

Europe and African relations post COVID-19: Time to add size, scale and speed

April 1 2020, by Carlos Lopes



Satellite imagery of Africa. Credit: Public Domain

Since 2000, European and African leaders have been talking about

giving the partnership between the two continents [a "new strategic" dimension](#). In 2007, [they reiterated](#) their ambition to come together "in awareness of the lessons and experiences of the past, but also in the certainty that our common future requires an audacious approach."

Why then, despite such good intentions, have they fallen so far behind?

The [financial crisis of 2008](#), protracted [Brexit negotiations](#), the [EU's fragmented approach](#) in its engagement with Africa and the reluctance in certain quarters to recognize the leadership role of the African Union have all exacted a toll. And now there's the coronavirus cyclone.

A new partnership is important for Africa and Europe alike. The entry into force of the [African Continental Free Trade Area](#), the world's largest free-trade area by number of countries, can provide investment opportunities for European business.

But Europe needs to realise that 2020 is bringing a new reality. It is no longer possible to do business as usual after COVID-19. The time is ripe to put an end to dialogue fatigue and cynicism about new unilateral European initiatives, each one announced with pomp and circumstance.

Instead, EU-Africa relations should be guided by an instrument that frames the continent-to-continent partnership clearly, with joint governance and agreed goals and targets. Serious negotiations should take place when COVID-19 offers a respite.

Opportunities and dangers

The EU likes to emphasize that it is Africa's largest trading and investment partner and its top aid provider, but that position is declining fast.

Nor is it a one-way street. Africa is Europe's third-largest trading partner, after the US and China, but ahead of either Japan or India. Africa's youthful population can be a problem but also a unique opportunity given Europe's aging population.

There are dangers too. The spread of [conflicts in the Sahel](#), reinforcement of [terrorist networks](#) and [human trafficking](#) in Africa signal growing threats that both continents need to address.

Climate action is a priority and an area made for multilateral cooperation. As we know better now, health conditions everywhere protect more anywhere.

Fortunately, there is a renewed sense of urgency from the EU. The administration of Ursula Von der Leyen, president of the European commission, has prioritized relations with Africa. She [recently visited Addis Ababa](#), seat of the AU, accompanied by 22 European commissioners, the largest such a delegation ever. And an [EU African strategy](#) was announced this month. The AU is formulating its own strategy towards Europe too.

The periphery post COVID-19

The world faces its worst economic contraction since the [Great Depression](#). Trillions of dollars in [stimulus packages](#) will certainly revive the central economies. But the peripheral ones will face a different scale of challenges.

The geostrategic dynamics, particularly the increased international interest in the continent that was demonstrated—not only by China, but from the Gulf States and the likes of India, UAE, Russia and Turkey—are bound to be deeply affected by the coronavirus crisis. In this context, African countries are openly speaking of the need to give

substance to the partnership with Europe and for it [to show "deliverables"](#), turning the rhetoric heard since 2000 into more tangible action.

To be fair, many voices in Europe say the same.

Giving substance means moving beyond the tendency of listing the areas of cooperation around which the continents can cooperate, the usual shopping list approach. In fact, EU-AU common priorities are straightforward. Cooperation around issues such as peace and security, trade and investment, climate change, human mobility or education are key and have been given significant European resources in the past. What was often controversial were the approaches to tackle them. We can now add size, scale and speed to the debate.

Stimulus packages in central economies will certainly provoke higher risk for the countries that cannot afford the same. With depressed prices for most of its major commodities and shrinking demand resulting from a production halt, Africa will be facing a perfect storm. Its internal demand will contract, its informal sector collapse, most major players looking for scarce bridge financing and governments struggling with a [\\$44 billion debt servicing in 2020](#), while facing the most adverse fiscal environment of the last 20 years.

This is the time Europe's new approach towards Africa can show its teeth. The solidarity required to combat a pandemic seems obvious to scientists and most pundits. But it has been challenged even inside the EU. Will the space to look even beyond the European borders be there to comfort the strategic southern neighbor?

Most agreements engaging the EU with various configurations of African countries and the African Union expire this year. Another reminder it is time to turn the page. These are all signs of changing

winds. The time for talk is over.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Europe and African relations post COVID-19: Time to add size, scale and speed (2020, April 1) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-04-europe-african-covid-size-scale.html>

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