

BLOG POST December 2nd 2021

From COP26 to the Africa Europe Summit: Accept to face critical asymmetries or put the nascent partnership at risk

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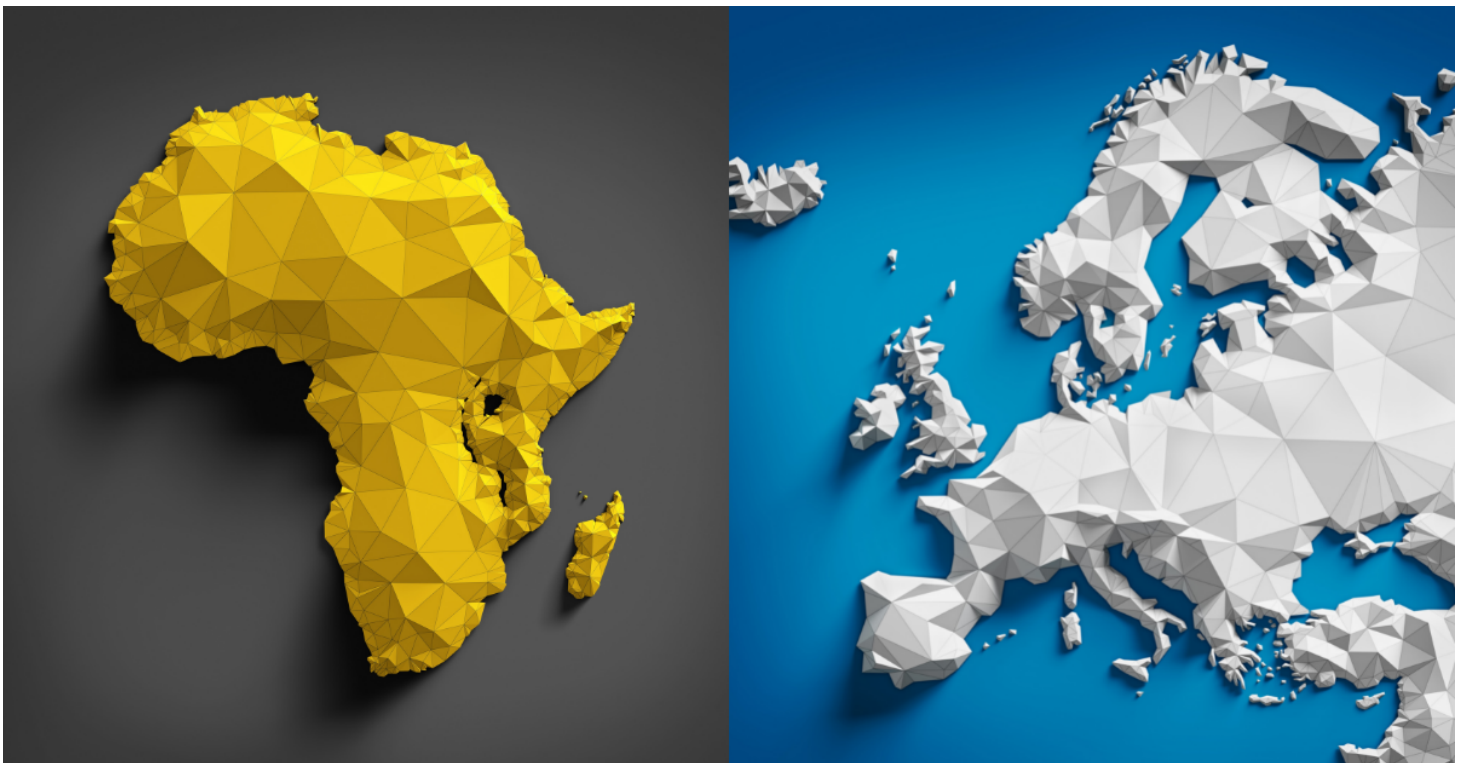
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🕒 Reading time: 8 min



