, thereby reinforcing Europe's economic security.[3] However, initial observations of 2023 agreements involving the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zambia, and Namibia indicate insufficient measures to address local priorities. Lack of transparency around the structure, financials, timelines and impacts of these agreements and weak consultation with African communities have raised strong concerns about the EU global gateway.[4] There is also criticism that it overly focuses on large infrastructure projects, without sufficient consideration of their capacity to generate productive activities and well-distributed benefits for local communities. Without enough attention to structural transformation, large projects like the Lobito Corridor can instead reinforce the colonial model of raw material exports. The absence of serious consideration of local priorities for industrialisation, including the inclusion of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and value addition, in these initiatives risk exacerbating inequality. Therefore, the EU needs to offer an approach distinctly different from other partners, one that not only avoids paternalistic behaviours, but also meaningfully integrates Africa's priorities into its investment strategies to ensure inclusivity and shared benefits.

A concrete example of where this shift is necessary concerns the narrative around green hydrogen. The current partnership framework primarily focuses on exporting green hydrogen to Europe through several large-scale projects in Mauritania, Morocco, Egypt and South Africa, primarily targeting European markets. However, experts argue that this should be complemented by strategies to enable African countries to use green energy domestically. This means supporting the development of domestic green hydrogen infrastructure and applications, including for clean power generation, decarbonising local industries and providing clean energy access to communities. This would ensure mutual benefits for Europe and national and local economies.

A similar co-benefit approach should apply to CRMs, emphasising co-development and equitable resource sharing. One proposal focused on implementing mineral beneficiation near the extraction site, which would create jobs and foster economic diversification, ensuring that artisanal and small-scale miners (ASMs) are appropriately integrated into value chains. Agreements should also include provisions for skills training and capacity building, industrial financing agreements, and technology. In this regard, the development of common standards agreed between the EU and Africa for secure and resilient CRM supply chains is seen as a priority.

Regarding technological transfer, the EU could significantly support the industrialisation of Africa through green energy and low-carbon industrial practices. However, a frequent criticism is that developing countries often cannot bear the cost structure of technologies designed for the Global North, which makes

it difficult for their sustainable, long-term adoption.

African countries need to adopt industrial policy to better leverage their economic partnerships. This requires moving away from short-term gains and outdated centralised planning models, such as an export-oriented extractive economy. It is also crucial for African policymakers to resist pressure from Western and Chinese multinationals that are not beneficial in their long-term development. In this domain, African regional bodies, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) or the Southern African Development Community, could act as leverage to negotiate with larger countries; often, bilateral trade deals undermine regional commitments, prioritising national interests over cohesive regional objectives.

Another point of contention is the EU's policy approach in its partnership with Africa, which often involves rapidly changing strategies developed without meaningful consultations with African stakeholders. One example is the EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, a carbon tariff imposed by the EU as part of the EU Green Deal to tax carbon-intensive products, such as steel, cement and certain electricity sources. Regardless of the tariff's appropriateness or effectiveness in addressing climate change, African counterparts stress that such mechanisms must account for the continent's development needs. Effective accompanying measures should be implemented to support African industries' transition and capabilities to manage carbon costs and avoid punitive effects.

The EU's short-term and often changing policy approach to Africa also undermines much of the progress achieved through EU-funded initiatives by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community organisations and trade unions. When funding ends, many of these organisations struggle to sustain their work, as projects are rarely designed with self-reliant strategies. This shift in funds was severely affected by the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022, when many of the resources destined for Africa's development and humanitarian needs were redirected towards Ukraine. As of 2025, a new paradigm of development aid is emerging; traditional large donors from Western countries, such as the USA, the UK and Sweden, have significantly reduced their cooperation aid budgets. In particular, the impacts of the United States Agency for International Development's dismantlement, exposed how heavily African countries have been made to rely on external financing for critical public goods, such as health, basic services and emergency response mechanisms. While traditional aid still has a role to play, more ownership and localised approaches should be adopted to foster the self-reliance of local communities. Yet, aid alone is not enough. Structural reforms at the macroeconomic level are needed to establish a fairer financial system that truly supports the development of African countries rather than penalises them.

