

The Future Is Young:

EU–Africa's Promising Horizon

Edited by: Alva Finn



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ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different EU stakeholders.

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Authors' Note

During the Renew PAC event in Abidjan in 2025, the European Liberal Forum (ELF) hosted an Innovation Policy Lab session with the support of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF) and African Liberal Youth. The Renew PAC Summit is a gathering of African and European liberals and centrists. The environment allowed for thoughtful reflections between partners from both continents on a liberal future for the EU–Africa relationship. We thank the Renew Europe Group and our hosts, the liberal party of Côte d'Ivoire – Le Rassemblement des houphouëtistes pour la démocratie et la paix – for creating a fruitful atmosphere for discussion.

We would especially like to thank Wendy Alexander (MP, South Africa and Vice-President of the African Liberal Network) and Daouda Seck (Deputy Director, FNF Senegal) for co-hosting the Innovation Policy Lab sessions, as well as all the participants and notetakers who generously contributed their time and ideas. The sessions focused on increasing trade and Europe being a partner of choice for the African continent. This publication is a direct result of those conversations, although the authors have built on the ideas through research.

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Foreword



MEP Jan-Christoph Oetjen

*President, European Liberal Forum (ELF) and
Renew PAC Delegation of the European
Parliament*

In the light of today's geopolitical shifts, growing uncertainty, and the reshaping of global alliances, the question of how regions engage with one another has never been more urgent. Global challenges transcend borders, whether in the form of climate change, security threats, economic inequality, or migration, and no region can afford to act in isolation. In this context, it is important for the European Union (EU) to reinvigorate the relationship with our partner and neighbour Africa.

For years there have been extensive discussions on the need for a fairer, more balanced partnership. This includes the Renew PAC Summit in Abidjan, hosted this year by Renew Europe Group and the liberal party of Côte d'Ivoire, Rassemblement des houphouëtistes pour la démocratie et la paix, reflecting on the future of the liberal Africa–EU relationship. ELF was once again a key partner in the discussions in Abidjan, bringing together African, international, and European liberals in our Innovation Policy Lab sessions. The conversations hosted with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation and Africa Liberal Youth for Freedom opened the door to new possibilities for collaboration, and this publication uses them as a springboard for concrete action and future liberal cooperation in the framework of Renew PAC.

Our Policy Labs showed that we must not only find common ground where our priorities align but also identify opportunities in areas where we can support and complement one another. For liberalism to thrive on both continents, we must build and strengthen the liberal values that we share such as free trade, democracy, human rights, tolerance, and multilateral cooperation. Yet we must always be pragmatic: we as liberals know that without economic security those values cannot be realised.

By bringing together liberal leaders, thinkers, and change-makers from both continents, we shaped a collective vision for what this partnership can become. The insights and relationships forged at Renew PAC are not just valuable, they are also essential for translating liberal ideas into strategies and strategies into impact.

This publication by ELF and partners is a response to that moment. It calls on us to move beyond well-intentioned dialogue towards tangible, equitable cooperation.



Executive Summary

This publication is a direct result of Innovation Policy Labs hosted at the Renew PAC Summit in Abidjan in February 2025. During the sessions, African and European liberals discussed common cause and values and shared fresh ideas for the EU–Africa relationship to bring the continents closer together in an increasingly difficult geopolitical landscape. A number of themes are explored in this publication that exemplify the liberal understanding of the EU–Africa dynamic, including economic collaboration based on the principle of win–win partnerships rather than traditional aid-based relationships, and focusing on what we can learn from Africa in Europe rather than on the usual dichotomy of what the EU can teach Africa. Many participants remarked on the need for Africa to stand on its own two feet in terms of developing its own trading region and exploiting its own resources. This is a familiar narrative for European liberals, who have been calling for open strategic autonomy for the EU where we develop our own capacities for defence, critical resources, free trade, and beyond.

Chapter 1 details some of the ‘big ideas’ presented by participants during a session led by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom. Chapter 2 develops some of those ideas on skills building with a particular focus on how the EU can learn from the African skills environment. Chapter 3 discusses a novel approach to equitable knowledge and innovation creation through Centres of Excellence for clean technology that would be co-owned by the EU and Africa. Chapter 4 focuses on moving towards a Common African Market and how the EU can use its single market experience to help achieve it. Chapter 5 is a pertinent exploration of the potential of market segmentation for European companies in Africa in a landscape where tariff wars are limiting European companies in other markets.

Africa and the EU have engaged in extensive discussions about the need for fair collaboration and have highlighted the importance of achieving an equitable partnership between them. It is time for us to take liberal action and move beyond dialogue. The authors hope that liberals on both continents can take the ideas in this publication and turn them into policies.

Chapter 1

The Next Big Idea: The Moment Is Now!


Alexandra von Schumann-Heldt, FNF West Africa

This chapter captures the vibrant and dynamic discussions that took place during the pitch session at the Renew PAC Summit in Abidjan in February 2025.

The participants – ranging from ministers and parliamentarians to diplomats, youth organisations, and political think tanks – united under a shared commitment to improving European–African relations and developing even stronger ties within the Afro-European liberal family.

A central theme emerged: the urgency of fostering a closer, more trust-based partnership between Europe and Africa. As one participant from West Africa emphasised, the focus should be on building relationships between people, not just between nations. This sentiment underscored the need for a people-centred approach to diplomacy and collaboration.

The majority of ideas raised during the session revolved around the transformative potential of youth, education, cultural exchange, and mutual understanding. These areas were seen as foundational to overcoming historical divides and building a future where both continents could thrive together. There was a strong consensus on the vital role women should play in this process, with many participants stressing the need for policies that empower women and promote gender equality.



One of the most compelling ideas put forward was the notion of socio-cultural exchanges.

One of the most compelling ideas put forward was the notion of socio-cultural exchanges. It was suggested that these exchanges could act as a powerful tool for breaking down cultural misunderstandings and fostering mutual respect. Drawing an analogy, a European parliamentarian said the relationship between Africa and Europe should be like a marriage

of equals, highlighting that sustainability in this relationship would require a fundamental shift towards equality and mutual respect.