COP26 and the G20 meetings seem to have positively passed the test of global cooperation, at a time when conflicts and tensions are high elsewhere. But the important progress made in these two arenas should not conceal the magnitude of distrust between less developed countries and industrialized countries, that Glasgow could actually have even exacerbated. The upcoming African Union (AU)-European Union (EU)

Summit next February will be the first international test of the capacity to overcome, at least partially, the most critical points causing such level of mistrust. Critical unbalances and asymmetries, that undermine all conversations and negotiations between the two continents, need to be faced and discussed, which is impossible in official political tracks. It is in this perspective that [Ukama](#), the Africa-Europe platform of Sustainability thinkers, was launched on November 25, to identify the most critical issues that could derail the AU-EU partnership, and offer a safe, independent space to debate them and progress on solving them. This is a critical condition to realize the potential for synergies and mutual learning between the two continents.

Trust is more at stake than ever

The 2021 multilateral agenda culminated in the G20 heads of State meeting followed by COP26: the sequence demonstrated that cooperation between major economic powers was still possible despite economic and geopolitical tensions, and that they could agree on an accelerated timeframe for more ambitious climate change mitigation action. But it also established that solidarity promises from Northern countries to the South were not met, and that the less powerful and most vulnerable countries had to accept deals in which their demands for more accountability and solidarity were not going to be met with ambitious enough solutions.

Despite playing the game of the Glasgow Pact, in which they have invested political capital as well as their own efforts towards decarbonization, numerous African countries came out of this sequence with extremely high concerns on their unmet needs for support to adapt to climate and environmental change, and extremely unequal capacities of investment and recovery from the Covid-19 crisis accentuated by vaccine access inequalities. Mounting distrust between Southern and Northern countries is not new and had already led to the AU responding to the [EU's strategy towards Africa](#) with an eloquent silence. And unless a series of critical structural asymmetries are explicitly identified and addressed, the establishment of any real partnership (a “partnership of equals” or even a slightly more equal partnership), although badly needed for both regions, will remain out of reach.

On the other side, the European Union and its Member States come out of this sequence with the impression that they had been doing their homework with the highest ambition possible, both deciding on ambitious policies to be in line with their commitment to become a net-zero continent, and making public climate finance available to Southern countries at a proportionately much higher level than the US. These decisions, that had necessitated difficult political arbitrages internally between and within Member States, have been announced in advance of COP26, and were thus much less visible than the [US-China common declaration](#), for instance. Italy had also played a key role to advance decisions at [G20](#) to address the issues of recovery, debt, as well as climate finance, and specifically the reallocation of special drawing rights to the countries most in need, even if final decisions were still disappointing for least developed countries.

In search of allies in order not to be trapped in the US-China economic and political rivalry, European players might feel they have done their best both to ensure the credibility of the EU Green Deal as central to the position of the European Union in the future global economy, as well as to ensure a sound basis for an AU-EU partnership to flourish. But the EU has to face the fact that it will be nearly impossible to separate the internal political and economic terms of compromise on an ambitious Green Deal between Member States and their external perception by or impact on other countries, as exemplified by the unresolved concerns about the potential negative impact of a [European carbon border adjustment mechanism](#) on emerging African economies.

Two continental economic transformation projects, with synergies but also critical asymmetries

As the EU's strategy for its partnership with the AU, published in March 2020, already rightly pinpointed, there are many points of overlap between Agenda 2063, the transformation vision of the African Union, and the EU Green Deal. Both entail a continental-scale structural transformation of the economy, which necessitates profound changes in all sectors and all regions and a whole mix of policy support: innovation and access to technology, access to finance for critical investment, social support and retraining, as well as specifically well designed macroeconomic policies to accompany the changes in demand and in production. Even if the starting points and processes are very different from one continent to the other and within each continent, the magnitude of the challenge and of the mobilization effort needed is extremely high in both cases. This opens up many opportunities for mutual learning on policies for transformation.