Moving forward, EU-Africa cooperation must move beyond viewing Africa solely as a supplier of raw materials and energy and recognise it as an equal partner in the global arena. This includes supporting African countries in reforming the global financial architecture, enhancing access to special drawing rights, international reserve assets that currently disproportionately favour wealthier nations, and facilitating debt restructuring and democratising multilateral institutions. The EU can offer an alternative path to other international actors grounded in equitable trade and diplomatic relations, emphasising cooperative governance that empowers African development while catering to its own strategic interests.

Strategic recommendations

- Move away from paternalistic and extractive behaviours and towards a co-development model, integrating Africa's priorities into European investment strategies to ensure inclusivity and shared benefits.

- Ensure that Global Gateway projects have a positive impact on local communities, guaranteeing their consultation, transparency and socially distributed benefits. For that, the European Commission's inequality marker, launched by former INTPA Commissioner Jutta Urpilainen – a tool to track how development actions reduce multidimensional inequality – should be implemented to ensure EU investments benefit the 40% poorest and most vulnerable groups within the population.

- Benchmark results of European development projects in the incoming Multiannual Financial Framework, introducing a budget line for scrutiny.

- Consider existing national regional compacts on Africa in EU policy and offer mitigating measures. Effective accompanying measures should be implemented to support African industries' transition and capabilities to manage carbon costs and avoid punitive effects.

- Align initiatives, such as the Global Gateway and the Civil Society and Local Authorities Platform, to strengthen their potential by bringing together civil society organisations (CSOs), trade unions and the private sector.

- Strengthen EU-Africa collaboration to address negative externalities and weak governance, including corruption, that limit local benefit sharing in the mining sector and increase the risks of violence and conflict. Prioritise integrating ASM into formal regulatory frameworks for CRMs and revive underused infrastructure in mineral-rich regions as part of Africa's green industrialisation strategy.

- Support policy and regulatory frameworks, similar to the Kimberley process – a UN certification scheme established to prevent conflict diamonds used to finance armed conflicts from entering the global diamond trade – that would improve transparency and traceability in mineral supply chains.

2. Advancing social rights and environmental standards in EU-Africa relations

Building on the previous theme of exploring a shared EU-Africa vision for green industrialisation, we turned to the issue of sustainability and the role of EU regulations, such as the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) or the EU Deforestation regulation, in advancing sustainable and responsible business practices in partner countries. By considering the impact these frameworks are expected to have on partner countries, particularly in improving labour conditions, environmental standards and corporate accountability, they can help drive inclusive socio-economic development and advance the green transition.

The EU has positioned itself as a value-based actor, as well as a global regulatory leader in sustainability, a dynamic often referred to as the "Brussels Effect". This regulatory effect on other countries is largely driven by the EU's market pull, which encourages them to align with EU standards; as a result, EU rules extend beyond the single market and influence global production and trade, with firms abroad adopting these standards to maintain market access. While this has elevated sustainability benchmarks

worldwide, it has also created growing frictions with partner countries, particularly in the Global South. These tensions stem not so much from the principles and objectives of these regulations, but more from the approach and implementation, which does not seem to adequately correspond to developing countries' realities, and in the process could actually negatively impact their development.

In particular, due diligence obligations require firms outside the EU to comply with EU risk management in their supply chains and take steps to address them. This represents a significant shift, as it externalises EU standards across borders and reshapes how companies operate abroad, but it also raises concerns about the extent to which producer countries' priorities and realities are being integrated.

The impact of these regulations is uneven across contexts. In Kenya, eco-design policies under the EU's circular economy agenda hold little relevance, as the country's apparel industry is mainly involved in the assembly stage, with inputs coming from outside Kenya and, therefore, little involvement in product design.[5] At the same time, the country faces pressing waste management challenges linked to second-hand clothing imports from Europe. For Kenya, recycling and landfill reduction are far more urgent than eco-design standards, but these are not sufficiently addressed in EU policies, underscoring the gap between EU regulatory priorities and local sustainability concerns.