Education and youth programmes were identified as key drivers for bridging the gap between the two continents. The idea of an extended Erasmus programme, combining cultural exchange and academic learning, was widely endorsed. Participants also proposed an obligatory programme for European youth to spend a few months in Africa and vice versa, with the goal of creating new, common narratives and thus overcoming the lasting impacts of colonialism.

Other concrete suggestions included the establishment of joint research centres, co-owned and co-managed by the EU and the African Union (AU), to facilitate direct knowledge exchange. Additionally, networks such as those promoted by political foundations like the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, internships, and online platforms were identified as crucial tools for broadening educational and professional opportunities across borders. The idea of a parliamentary exchange programme was also considered.

While much of the focus was on mutual learning, some African voices raised the importance of self-representation. These participants argued that Africa, particularly African women, needed to take a more active role in shaping their image on the international stage. They pointed out that stereotypes and societal barriers still limit the perception of Africa, and they emphasised the need for a collective effort to break down these prejudices.

The discussions also touched on the historical context of European–African relations. The colonial past, followed by more subtle power dynamics tied to exploitation, has often overshadowed the potential for true partnership. However, the participants agreed that the current moment is ripe for a shift. The focus should now be on economic collaboration based on the principle of win–win partnerships rather than traditional aid-based relationships.

The idea of a European–African Union was presented as a bold vision for the future. Drawing inspiration from Europe’s post-war transformation, where former adversaries united to create a powerful economic and political bloc, the proposal called for Africa and Europe to forge a similar path. Instead of being caught in the rivalry between global powers such as the United States, Russia, and China, the

two continents should see their growing importance on the world stage as an opportunity to strengthen their partnership and build a more powerful, unified presence.

Drawing inspiration from Europe’s post-war transformation, where former adversaries united to create a powerful economic and political bloc.

Ultimately, the pitch session emphasised the need for a redefined partnership between Europe and Africa, grounded in mutual respect, shared interests, and a commitment to addressing the challenges of the present while looking towards a more

collaborative future. The exchange of ideas at Renew PAC highlighted the potential for a transformative relationship built on equality, mutual understanding, and joint action.

Chapter 2

Co-Creating the Future: Rethinking Africa–EU Skills Partnerships

Sofia Mørch, *Governance and Enlargement Fellow, European Liberal Forum*

The optimistic rhetoric of ‘Two Unions, a Joint Vision’ reflects the strong ambition to create a more balanced and cooperative relationship between Africa and the EU with shared goals around sustainable growth, digital innovation, development, trade, peace, and migration. Yet the partnership has largely remained Eurocentric, where most of the focus has been on what the EU can offer Africa, with less emphasis on what Africa can teach the EU. To build upon the idea of win–win partnerships, we therefore must ask: how do we make the Africa–EU relationship more mutually beneficial and collaborative?

A key barrier to a balanced partnership is the limited transfer and recognition of skills and knowledge from Africans to the EU. Take the field of climate action. African nations, through initiatives such as the African Adaptation Initiative, have developed deep expertise in adaptation strategies, prioritising nature-based solutions, drought-resilient agriculture, and community-led responses. In contrast, EU efforts, guided by frameworks such as the European Green Deal and the Fit for 55 package, tend to focus on mitigation through emissions reduction and clean energy innovation. A 2025 report by the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) found that EU-funded resilience programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa struggled to adapt because they did not adequately incorporate local knowledge

systems and adaptive techniques honed by African experts.¹ These approaches, while complementary in theory, often fail to align in practice due to siloed policy development and limited cross-training on each other’s strengths.

Alongside technical expertise, a lack of mutual soft skill development continues to hinder Africa–EU partnerships. Professionals often struggle with differences in communication, leadership styles, and workplace expectations, mismatches that can lead to delays, misunderstandings, and reduced project impact. This cultural gap also affects African diaspora professionals in the EU, who, upon returning to the continent, may find it challenging to reintegrate into local job markets due to misaligned expectations, work cultures, and compensation models, leading to underutilised talent and lost opportunities.²

As global powers compete for influence in Africa, the EU–Africa partnership must set itself apart by empowering African leadership and working together to create equal opportunities. The EU can address these challenges by creating platforms for mutual skills transfer, investing in co-developed knowledge systems, and embedding intercultural collaboration, ensuring that Africa is not simply a beneficiary but an equal driver of the partnership.

¹ ECDPM, *European Support for Adaptation in Times of Shifting Politics and Tight Budgets*. European Centre for Development Policy Management, 2025, <https://ecdpm.org/work/european-support-adaptation-times-shifting-politics-tight-budgets>.

² C. Diagne, *African Diaspora: Stay in Europe or Work and Live in Africa?* Talent2Africa, 9 August 2023, <https://talent2africa.com/en/diaspora-work-and-live-in-africa/>.

Bridging the cross-continental skills gap

While numerous initiatives, such as the Team Europe Initiative on Opportunity-Driven Skills, Youth Mobility for Africa, and the Smart Africa Digital Academy, are helping to address skills gaps and promote mobility between Africa and Europe, most of these programmes continue to operate within a Eurocentric framework focused on the EU imparting skills to Africans. This one-way exchange risks reinforcing outdated hierarchies and overlooks the wealth of African expertise that could benefit the EU in tangible ways. African professionals and institutions offer valuable knowledge in climate adaptation, such

The partnership must therefore empower individuals and institutions in Africa not only to receive knowledge but also to share, lead, and innovate across borders.

as drought-resilient agriculture and community-based water management systems, which are increasingly relevant as the EU experiences more frequent climate shocks. The partnership must therefore empower individuals and institutions in Africa not only to receive knowledge but also to share, lead, and innovate across borders.

One way forward is to establish Africa–EU skills learning centres in different priority sectors, going beyond training to foster co-

research, knowledge co-production, and context-driven pilot projects. A model for this already exists in the AU–EU Innovation Agenda, which proposes joint roadmaps for collaborative research and innovation, but a stronger focus on skills exchange is needed. These centres can unlock inclusive innovation, where African and European actors collaborate and exchange skills to develop solutions together. They strengthen innovation in Africa while also allowing African expertise to inform European development and generate mutual benefit.

