



Africa/European Union (EU) Relations in the Era of Covid-19

Johannesburg, South Africa

Date of publication: June 2021

Rapporteur:

Ms Terri Maggott, Former Research Coordinator, Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation (IPATC), University of Johannesburg (UJ)

Reviewer:

Dr Adeoye O. Akinola, Head of Research and Teaching, IPATC, UJ

Editors: Prof Adekeye Adebajo, Director, IPATC, UJ; and
Ms Glenda Younge, Independent Consultant

5 MOLESEY AVENUE, AUCKLAND PARK 2092, JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA
TEL: +27 11 559 7230 ■ FAX: +27 865 527 6448 ■ WEBSITE: <http://ipatc.joburg/>



1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in December 2019, all aspects of human life have been fundamentally affected. Although the pandemic is essentially a public health issue, political and economic relations between states and other actors have also been altered, as global supply chains and markets have been forced to adjust to conditions brought about by the virus, as well as measures taken to combat its spread.

Restrictions on movement and travel have been implemented by governments globally. Geo-political arrangements are being transformed, and Africa/European Union (EU) relations are no exception. Africa's role in the global arena – as the continent with the youngest population, with 60 per cent of people under the age of 25 – is also undergoing dramatic changes at a time when a quarter of Africa's global migrants – 10.6 million out of 39.4 million – live in the EU. The COVID-19 crisis thus provides a new context for rethinking the future of Africa/EU relations.

To explore areas of convergence between Africa and the EU in order to provide concrete ideas for policy development, the University of Johannesburg's (UJ) Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation (IPATC) in South Africa held a one-day policy dialogue on "Africa/EU Relations in the Era of COVID-19" in Johannesburg on 13 November 2020. The meeting was part of IPATC's German government-funded project on "Implementation of the United Nations (UN) Global Compact: Conflict, Governance, and Migration in Africa/EU Relations", which aims to consolidate the Community of Practice (CoP) it established in 2019 involving about 100 African, EU, UN, and International Organization for Migration (IOM) policymakers, diplomats, experts, and civil society actors. About 25 participants attended the Johannesburg policy dialogue.

The meeting involved two panels. During the first panel on "The Historical Context of Africa/EU Relations", Mr Mxolisi Nkosi, South Africa's former Ambassador to the EU and then Deputy Director-General of Global Governance and Continental Agenda in South Africa's Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), and Mr Raul de Luzenberger, the EU Deputy Ambassador to South Africa, led the discussion, while Professor Pragna Rugunanan, Head of the Department of Sociology at the University of Johannesburg, chaired the session. During the second panel on "Africa/EU Migration in the Era of COVID-19", Mr Charles Kwenin, Regional Director for Southern Africa at the International Organization for Migration, and Dr Ayodele Odusola, the Resident Representative of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in South Africa, led the discussion, while Dr Rüdiger Lotz, Deputy Ambassador of Germany to South Africa, chaired the session.

This report is based on key discussions and policy recommendations that emerged from the meeting, as well as additional research.



“ The COVID-19 crisis provides a new context for rethinking the future of Africa/EU relations. ”

PANEL AT THE SECOND SESSION OF IPATC'S ONE-DAY POLICY DIALOGUE ON "AFRICA/ EU RELATIONS IN THE ERA OF COVID-19;" FROM LEFT: DR AYODELE ODUSOLA, RESIDENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE UN DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME OFFICE IN SOUTH AFRICA; DR RÜDIGER LOTZ, DEPUTY AMBASSADOR OF GERMANY TO SOUTH AFRICA; AND MR CHARLES KWENIN, REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR SOUTHERN AFRICA, INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION.