This misalignment is also visible in trade relations. Efforts to include labour, climate, and social conditions in EU trade agreements have been resisted by many Global South countries, which view them as restrictive without sufficient redressal of their own concerns. As a result, some partners are turning toward alternative alliances, such as BRICS, an intergovernmental organisation comprising ten countries, including Brazil, Russia, India and China, which do not impose similar conditionalities.

These dynamics raise several questions for progressives engaged in the debate. The first is what do these regulations actually achieve in practice? Are they delivering on their operational and procedural promises, and if not, what should be changed? The second is how to respond to backlash. Criticism comes not only from partner countries, but also from within the EU itself, particularly from business lobbies that raise issues of competitiveness. In the past year, these concerns have been acknowledged by the Commission, which has promised to "cut the red tape". In this context, "cutting the red tape" means reducing some of the due diligence and environmental regulations, sparking much opposition from the European trade union movement and environmental NGOs.

A further question concerns representation in the regulatory process. Which actors need to participate to ensure that EU rules are both effective and legitimate? Too often, civil society and governments in partner countries are treated as uniform blocs, when in fact they contain diverse groups with different priorities, interests and degrees of influence. Failure to recognise this diversity risks producing regulations that appear exclusionary, fuelling perceptions of bias and limiting buy-in from those most affected.

Finally, it is worth noting that EU regulation has been vocal on social and environmental sustainability, but far less active on economic sustainability. That dimension has largely been left to market forces and firm-level decisions. This imbalance may limit the transformative potential of EU policies, raising the question of whether a more holistic approach is needed.

Key question: How can labour, human rights and environmental standards in international supply chains be improved in the context of EU-Africa relations?

On one hand, progressive Europeans have made significant efforts over the years to ensure that business practices carried out by European companies abroad, as well as products destined for European consumers, respect human rights, the environment and labour conditions. This has been promoted by creating due diligence regulations like the CSDDD or the EU deforestation regulation, as well as the introduction of conditionalities on human rights and environmental protection on bilateral and regional free trade agreements.

On the other hand, African counterparts, including those with shared values, have often been reluctant to fully embrace these regulations, as they can be seen as an external imposition. They have voiced persistent concerns about the high administrative and financial costs for producer countries, particularly for SMEs, to comply with European due diligence obligations without sufficient attention to whether these measures address domestic challenges linked to sustainability. The compliance requirements of these regulations can be particularly hard on small producers, who risk economic marginalisation or exclusion from European supply chains if they are unable to fulfil them without adequate external support. While the regulation intends to foster more ethical business practices, African analysts point out that the added complexity and compliance costs could in fact threaten the viability of smaller actors without adequate mechanisms for inclusion and capacity building, thereby having a counterproductive effect.

Both sides present valid points: the need to adopt standards and address abuses is widely recognised, but the key question is how to balance regulatory compliance with inclusivity, so that the shift towards responsible business does not result in further marginalisation of vulnerable producers in the Global South. Regulations should be better adapted to local realities, through co-building of frameworks, allowing for more flexibility in their implementation, and be accompanied by supporting measures, such as direct financial and technical assistance.[6] Another key point raised was the question of how much external EU regulations can, in practice, improve human rights, labour rights and environmental standards when export markets and compliance strategies do not align with local realities or capacities. Some stakeholders instead proposed that climate, labour and human rights regulations should primarily be agreed upon at the regional and global levels.

Many African countries either do not have regulations related to business conduct or have frameworks related to labour, as signatories to International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, which are often outdated or poorly applied. Some also argue that the EU should therefore support countries in strengthening their own systems and standards, rather than simply imposing EU standards. In this way, improved standards would apply not only to exports to Europe, but also to domestic production and other markets, creating a wider impact.

Context is therefore paramount, governance, security and state capacity vary widely across African countries. In cases where states lack full territorial control, regulation alone is insufficient and must be paired with financial and institutional support to build regulatory and enforcement capacities. Flexible implementation of regulations is also critical. In this respect, local actors, CSOs and trade unions are recognised as playing a vital role in collaboratively shaping frameworks that

ensure inclusivity, proportionality and genuine improvement for all stakeholders throughout the supply chain.