In parallel, long-term institutional partnerships between African and EU universities, think tanks, and innovation hubs can create durable knowledge ecosystems, as further explored in the next chapter on ‘Africa and the EU: Owning the Future Together through Centres of Excellence’, written by Alva Finn. Expanding and better funding staff exchange programmes, such as the Intra-Africa Academic Mobility Scheme or Horizon Europe’s Africa initiative, would ensure that African professionals are not just recipients of capacity-building but also instructors and co-creators of knowledge and innovation.

Strengthening cross-continental soft skills

Bridging the cultural divide between Africa and the EU requires more than technical expertise; it necessitates the cultivation of soft skills essential for effective cross-cultural collaboration. Initiatives such as the Africa–Europe Youth Academy, launched under the EU’s Global Gateway strategy, aim to empower young leaders through formal and informal learning exchanges, focusing on leadership development and network building. To maximise impact, such programmes should integrate comprehensive cross-cultural training modules that address communication styles, leadership dynamics, negotiation techniques, and the nuances of working within diverse teams.

For African diaspora professionals returning to their home countries, reintegration poses unique challenges, including navigating different workplace cultures and aligning expectations. Programmes such as the Migrant Protection, Return, and Reintegration Programme for Sub-Saharan Africa offer assistance by providing psychosocial support and facilitating sustainable reintegration into local communities. Building upon these efforts, tailored reintegration initiatives should incorporate cultural onboarding, mentorship opportunities, and orientation to local market dynamics, ensuring that returning professionals are empowered and can effectively contribute to their home countries’ development.



The EU has a critical opportunity to lead differently: by embracing collaboration, co-creation, and innovation, fostering opportunities for each other.

The future of the Africa–EU partnership depends on its ability to evolve into a partnership defined by shared leadership and mutual benefits. As global dynamics shift and Africa’s strategic relevance continues to grow, the EU has a critical opportunity to lead differently: by embracing collaboration, co-creation, and innovation, fostering opportunities for each other. Elevating African knowledge, expanding two-way skills exchanges, and investing in cross-cultural capacity are strategic imperatives for a partnership built to last.

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Chapter 3

Africa and the EU: Owning the Future Together through Centres of Excellence

Alva Finn, *Executive Director, European Liberal Forum*

How can the EU and Africa become more equal partners? We want to share resources and common interests. Yet more partners for Africa have emerged in the last decade, which is often seen as a threat by the EU. Conversely, it is an opportunity for Africa. The EU too often points to what is 'wrong' with the approaches of other partners while trying to mimic what is right. In view of the recent dramatic changes in the global landscape, it is essential to adopt a pragmatic approach focused on our shared interests. By working together, Africa and the EU can unlock significant potential for mutual benefit.

A major stumbling block to strengthening the EU–Africa partnership is the lack of balance in the relationship that African partners feel keenly, including the EU's top-down approach which leads to cherry-picking projects that serve European interests.¹ Co-ownership is also lacking from some of the EU's rivals, including China and Turkey. The EU can offer a more balanced partnership based on the liberal value of increased free trade but should develop knowledge transfer and co-owned Centres of Excellence on the continent of Africa that help Africa exploit its resources for the benefit of humanity and the planet.

¹ Shiferaw, L.T. and Di Ciommo, M., *Trouble in Paradise: The EU–Africa Partnership in a Geopolitical Context*. ECDPM, 2023, <https://ecdpm.org/work/trouble-paradise-eu-africa-partnership-geopolitical-context>.

Towards a comprehensive EU–Africa free trade agreement

In 2022, the EU was Africa’s largest trading partner, accounting for 33 per cent of Africa’s total trade; however, a significant portion of African exports to the EU comprises raw materials.² While trade is inherently a pathway to prosperity, it is crucial that certain conditions are met for this prosperity to be realised. The economic regulations imposed by the EU are considerably stricter than those related to environmental and other pertinent issues in other regions. When it comes to trade projects, the European perspective is that the same rules must apply universally, creating a level playing field. However, from the African perspective, trade between Africa and the EU faces serious hurdles due to tax barriers and stringent product regulation, including labelling requirements that complicate the export process.³ Take the example of products such as tomatoes and strawberries from Morocco. The competition in this market is fierce, making it increasingly difficult to penetrate EU markets with African produce.

Reinforcing a free trade zone between Africa and Europe is essential as it could reduce taxes and lower product prices, ultimately benefiting both regions. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) aims to create a single market across Africa, as discussed in Chapter 4. The EU’s strategy should be to support and align with the AfCFTA’s objectives through a continent-to-continent approach. The long-term goal could be a comprehensive free trade agreement between the EU and the AfCFTA bloc, rather than a patchwork of individual agreements. There is potential to support the AfCFTA implementation

² European Commission – Directorate-General for Trade and Economic Security (2025).). European Union, Trade in goods with Africa (all countries). 8 mai. https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/region/details_africa-all-countries_en.pdf.

³ UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development), *Economic Development in Africa Report 2023: Addressing Trade Barriers for Sustainable Development*. Geneva: UNCTAD/ALDC/AFRICA/2023.

through greater technical and financial assistance to African countries to implement the AfCFTA, including reducing non-tariff barriers and harmonising regulations. Another area in which the EU is assisting African partners is in digitalising the customs process to speed up trade, which will not only help its trade with Europe but also hasten its trade globally.