Both continents also subscribe vibrantly to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Climate Agreement as defining major goals that they set for their own transformation to prosperity. They also both consider environmental sustainability as a key element of the economic viability of both projects, and the reduction of both poverty and inequalities as a necessary condition for prosperity. Such a convergence should also result on possible mutual learning processes, exchanging experience and sharing innovation.

The EU therefore proposed to focus on major areas for synergies. Given the importance of access to electricity as the main limiting factor for industrialization in many African countries, one of the 5 priority areas identified is green transformation and clean energy access, which appears as an obvious win/win area.

But potential critical asymmetries between the two continents are often implicit and not addressed directly, while both regions need to be much clearer on each continent's economic interests in this matter, and to identify explicitly not only the areas where these interests are synergistic but also those where they are antagonistic. For instance: regarding the conditions for access to technologies concerning renewable energy production as well as minigrid or microgrid and their potential interconnexion; also, while the access to investment is critical for countries with narrow fiscal space or with already high levels of debt, the exclusion criteria linked to sustainable finance principles could be considered an obstacle to access financial markets for investments considered necessary by some African countries, with the particular example of the modernization of existing gas infrastructures before their progressive phase-out. A carbon border adjustment mechanism might also be perceived as a form of climate conditionality imposed on an industrialization development pathway. There are perceived risks that the global new economy, based on green and digital transformation, could bifurcate emerging industrialization and economic diversification pathways in African economies back to desindustrialisation, respecialisation and export of raw materials without local added value and not enough creation of the necessary decent jobs in the secondary or tertiary sectors.

Can the promises of the green transition really be made more symmetrical? What can the EU alone actually do about it?

On top of delivering on solidarity, structural economic unbalances matter

Because of the existing economic inequalities between countries, solidarity has been promised to Southern countries on the basis of historical responsibility of the North, or on an ethical ground, or just because of a well understood self-interest (as should actually be the case on global pandemics). But promises are not delivered, which is extremely problematic. The EU and its Member States, altogether the first donor globally, are already trying to have a sound dialogue on this with vulnerable countries and African countries in particular, in order not only to promise more

financial flows but also to ensure pragmatic progress towards the effective access to these flows. But this is not enough to face the main problem that is much more deeply rooted in the unequal structure of the global economic system.

What is at stake is not only the legacy of history that leads to critical unbalances in the structure of the economic system, but also inequalities in decision power in the way the system is governed both in global intergovernmental regulation systems and in private companies governance, which leads to persistent imbalances in the way power and value are allocated along global supply chains. Similar issues concern the asymmetry in financial flows, including unidirectional illicit financial flows. This leads also to unequal potentials of job markets: in such a situation, governing migration only through the control of incoming flows to Europe is largely insufficient and obviously one sided, as there is also the need to consider intra and intercontinental mobility as a factor of development and prosperity, as long as it is not only leading to a unidirectional brain drain.

Correcting asymmetries: is there a strategic rationale ?

Overall, what needs to be rebalanced is also who sets the agenda of the partnership between the continent, as well as the narrative over Africa itself, and who defines it. The economic significance of the African market is becoming a reality and not anymore just an assumption about a future potential. The growing economic power of its emerging economies is also making African countries more confident in their claim that preparing a rebalance in the economic system is not just necessary for ethical reasons of justice, but because it is going to happen anyway.

Rivalry between global powers can also be used by African countries as a way for to reaffirm their sovereignty by strategically playing the competition between these powers to access their markets. In such a context, the EU has thus not just an moral imperative but also a strategic interest to actively work on rebalancing the asymmetries between the two continents. Another option would be to compete with other global players in Africa by lowering or diluting its principles and values, for instance, on the political rights of civil society: such a race to the bottom in terms of social and environmental ambition would probably not be a winning strategy. The EU would best defend its own interests by seeking differentiation in the way it establishes the conditions of trust by genuinely and explicitly aiming at a reallocation of power and value in the supply chains and financial links that materialize the partnership between the continents.

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