Strategic recommendations

- Enhance global and regional coordination around sustainability, labour and human rights regulations. While the EU should continue to push for high standards, it should align implementation, where possible, within regional and international frameworks and always ensure accompanying measures that mitigate negative repercussions for local and small-scale producers.

- Strengthening the capacities and resources of national and local institutions responsible for upholding labour rights, including labour inspectorates, health agencies, trade unions and academic bodies, by supporting training, awareness-raising and technical cooperation, in coordination with the ILO and relevant partners at all levels.

- Foster sustained and structured dialogue between the private sector and trade unions to build trust and encourage collaborative approaches to regulatory compliance and worker rights.

- Increase investment in capacity building, contract management support, critical infrastructure and public outreach to support CSOs and producer organisations in understanding and adapting to new regulations.

- Ensure that collaboration projects are not predominantly "demand-driven" by European business interests. Cooperation should originate in inclusive, joint development strategies co-created with partner countries, based on mutual respect, trust and negotiated principles, not punitive measures or outdated "trickle-down" models.

- Strengthen international legally binding business and human rights frameworks by ensuring full support from the EU and its member states for ongoing UN treaty negotiations.

- Develop new structures to expand social protection, including access to healthcare and education and gender-based violence prevention, for the working poor and marginalised populations in vulnerable sectors, such as mining, responding to the evolving context of supply-chain due diligence.

3. Navigating peace, human rights and democratic concerns in the EU-Africa partnership

As global powers compete for access to Africa's energy and CRMs, European engagements on the continent are increasingly shaped by geostrategic considerations to fulfil its own goal of the green transition. This, however, may also necessitate engagement with some states that can be deemed authoritarian, raising concerns about the EU's own value agenda based on democracy and human rights. This is not a new conundrum, and the EU's deals with some of Africa's undemocratic regimes to curb migration have also raised criticism for human rights violations[7] and aggravated conflicts.

In 2019, the EU adopted the European Green Deal, which was designed to chart a pathway toward a green transition that could also serve as a model for the rest of the world. Yet the EU's ambition for green industrialisation requires access to CRMs and energy supplies, which it does not possess domestically in sufficient quantities. To achieve this transformation, it must engage with partners across the globe to secure these inputs. Many of these countries, however, are not like-minded democracies. In fact, according to democratic indices, such

as those of Freedom House, roughly 75% of the world's population lives outside liberal democracies.[8] Moreover, a significant number of potential partner states are also affected by ongoing instability and violent conflict, which is often exacerbated by external interference.

With the launch of the Global Gateway, the EU also wanted to present an effort to reposition Europe as a central actor in Africa and offer an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative, by aiming to mobilise up to €300 billion in investments around the world. China maintains a decisive edge in manufacturing clean technologies, such as solar panels, batteries and wind turbines, and exports them globally at highly competitive prices, creating direct challenges for Europe's industrial base.

Over the past year, EU policy regarding its green transition has taken a sharper geopolitical turn, driven by concerns over supply chains, technological competitiveness and strategic dependencies as well as migration. This more realist posture, endorsed by Ursula von der Leyen under the notion of a "geopolitical Europe", has raised questions over the establishment of partnerships with authoritarian regimes.[9]

At the opposite end of the spectrum would be engaging exclusively with like-minded countries; this not only greatly limits the EU's reach, but it also risks condemning less-developed countries to remain underdeveloped. It would also misunderstand the course of the history of development – it's not as if democracies were perfectly established first, all conflicts resolved and then development neatly followed. Historically, development and political change have gone hand in hand, often with overlapping timelines. In many cases, significant conflict accompanied development, and democratic governance only emerged much later, as a result of these struggles.

This context is further complicated by the fact that the EU, like other global actors, is inconsistent in its actions. While it aims to uphold certain principles, accusations of double standards are visible in the EU's complicity in Israel's genocide in Gaza,[10] its silence in the face of certain war crimes and its opportunistic definition of what counts as a "coup", depending on political convenience or realpolitik. Similarly, the EU's dealings with authoritarian regimes, particularly on migration-related issues, undermine its stated values and foundational commitments. These contradictions weaken the EU's credibility and make its claims to moral authority appear hollow.