Sharing is caring: Building local value chains

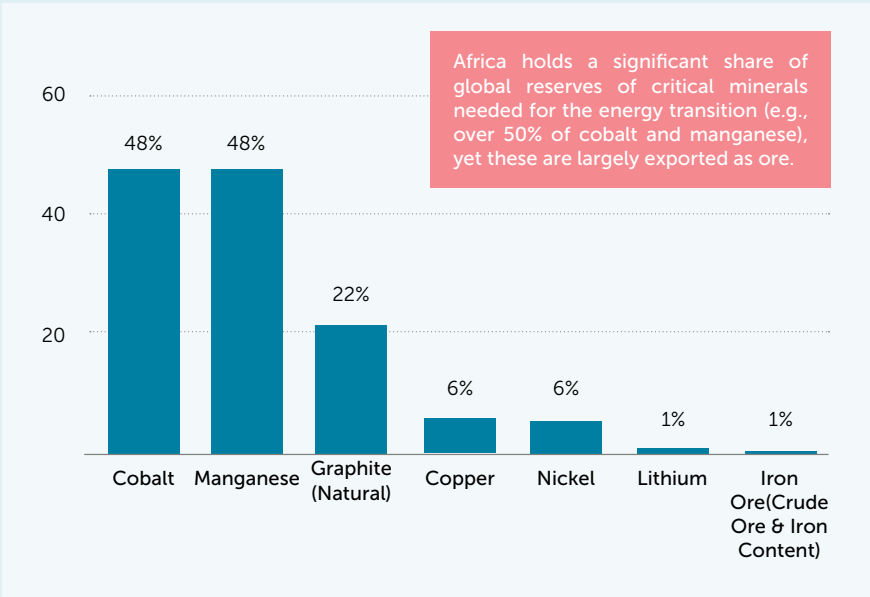
Historically, Africa's exports to the EU primarily consisted of raw materials, leaving little room for diversification. However, the dynamics have shifted, and new competitors and clients have emerged, allowing African nations to explore exports to alternative countries and regions beyond the EU.⁴ Africa holds a significant portion of the world's critical raw materials, including approximately 70 per cent of global cobalt reserves, essential for electric vehicle batteries.⁵ While Africa is rich in resources, it sometimes lacks the means to fully exploit them. Currently, a large percentage of African raw materials are exported for processing elsewhere, with only a small fraction of the value added remaining in Africa.⁶

⁴ FIW (Austrian Institute of Economic Research), 'Africa's Trade with Europe: Trends, Status and Potential Developments', 2025, https://www.fiw.ac.at/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/65_FIW_PB-EU-Africa_2025-01-08_final.pdf.

⁵ US Geological Survey, *Mineral Commodity Summaries 2023*. Reston, VA: US Department of the Interior, US Geological Survey, 2023, <https://pubs.usgs.gov/periodicals/mcs2023/mcs2023.pdf>.

⁶ AfDB (African Development Bank), *Industrializing Africa: Performance, Challenges, and Strategic Directions*. Abidjan: AfDB, 2020, <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/industrializing-africa-performance-challenges-and-strategic-directions>.

**Critical minerals:
Africa has an abundance of metals needed for electric vehicles**



Source: UNCTAD calculations, based on data from the Knoema database, 2023

There is much we can do to facilitate Africa processing resources on the continent of Africa while reducing the price for Europeans. Supporting the development of local processing industries, such as oil refineries and agricultural processing facilities, will enhance Africa’s economic diversification. Increased local processing of resources could generate millions of jobs and significantly boost African economies. If we speed up the value chain by processing these materials at the source, it will be a win–win for Africa, the EU, and the planet.

Roughly 75% of crude oil from Africa is exported and then re-imported as more expensive refined petroleum products

Region	Crude oil production	Refinery output	Final consumption of oil products	Oil consumption in Industry	Oil consumption in transport	Transport use as share of total oil consumption
Central	35.4%	6.3%	4.6%	6.8%	4.7%	72%
Eastern	2.9%	4.9%	9.9%	14.1%	10.5%	74%
Northern	34.3%	57.6%	43.0%	42.9%	39.2%	64%
Southern	0.1%	22.2%	19.8%	19.1%	19.2%	68%
Western	27.3%	9.1%	22.6%	17.2%	25.7%	82%

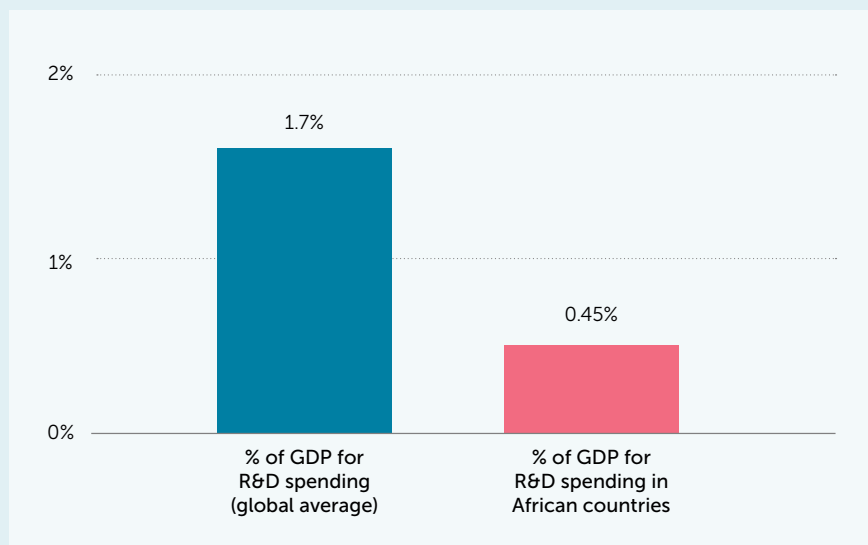
Source: AFREC: Africa Energi Database

Beyond dependence: A co-owned Africa–Europe partnership

Investment in research and development (R&D) in Africa remains relatively low compared with other regions, impacting innovation capacity.⁷ An extra dose of tech optimism can help Africans ‘own the future’. Speeding up knowledge and technology transfer is key, and one of the ideas developed at the Renew PAC Summit in Abidjan is the establishment of truly co-owned Centres of Excellence for clean technology. The EU does support Centres for Excellence in Africa, such as the West African Science Service Center on Climate Change and Adapted Land Use and the African Center of Excellence for Genomics of Infectious Diseases, which is supported by the European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership. However, these centres are not truly co-owned by Africa and the EU.