IMAGE SOURCE - IPATC

LINK - <https://ipatc.joburg/1-africa-european-union-eu-relations-in-the-era-of-covid-19/>

2. The Historical Context of Africa/EU Relations

Historically, Europe's relations with Africa have been premised on domination and exploitation, involving four and a half centuries of slavery from the 15th century, followed by a century of colonialism. At the Berlin Conference in 1884–1885, the rules were effectively set for Africa to be carved up between European powers. Only from the 1950s did these countries begin to gain their independence. Centuries of systematic exploitation by European imperialists thus left the continent economically dependent, while the legacy of colonial borders triggered conflicts in several African states such as Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Ethiopia.

Contemporary Africa/EU partnerships have been forged in areas such as development, migration, and conflict management. This relationship has aimed to ensure peaceful, safe, and secure environments and to foster political stability and effective governance, while enabling sustainable and inclusive growth. The EU contributed €2.7 billion - 90 per cent of the total funding - to the African Union's (AU) Africa Peace Facility (APF) between 2004 and 2019. Brussels supported the facility generously due to the EU's security concerns in Africa, particularly in neighbouring regions such as North Africa, from which most African migrants leave for Europe. Special focus has been directed at the security-development nexus in this relationship. However, issues of financial assistance, such as African over-dependence on EU funding, and Brussels's conditionalities around development aid, have led some African countries to continue to highlight the historical power imbalances of Europe's relations with Africa, and to seek alternative funding from China.



“ The EU contributed €2.7 billion - 90 per cent of the total funding - to the AU's Africa Peace Facility between 2004 and 2019. ”

THE INTERIOR OF THE EUROPEAN UNION HEADQUARTERS IN BRUSSELS, BELGIUM.

IMAGE SOURCE - Dezeen

LINK - <https://www.dezeen.com/2016/12/16/european-union-headquarters-offices-curved-glowing-lantern-glass-box-brussels-belgium/>

3. Contemporary Developments in Africa/EU Relations

Contemporary Africa/European Union relations can be dated to the first ever inter-continental summit in Cairo in April 2000 between the then Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the EU. This process eventually culminated in the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) in December 2007, adopted at the second Africa-EU summit in Lisbon, Portugal. The JAES's *2008–2010 Action Plan* identified eight priority areas: peace and security; democratic governance and human rights; regional economic integration, trade, and infrastructure; the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); climate change; energy; migration, mobility, and employment; and science, information society, and space. The third Africa-EU summit was held in Tripoli, Libya, in November 2010 during which the *2011–2013 Action Plan* was adopted, reinforcing cooperation in the same eight priority areas as the first Lisbon Action Plan.

The fourth Africa-EU summit took place in the Belgian capital of Brussels in April 2014 under the central theme of “Peace, Prosperity and People”. The meeting adopted the *2014–2017 Roadmap*, highlighting five priority areas for joint action: peace and security; democracy, “good governance”, and human rights; human development; sustainable and inclusive development and growth and continental integration; and global and emerging issues. The fifth Africa-EU summit took place in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, in November 2017 under the broad theme of “Investing in Youth For A Sustainable Future,” as European leaders worried increasingly about irregular African

Africa/European Union (EU) Relations in the Era of Covid-19

migration across the Mediterranean. With 375 million African youths expected to reach working age by 2035, EU leaders are eager to find ways of keeping these young people at home. Four strategic areas were identified in Abidjan: mobility and migration; economic opportunities for youth; peace and security; and cooperation on governance. The sixth Africa/EU Summit, planned for October 2020, was postponed to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Europe is currently Africa's largest trading partner in commerce worth €8.8 billion. According to the European Commission, in 2019, 31 per cent of African goods – mostly food and drink products, raw materials, and energy – were exported to the EU, while 29 per cent of imports to Africa – mostly machinery, vehicles, and chemicals – came from the EU. Brussels and the 79-member African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) Group signed the 20-year Cotonou trade agreement in 2000. The accord resulted in tense economic relations, as Brussels pursued the controversial Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with individual sub-regional blocs. The 48 African member states insisted that the EPAs undermined the AU's vision for an African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) – that was declared into existence in January 2021 – since, in their view, the agreements provided European companies an unfair competitive advantage in accessing African markets. In December 2020, the EU and the renamed Organisation of African, Caribbean, and Pacific States (OACPS) reached consensus on implementing the EPAs. The new post-Cotonou pact, built on three pillars of development cooperation; economic and trade cooperation; and political cooperation, aims to contribute to poverty eradication and to integrate African economies into the global economy.