The EU's engagement with non-democratic countries reflects a delicate balance between advancing its own interests and upholding its values, requiring careful navigation of trade-offs. It is also important to examine how the EU can interact with countries in ways that support peace and reduce tensions, drawing on examples where this has been successfully achieved. The EU can also reinforce its values-driven agenda by fostering collaboration and acknowledging African priorities, rather than appearing prescriptive or judgmental.

Key question: How can the EU balance values and interests in its African partnerships?

While more honest communication about the EU, regarding its interests, has been welcomed by its African counterparts, it was highlighted that this more pragmatic approach risked positioning the EU less as an alternative actor and more as a competitor, alongside other global powers, without offering a fundamentally different model of engagement. Where the EU once projected itself as a normative force attentive to the broader dimensions of development, the current crisis-driven and competitive environment has left it unable to

uphold or meaningfully assert its foundational values. Defending European values, which should not be equated with the imposition of democracy, must instead mean aligning with African-led visions of development, which will also enhance its ability to restore trust with African populations.

In this context, the need for the EU to remain open to dialogue with all countries, while deeply reflecting on the broader consequences of its actions, becomes even more urgent. In particular with regard to the green transition, emphasis was placed on the need for inclusive consultation and the active involvement of local populations to ensure that the impacts of initiatives such as the Global Gateway and other EU actions do not generate unintended harm and have a positive impact on local dynamics. Such consultations must go beyond tokenism and be systematically followed by thorough evaluation of their social and economic effects to ensure real accountability and transparency.

Preventing EU projects from exacerbating conflict in fragile contexts requires strong evaluation and monitoring systems, but these should be co-designed with local institutions and civil society, rather than imposed externally. All initiatives need to integrate conflict-sensitive analysis from the outset, ensuring that shifting dynamics are reflected in planning and implementation. Ultimately, accountability must rest on transparency, shared governance and placing the lived experiences of affected communities at the core of decision-making.

Normative transfer, related to human rights, the rule of law and democracy, from the EU to Africa is unlikely to generate lasting change. Reform processes must be locally driven and endogenous. However, the EU can build on its own green industrialisation framework, as well as African frameworks such as the African Union's Green Minerals Strategy, to advance sustainable development, particularly in conflict-affected countries. This should be pursued in close cooperation with regional organisations, which already have industrialisation and trade strategies and play a role in ensuring coherence between national and regional priorities.

For the EU to remain competitive, it must demonstrate not only economic contributions, but also the added value it brings as a partner. European partnerships should strengthen African industrial capacities, support local value chains and ensure that raw materials are not simply exported unprocessed. At the same time, Europe must recognise that African countries have the sovereign right to engage with a diverse range of partners. Insisting that they choose between cooperation with the EU and alignment with other powers, such as China or Russia, risks backfiring and reinforcing perceptions of paternalistic or neo-colonial behaviour. African countries must no longer be viewed as a theatre for geopolitical contestation, but as a full agents in their own right.

Strategic recommendations

- Be transparent about EU interests, while ensuring African priorities remain central, to foster trust and credibility.
- Respect the sovereign right of African countries to pursue diverse partnerships without framing cooperation as a geopolitical contest.
- Avoid double standards that undermine the EU's credibility and values.
- Stop giving EU funding to actors, often autocratic or with a poor human rights record, involved in the mistreatment of migrants and human rights abuses to ensure that aid supports rights-respecting migration governance, rather than coercive practices.

- Do not tie development aid to migration-control objectives, such as enforcing returns, as this violates international protection norms and risks supporting autocratic regimes.

- Establish clearer and more effective EU guidance on the reassessment of international partnerships in the context of international law and human rights violations.

- Coordinate political responses to coup d'état and other violations with established legitimate institutions, such as ECOWAS and other regional institutions.

- Direct engagement of EU officials in challenging political countries, rather than concentrating on regional hubs, is likely to lead to a disconnect with lived realities on the ground.

- Establish robust systems of evaluation and monitoring that use tools such as the inequality marker to assess distributional impacts, ensuring benefits reach the most vulnerable socio-economic groups and contribute to reducing inequality, which is a key driver of conflict.