⁷ UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), Gross domestic expenditure on R&D (GERD) as a percentage of GDP. [Data table showing R&D expenditure for selected African countries and EU average, 2015–2021]. Retrieved from the UIS.Stat database at <http://data.uis.unesco.org/index.aspx?queryid=38478&lang=en>.

Gross domestic expenditures on research and development (R&D)



Source: World Bank

Co-owned Centres of Excellence for clean technology could link to the Global Gateway,⁸ as well as to the Africa–Europe Innovation Partnership (AEIP),⁹ and build on the joint AU–EU Innovation Agenda,¹⁰ which focuses on public health, the green transition, innovation and technology, and capacities for science. It could be closely linked to the ENRICH in Africa Centre in South Africa, which acts as an accelerator and incubator for innovators and entrepreneurs. The initiative

⁸ European Commission, 'Global Gateway', 2021, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway_en.

⁹ For more information on the AEIP, see <https://africaeurope-innovationpartnership.net/>.

¹⁰ European Commission. 'EU–Africa Cooperation in Research and Innovation', n.d., https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-research-and-innovation/europe-world/international-cooperation/regional-dialogues-and-international-organisations/eu-africa-cooperation_en.

would have a laser focus on clean skills and technology transfer. These research and technology development institutions could help European and African researchers develop clean mining and processing technologies and improve technology for infrastructure projects. Establishing these centres near resource extraction sites, in collaboration with local innovators and entrepreneurs, would accelerate the translation of research into market-ready technologies, supported by the Global Gateway.

Liberals in Africa and Europe want people to stand on their own two feet. However, we are not naïve when it comes to competition among partners. What liberals can offer each other moves beyond transactional relationships provided by some international partners to partnerships based on mutual interest in trade and innovation. With our old partnerships stagnating and a geopolitical crisis of faith in the rules-based order, Europe needs Africa. The future of Africa–EU relations depends on bold liberal action today. We need to move away from traditional donor–recipient dynamics and embrace a real partnership based on mutual benefit. This means speeding up European investment and cutting red tape, improving communication on trade agreements and standards, supporting Africa in adding value to its own resources, and co-investing in research and innovation for a shared future as equal partners, economic allies, and co-owners of the future.

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Chapter 4

The Euro-African Trade Boom: How Unity Pays Off

Dr. Kawtar Mawas, *Co-founder and President of ALYF – Africa Liberal Youth for Freedom*

The economic partnership between Africa and Europe is deeply interconnected, yet it remains far from reaching its full potential. While Africa is home to abundant natural resources and a rapidly growing consumer market, structural fragmentation continues to hinder its ability to compete effectively on the global stage. Meanwhile, European businesses face challenges in adapting their products and pricing strategies to meet the needs of African consumers. Addressing these barriers requires a twofold approach: strengthening Africa's internal trade framework and fostering a more inclusive, strategic trade relationship with Europe.



Africa is not a single country, but it can be a single market.

Akinwumi Adesina, President of
the African Development Bank

One of the most pressing priorities for Africa is market unification to enhance its global position. A more integrated trade bloc, similar to the EU, would empower African nations to negotiate more effectively, add value to raw materials, and establish fairer trade agreements. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) embodies

this ambition, aiming to transform Africa's fragmented markets into a cohesive economic bloc. Drawing from the EU's success in

leveraging collective strength, Africa's integration efforts must also consider external trade dynamics, particularly its trade relationship with Europe. A liberal approach that emphasises structured, mutually beneficial partnerships – anchored in clear rules, transparency, and strategic reciprocity – will help sustain a rules-based international trading system, a shared interest for both continents.

At the same time, Europe must explore market segmentation strategies that make its products more accessible and competitive in Africa. By tailoring offerings to the African market while supporting local industry growth through knowledge transfer, both continents can create a more balanced and mutually beneficial trade relationship. This approach not only strengthens economic ties but also promotes sustainable development across both continents.

Empowering the AfCFTA as a catalyst for growth: What have we achieved so far?

Launched in 2021, the AfCFTA seeks to create a unified market across 54 nations, with the potential to boost intra-African trade by 34 per cent by 2045 and lift 30 million people out of extreme poverty. By harmonising tariffs and eliminating non-tariff barriers, the AfCFTA facilitates the development of regional value chains that transform raw materials into finished products within the continent. For example, instead of exporting raw Kenyan coffee or Ivorian cacao, local industries can produce roasted coffee or chocolate, capturing more value domestically and thus fostering economic growth. Similarly, Morocco and Tunisia's olive oil industries are moving away from bulk exports to branded production, leveraging the AfCFTA's framework to integrate refining capacities with West African partners. Another promising example lies in Nigeria's crude oil production, which could be refined in Côte d'Ivoire before being exported globally, showcasing how regional value chains can enhance self-sufficiency and reduce dependence on external markets.



By providing access to larger markets through reduced tariffs and simplified cross-border processes, the agreement empowers entrepreneurs to scale up their businesses.

Post-implementation data demonstrates that the AfCFTA is encouraging countries to redirect exports towards continental partners, fostering new trade routes and alliances based on strategic resources and geographic positioning. Ethiopia's coffee exports to Ghana and Ghanaian cocoa imports to Ethiopia illustrate how reduced tariffs are enabling inter-African commerce.¹ The agreement has also spurred industrial transformation by promoting

manufacturing and economic diversification across sectors such as agribusiness, automotive production, pharmaceuticals, and logistics. For instance, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana are leveraging the AfCFTA to expand domestic cocoa processing industries, aiming to export higher-value chocolate products rather than raw beans.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are among the biggest beneficiaries of the AfCFTA. By providing access to larger markets through reduced tariffs and simplified cross-border processes, the agreement empowers entrepreneurs to scale up their businesses. Sierra Leone's agribusiness sector offers a success story: local companies have expanded their client base by exporting processed food items to neighbouring countries under the AfCFTA's streamlined regulations. These activities have not only boosted regional demand but also created jobs within local communities. By removing trade barriers, the AfCFTA is empowering entrepreneurs and enabling businesses to flourish across the continent.

¹ For more information, see the Centre for African Conflict and Development blog 'AfCFTA and the Future of Africa's Economic Prosperity', <https://ca-cd.com/afcfta-and-the-future-of-africas-economic-prosperity/>.



By removing trade barriers, the AfCFTA is empowering entrepreneurs and enabling businesses to flourish across the continent.

The agreement also marks a critical step towards deeper economic integration among African nations. The process is unfolding in phases, from eliminating trade barriers to establishing a future customs union. Case studies such as the East African Community highlight the benefits of regional integration, though disparities in infrastructure, governance, and resource distribution still present challenges to full economic unity.

Beyond eliminating trade barriers, infrastructure development remains essential to the AfCFTA's success, something the EU is focusing on with its Global Gateway, as efficient trade depends on strong transportation networks, energy grids, and digital systems. In line with this vision, several African nations are advancing key infrastructure projects to enhance cross-border connectivity and drive economic integration. Initiatives such as the Lagos–Abidjan corridor for road transport and port upgrades in Mombasa and Durban are improving the movement of goods and services. At the same time, digital platforms such as M-Pesa are streamlining financial transactions across borders, empowering SMEs to participate more effectively in e-commerce and regional trade.

Inclusive policies are crucial to ensuring that traditionally marginalised groups can fully participate in the evolving economic landscape, gaining access to markets and resources that were once beyond reach. Women, who comprise 70 per cent of informal cross-border

traders in Africa, stand to benefit from the AfCFTA's attempts to formalise their participation and reduce barriers to entry. At the same time, youth-focused initiatives are equipping future generations with the skills needed for high-value industries such as renewable energy and technology.

Taking the AfCFTA a step further: Are we ready to reshape Africa's future?

Taking the next step towards a Common African Market requires addressing key challenges. While the continent has shown readiness in some areas, others demand concerted effort and political will to reshape Africa's economic future. Free mobility remains a critical hurdle. Despite the AfCFTA's ambitions, only four countries have ratified the free movement of people protocol. This limitation hampers labour mobility and economic integration. Intra-African travel costs often exceed those for intercontinental travel, with only 1.5 per cent of Africa's population being migrants, far below the global average. Addressing this requires simplifying visa processes and work permits to boost labour mobility across the continent. The EU is already providing technical assistance, given its experience in founding the Schengen area – the largest area of free movement in the world. Additionally, the EU can promote pilot mobility programmes, support data collection and research, and use political dialogue to encourage more African countries to ratify and implement the free movement protocol. The EU can also lead by example by making its own visa policies towards Africans more transparent and accessible.

Standardisation of products has seen progress, but challenges persist. Over 70 per cent of agricultural exports and 40 per cent of manufacturing exports face rejection due to non-compliance with standards. The African Organisation for Standardisation is working to harmonise regulations, especially in agro-processing, but more comprehensive efforts are needed to ensure African products meet global benchmarks.

Infrastructure and regulatory fragmentation continue to impede the AfCFTA reaching its full potential. Transport costs account for 30–60 per cent of goods’ final prices due to poor infrastructure. Only six African countries have adequate quality infrastructure for trade. The EU can support Africa by promoting harmonised, transparent standards, especially in agriculture and manufacturing, while streamlining regulations through simplified digital procedures to reduce the bureaucratic burden so that standardisation does not become a barrier to trade or innovation.

South Africa boasts well-developed ports such as Durban and Cape Town, along with a robust road network that facilitates regional trade. Egypt has modernised its ports and transportation networks, connecting key trade hubs efficiently. Morocco’s Tanger Med Port is a major hub for global trade, supported by a strong road and rail infrastructure. Algeria has invested heavily in its road, airport, and port facilities, primarily for its oil and gas sector. Kenya’s Mombasa Port is a critical gateway for East Africa, complemented by improvements in road and rail networks such as the Standard Gauge Railway. Rwanda, though smaller, has made notable strides in developing quality infrastructure, including roads and logistics systems that enhance trade with neighbouring countries.

Addressing the transportation challenges requires strategic investments in cross-border projects, leveraging initiatives such as the Lagos–Abidjan corridor and port upgrades in Mombasa and Durban, supported under the EU’s Global Gateway initiative.²

² This support included, for the Lagos–Abidjan corridor, a \$10.38 million for feasibility studies; for the Mombasa Port, a €20 million grant from the EU for road upgrades (Kwa Jomvu–Mariakani); and for the Durban port, part of a €4.7bn South Africa package, including corridor, rail, and port upgrades; see https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kenya/global-gateway-kenya-upgrades-east-africa%E2%80%99s-busiest-trade-and-transport-route-kwa-jomvu-mariakani_en ; https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/attachment/874232/GG_Africa_Infrastructure.pdf.pdf ; https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/GG_Africa_InvestmentPackage.pdf_0.pdf

Economic disparities and protectionism pose significant challenges as well. The AfCFTA brings together unequal economies with varying production capacities. Nigeria, South Africa, and Egypt alone account for about 50 per cent of Africa’s GDP. Protectionist tendencies, exemplified by border closures and persistent tariffs, undermine free movement protocols. Overcoming these disparities requires targeted support for less developed economies and a commitment to phasing out protectionist measures.

Despite these challenges, Africa has shown readiness in several areas. The Guided Trade Initiative has expanded from seven to over 30 countries, facilitating the first transactions under the AfCFTA. Countries are redirecting exports towards continental partners, fostering new trade routes. SMEs are benefiting from reduced tariffs and simplified cross-border processes, as seen in Sierra Leone’s agribusiness sector. To truly reshape Africa’s future, the continent must build on these successes while addressing remaining obstacles. This includes accelerating infrastructure development, harmonising regulations, and fostering inclusive growth that benefits marginalised groups, particularly women and youth.

While the journey towards a Common African Market is complex, the AfCFTA has made progress by reducing tariffs and facilitating trade. However, deeper integration is needed. Regulatory frameworks across sectors, including investment policies, competition laws, intellectual property rights, and data protection, must be harmonised to minimise non-tariff barriers and create a stable business environment. The EU is already providing technical assistance on regulatory reforms and capacity-building to facilitate the economic integration required for the AfCFTA, but more could be done, including in the support of a pan-African digital identity system using the knowledge gained from progress on a European Digital Identity.