- Guarantee effective and meaningful participation of local communities to ensure that their priorities directly shape project design, implementation and oversight. This approach will foster projects that promote social cohesion and do not deepen divisions or marginalisation of particular societal groups.

- Integrate conflict-sensitive analysis into all EU-supported initiatives from the design stage to prevent exacerbating fragility and orient action towards social cohesion and peace.

Endnotes

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About the editor

BEATRIZ ABELLÁN

Beatriz Abellán (she/her) joined FEPS in September 2024 as a Policy Analyst on International Relations. Before joining FEPS, she worked for two years as a Programme Officer for the *European Institute of Peace*, coordinating peacemaking and conflict resolution initiatives supporting dialogue processes in Colombia, Venezuela, and, more recently, West Africa.

In collaboration with the *Spanish Cooperation Agency* (AECID), she has undertaken research and facilitated training on the operationalisation of Humanitarian Action-Development-Peace in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, with a particular focus on the peace pillar. Previously, at *Rand Europe*, she contributed to studies commissioned by European Institutions on international development and environmental policy. Before that, she worked as a Public Diplomacy Expert for FPI at the European Union Delegation in Costa Rica, promoting the EU's ability to engage meaningfully with relevant civil society actors in the country.

Beatriz has a Master of Laws (LLM) in Human Rights, Conflict and Justice from SOAS (*University of London*) and a Bachelor of Laws (LLB) and a Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) from *Carlos III University of Madrid*, having done study abroad programs at UC Berkeley, *University College of London* and the *Pontifical Catholic University of Chile*.

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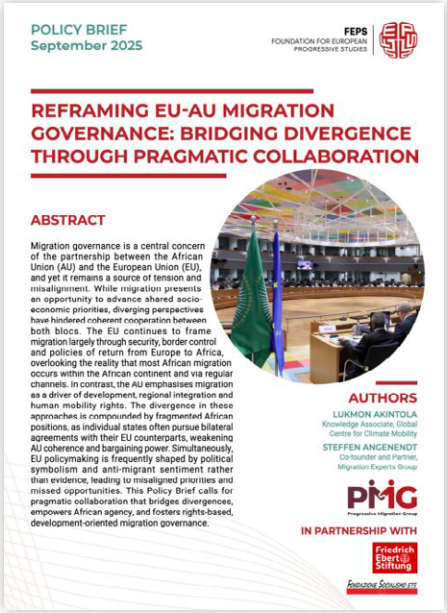
POLICY BRIEF
September 2025

FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES

REFRAMING EU-AU MIGRATION GOVERNANCE: BRIDGING DIVERGENCE THROUGH PRAGMATIC COLLABORATION

ABSTRACT

Migration governance is a central concern of the partnership between the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU), and yet it remains a source of tension and misalignment. While migration presents an opportunity to advance shared socio-economic priorities, diverging perspectives have hindered coherent cooperation between both blocs. The EU continues to frame migration largely through security, border control and policies of return from Europe to Africa, overlooking the reality that most African migration occurs within the African continent and via regular channels. In contrast, the AU emphasises migration as a driver of development, regional integration and human mobility rights. The divergence in these approaches is compounded by fragmented African positions, as individual states often pursue bilateral agreements with their EU counterparts, weakening AU coherence and bargaining power. Simultaneously, EU policymaking is frequently shaped by political symbolism and anti-migrant sentiment rather than evidence, leading to misaligned priorities and missed opportunities. This Policy Brief calls for pragmatic collaboration that bridges divergences, empowers African agency, and fosters rights-based, development-oriented migration governance.

AUTHORS

LUKMON AKINTOLA
Knowledge Associate, Global Centre for Climate Mobility

STEFFEN ANGENENDT
Co-founder and Partner, Migration Experts Group

PMG
Progressive Migration Group

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

Fondazione Sviluppo EFE


POLICY BRIEF
September 2025

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FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES

RETHINKING RETURN COOPERATION AND CONDITIONALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF EU-AU MIGRATION RELATIONS