With sustained commitment and collaboration, Africa can unlock the full potential of the AfCFTA and redefine its position in the global economy. A unified African market should become a central pillar of EU–Africa cooperation. From a liberal policy perspective, regional

integration fosters open, rules-based trade, strengthens governance, and supports inclusive, market-driven growth. These values are shared by both continents and are vital for building a resilient and equitable global economy. Making the Common African Market a cornerstone of cooperation will enable both regions to create fairer trade frameworks, empower SMEs, and increase economic self-reliance. By deepening this partnership, African and European liberals can jointly shape a more balanced, sustainable, and rules-based global trading system.

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Chapter 5

Euro-African Trade: Smart Segmentation, Stronger Markets

Dr. Kawtar Mawas, *Co-founder and President of ALYF – Africa Liberal Youth for Freedom*

European companies must prioritise affordability-driven segmentation to remain competitive in African markets. While European products are often perceived as high-quality but premium, many African consumers gravitate towards lower-cost alternatives from China, India, or Turkey. A strategic shift towards tailored pricing and product design could reverse this trend.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for Africa. Each market is unique and requires a tailored approach.

Strive Masiyiwa, Founder & Executive Chairman, Econet Group

For instance, Renault's Dacia brand has thrived in North Africa by offering durable, no-frills vehicles at accessible price points. Similarly, Unilever adapted its powdered milk formula in East Africa by using vegetable fat instead of dairy, catering to regions with limited refrigeration access. These examples show how European firms can retain market share by aligning with local purchasing power.

Affordability-driven segmentation not only expands market reach but also fosters long-term brand loyalty by introducing budget-tier products, such as simplified solar panels for off-grid communities or smartphones with features such as multi-language support and extended battery life. For example, over 3.3 million people in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania have benefited from pay-as-you-go solar services designed for households without electricity grid access. These approaches allow companies to effectively engage with Africa’s rapidly growing middle class, which is expected to reach 1.1 billion by 2060.

Beyond affordability, sustainable trade depends on collaborative innovation and co-ownership. Europe’s traditional model of exporting finished goods must evolve into partnerships that transfer skills, build local capacity, and add value within African economies. This shift is already underway. The Lobito Corridor, a joint initiative by the EU, US, and African governments, demonstrates this new approach: by funding transport infrastructure to connect Zambia’s copper mines with Angola’s ports, the project aims to enable local mineral processing, creating jobs and reducing reliance on foreign refineries. Similarly, the ENRICH in Africa programme connects African and European innovation hubs to co-develop solutions in sectors such as agritech and renewable energy. These initiatives align with growing calls from African leaders and European liberals for a new model of partnership – one that moves beyond donor–recipient dynamics towards mutual benefit, co-investment, and shared ownership of the continent’s future industrial and technological development.

Workforce development is equally critical. Germany’s dual vocational training model, replicated in Rwanda and Kenya through EU partnerships, equips African workers with advanced manufacturing skills. Such initiatives align with Africa’s industrial ambitions, such as Ghana’s plan to increase domestic production to 50 per cent of its cocoa by the end of 2025, which is a leap from 20 per cent.

Digital payment integration as the first step to adapting to Africa's market

Bridging the affordability gap through market segmentation is just one piece of the puzzle. To fully unlock Africa's market potential, European companies must also address another critical factor: financial accessibility. Many African consumers and businesses still operate in cash-driven economies with limited access to traditional banking services, making seamless and inclusive payment solutions essential for trade expansion. This is where digital payment integration emerges as a game-changer, offering a pathway for European firms to engage with African markets more effectively while driving financial inclusion across the continent.

The integration of digital payment platforms such as M-Pesa into Africa–Europe trade relations holds immense promise for fostering financial inclusion and expanding market access. M-Pesa (M for mobile and Pesa for money in Swahili) is a microfinance and mobile money transfer system launched in 2007 by Vodafone for Safaricom and Vodacom, the two largest mobile operators in Kenya and Tanzania. M-Pesa is Africa's largest fintech platform, serving over 51 million users across seven countries, including Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique,



Ghana, Egypt, Lesotho, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Its ability to facilitate seamless transactions has revolutionised financial inclusion, connecting underserved populations to the digital economy and enabling businesses to thrive in previously inaccessible markets.

For European firms seeking to penetrate Africa's underserved markets, partnerships with M-Pesa offer a strategic advantage. By integrating 'Pay by M-Pesa' into their payment systems, European companies can tap into a trusted and widely recognised payment method that is already accepted by over 200,000 African merchants. Leading brands such as Uber, Kenya Airways, and Jumia – the 'Amazon of Africa' – have successfully adopted M-Pesa to cater to African consumers who often lack access to traditional credit or debit cards. By embracing these technologies, European firms can overcome traditional barriers to entry while fostering inclusive growth across the continent. At the same time, Africa would benefit from enhanced financial inclusion, reduced transaction costs, and expanded access to global markets.

Africa's pragmatic geopolitical shift

African nations are increasingly diversifying their trade and investment relationships, turning to countries such as China, India, Russia, and Turkey due to their flexible negotiation frameworks and absence of political conditions tied to governance or internal affairs. This pragmatic approach reflects Africa's growing desire for partnerships that prioritise economic development over external interference.

China has emerged as a dominant player in Africa's infrastructure landscape, particularly in telecommunications and transportation. Chinese firms have invested heavily in projects such as the Standard Gauge Railway in Kenya and the Addis Ababa–Djibouti railway, offering low-interest loans through the China Exim Bank without imposing governance stipulations. In 2023 alone, Chinese investments in Africa reached \$282 billion, dwarfing those of other nations.

However, it is important to recognise that when considered as a unified bloc, the EU remains Africa's largest overall trading and investment partner. In 2022, total EU–Africa trade amounted to approximately \$295 billion, slightly surpassing China's trade volume with the continent. The EU's foreign direct investment (FDI) stock in Africa is also the highest among all external partners, standing at over \$222 billion as of 2021, compared with China's estimated \$44 billion. This collective European engagement is often underappreciated, as public discourse tends to compare China with individual EU Member States rather than the EU as a whole.

The geopolitical landscape also highlights Turkey's growing influence as it balances its Eastern and Western ties. Turkey was recently offered partner status by BRICS, a bloc comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Ethiopia, Egypt, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates. Turkey is positioning itself as a bridge between emerging economies and traditional Western alliances such as NATO. This dual strategy allows Turkey to expand economic cooperation with BRICS member states while maintaining its role within Western frameworks. For instance, Turkey has expanded its presence on the continent through civil investments and construction projects. Turkish companies such as Yapı Merkezi have completed over 1,800 projects, including a \$2.35 billion contract to upgrade Tanzania's railway network. Turkey's trade volume with Africa surged from \$5.4 billion in 2003 to \$37 billion in 2024, underscoring its growing role as a competitor to China and Russia.



Foreign Direct Investment, Trade Volume, and Sectoral Engagement in Africa by Global Actors¹

Entity	FDI in Africa (USD)	Trade Volume with Africa (USD)	Key Sectors of Engagement
China	\$1.8B (H1 2023)	\$282B (2023)	Infrastructure, Telecommunications, Mining
India	Not specified	Not specified	Renewable Energy (ISA), Agriculture
Russia	Not specified	Not specified	Energy, Arms Sales
Turkey	\$6B (2022)	\$40.7B (2022)	Construction, Chemicals, Steel, Electronics
United States	Not specified	Not specified	Critical Minerals (e.g., Phalaborwa Project)
European Union	€300B (Global Gateway)	Not specified	Infrastructure, Green Energy, Digital Transition


Russia, meanwhile, has strengthened its ties with Africa by leveraging energy partnerships and arms sales, particularly in resource-rich nations such as Algeria and Sudan. India has also deepened its engagement through initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance (ISA), which promotes renewable energy projects across Africa. These countries’ willingness to negotiate on equal terms without imposing political conditions has made them attractive partners for African governments seeking infrastructure development and economic growth.

These developments are part of a broader trend in Africa. In North Africa, the decision by the European Court of Justice to invalidate the 2019 trade and fisheries agreements between Morocco and the

¹ See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/277985/cash-flow-of-chinese-direct-investments-in-africa/> ; <https://energycapitalpower.com/brics-and-africa-a-strategic-partnership-for-energy-and-minerals/> ; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2025/04/30/trump-china-minerals-south-africa-investment/>

EU owing to questions about Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara has led the Kingdom to strengthen its economic relations with other powers, notably Russia and China. African countries now prefer partners who respect their sovereignty and offer economic opportunities without political conditions.

As African nations diversify their partnerships to drive economic growth and assert their sovereignty, Europe must refine its strategic priorities to build trust and remain a relevant partner. Rather than attempting to control entire value chains, an approach often viewed as exploitative, European leaders should support midstream processing initiatives, such as battery precursor production within Africa. This strategy aligns with Africa's industrial ambitions while ensuring that more value is retained within the continent.



Europe must embrace a non-zero-sum approach that prioritises mutual benefit over extractive models.

To adapt to this shifting landscape, Europe must embrace a non-zero-sum approach that prioritises mutual benefit over extractive models. The EU's recent critical minerals partnerships with Zambia and the DRC illustrate this recalibration. Signed under the Global Gateway initiative, these agreements aim to secure sustainable supplies of copper and cobalt, essential for green

technologies, while fostering local value addition and infrastructure development. A key example of this approach is the Lobito Corridor project, which connects Zambia and the DRC's mining regions to Angola's port of Lobito, strengthening regional connectivity and reinforcing Africa's role in global supply chains.

Africa's pragmatic partnerships with China, India, Russia, and Turkey reflect a broader shift towards sovereignty in trade negotiations. To remain competitive in this evolving landscape, Europe must adapt by fostering equitable partnerships that prioritise local development

and shared prosperity. By embracing collaborative models centred on infrastructure investment, midstream processing, and knowledge transfer initiatives, Europe can redefine its relationship with Africa as one built on trust and mutual benefit rather than dependency or extraction.

Conclusion

Africa’s diversification of trade partnerships reflects a broader shift towards self-determination and regional empowerment – principles that resonate strongly with liberal values. In this evolving landscape, a renewed Europe–Africa trade relationship must be grounded in mutual agency, economic freedom, and shared prosperity – not paternalism or conditionality.

Market segmentation, often viewed as a purely commercial strategy, aligns squarely with liberal ideals. By tailoring product design and pricing to Africa’s diverse consumer base, European companies honour the liberal principle of consumer choice while also creating space for fair competition with emerging players such as China and Turkey. Affordability-driven innovation does not dilute quality; rather, it reflects market responsiveness and the recognition of African consumers as autonomous economic actors.

Moreover, segmentation empowers African middle- and lower-income populations to access goods and services previously out of reach, advancing liberal commitments to equal opportunity and inclusive growth. This demand-driven approach also opens new commercial pathways for Europe, enabling firms to diversify exports and build brand loyalty in one of the world’s fastest-growing consumer markets. For Europe, the mutual benefit lies not only in economic returns but also in strengthening a rules-based international trading system built on open markets, fair competition, and reciprocal trust.

From supporting digital payment systems such as M-Pesa to co-developing infrastructure through projects such as the Lobito Corridor, liberalism calls for partnerships that transfer knowledge, build capacity, and respect national sovereignty. This is not about controlling African value chains. It is about enabling them. By shifting towards a model of co-investment and shared innovation, Europe and Africa can build a resilient economic future defined by mutual empowerment, not dependency.

In an era of rising protectionism and great-power rivalry, the liberal answer is not retreat but renewal – doubling down on open, equitable, and market-driven cooperation. A liberal trade agenda for EU–Africa relations must centre on dignity, choice, and fairness – because real partnership means advancing together, as equals, towards shared prosperity.

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