ABSTRACT

Migration governance between the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU) is increasingly shaped by the politics of return and conditionality. Framed as a tool to safeguard asylum systems and manage irregular migration, return cooperation has evolved into a contentious policy area marked by ethical dilemmas, limited effectiveness and strained diplomatic relations. Despite substantial investments, enforcement rates remain low, while coercive measures, such as aid or visa conditionality, undermine trust and erode human rights safeguards. Returns to politically fragile states raise serious questions about safety, legality and sustainability, while the absence of transparent monitoring perpetuates cycles of re-migration. At the same time, African states face internal tensions over responsibility for returnees, exposing the limits of unilateral and bilateral approaches. This policy brief argues for a recalibration, shifting from coercion to cooperation, embedding rights and accountability at the core, prioritising regularisation and labour mobility pathways, and enabling sustainable reintegration as part of broader AU-EU migration dialogue.

AUTHORS

LUKMON AKINTOLA
Knowledge Associate, Global Centre for Climate Mobility

STEFFEN ANGENENDT
Co-founder and Partner, Migration Experts Group

PMG
Progressive Migration Group

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

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POLICY BRIEF
September 2025

FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES

REVITALISING MULTILATERALISM TO REBALANCE EU-AFRICA MIGRATION COOPERATION

ABSTRACT

Multilateralism is facing an acute crisis, undermined by rising nationalism, geopolitical rivalries and weakening commitments to international cooperation. This decline is starkly evident in migration governance between the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU), where migration has shifted from a shared development priority to a politicised and securitised issue. The consequences are severe: weakened global conventions, humanitarian aid cuts, declining development budgets, and an erosion of trust in global frameworks such as the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Meanwhile, African stakeholders and civil society remain sidelined, reinforcing perceptions of externally imposed agendas. This Policy Brief identifies three critical challenges: the drift from shared responsibility to unilateralism, the shrinking space for African agency, and the financing crisis undermining the migration- development nexus. It argues for revitalising multilateralism through renewed commitments, inclusive governance and sustainable financing, thereby rebalancing AU-EU cooperation toward people-centred, rights-based and development-oriented migration policies that benefit both continents.

AUTHORS

LUKMON AKINTOLA
Knowledge Associate, Global Centre for Climate Mobility

STEFFEN ANGENENDT
Co-founder and Partner, Migration Experts Group

PMG
Progressive Migration Group

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

Fondazione Sviluppo EFE


POLICY BRIEF
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FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES

EUROPE'S STRATEGIC ROLE IN GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

A CALL FOR AMBITION AND REFORM

ABSTRACT

In a world marked by geopolitical tensions, climate crises and weakening global cooperation, this policy brief argues that the EU must redefine its relationships with developing countries – moving from its current partnership approach to a strategic alliance, the terms of which are grounded in mutual interest and defined in common.

The policy brief identifies four urgent imperatives: (1) renewing multilateralism through more inclusive governance; (2) rethinking development priorities and metrics beyond GDP; (3) reforming cooperation instruments to foster joint action, peer learning and national ownership; and (4) overhauling the global financial architecture to generate sustainable fiscal space for developing countries, protecting them from recurring debt crises. These reforms are not merely technical – they are political. They require the EU to act as a convener of alliances and an architect of common goods, particularly in cooperation with the Global South.

At the heart of this redefinition lies the Global Gateway, which should evolve from a flagship investment strategy into a truly global platform for co-created transformation. To succeed, it must redesign its governance, connect the priorities of the EU and its partners, and invest in capacities and ecosystems beyond infrastructure. This requires rapid and visible reforms, from radically simplified delivery procedures to the creation of inclusive dialogue mechanisms and robust certification frameworks.

The EU's credibility will depend on the level of resources it commits to external action and on its determination to change – beginning with how it listens, decides and collaborates. The upcoming UN Conference on Financing for Development in Seville represents a crucial opportunity for the EU to demonstrate its willingness to shape, together with the countries of the Global South, a new compact aimed at achieving the sustainable development goals. This will be essential to the EU's global relevance and resilience.

AUTHORS

STEFANO MANSERVISI
Chair of the Governing Board, GCERF & Former Director General for International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO), European Commission

MARIO PEZZINI
Special Advisor for Social and Human Sciences, UNESCO; Editor-in-Chief, Development Cooperation Review (India) & Distinguished Fellow, Jindal University (New Delhi)

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