Critics of the Africa/EU partnership have further noted the asymmetry in power relations within the bilateral relationship, arguing that the EU has sometimes imposed its policy preferences on the AU. The mismatch between the EU and the AU is further evidence of an unequal relationship: in 2020, the 55 AU member states had a combined population of 1.3 billion, with a gross domestic product (GDP) of \$2.3 trillion, while the 27-member EU had a population of 447.7 million and a GDP of \$15 trillion. Both Africa and the EU must therefore develop an effective partnership based on mutual global obligations such as the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The European Commission's March 2020 revised Strategy with Africa highlights several geo-political, economic, and migration challenges confronting this strategic partnership.

Africa's changing position in the global arena presents the continent with an opportunity to improve its relations with the EU. European Commission President, Germany's Ursula von der Leyen, whose first diplomatic visit upon assuming office was to the AU Commission in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa in December 2019, noted that Africa/EU relations would, in the short term, focus on COVID-19 assistance and relief for Africa's external debt of \$417 billion. The various gains made within the broader Africa/EU relationship, including the plethora of bilateral and multilateral agreements between both continents, could be undermined by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, an appropriate response is critical, focused on public health support and debt relief for African countries. In addition, the migration-development nexus between Africa and Europe presents both sides with a political framework for future mutual cooperation. The global economic recession triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic will affect Africa/EU relations in many areas, including migration governance. This has created a renewed search for innovative and sustainable policy solutions at the national, regional, and global levels.

“ European Commission President, Germany's Ursula von der Leyen, noted that Africa/EU relations would, in the short term, focus on COVID-19 assistance and debt relief. ”



THE FIRST DIPLOMATIC VISIT OF EU COMMISSION PRESIDENT, URSULA VON DER LEYEN, TO ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA, IN DECEMBER 2019.

IMAGE SOURCE - European Union
LINK - https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/jordan/71672/remarks-president-von-der-leyen-joint-press-statement-moussa-faki-chairperson-african-union_he

4. Africa/EU Migration in an Era of COVID-19

The Africa/EU migration debate has often created divergence between Africa and Europe. For African actors, migration is widely seen as a developmental phenomenon that is beneficial to sending, transit, and receiving countries. In contrast, many EU governments have frequently treated migration as a security concern, and thus adopted harsher restrictions for entry and increased returns of African migrants. While both continents have pursued skills migration partnerships specifically around labour migration, legal pathways are not easily accessible for most African migrants.

“ The International Organization for Migration’s November 2020 *Africa Migration Report* found that, of the total global migrant population residing in Africa, 79 per cent were born on the continent, suggesting far higher levels of intra-continental migration than cross-continental migration of Africans to Europe. ”

Africa/EU migration is a historical reality which predates the era of colonialism. The International Organization for Migration’s November 2020 *Africa Migration Report* found that, of the total global migrant population residing in Africa, 79 per cent were born on the continent, suggesting far higher levels of intra-continental migration than cross-continental migration of Africans to Europe. According to the IOM’s 2020 report, of the 40.2 million African migrants globally in 2020, only 26 per cent migrated to the EU, while 53 per cent remained on their own continent. The report also found that 94 per cent of African migrants crossing oceans use regular routes, meaning that Africans migrating to Europe employ regular migration channels at a greater rate than irregular pathways. Despite these realities, the illegal migration of Africans to Europe continues to dominate policy and public discourses due to the graphic depiction of African “boat people” as a horde of frightening aliens in much of the European media. Both the EU’s 2006 Rabat and 2014 Khartoum processes – the latter was spurred by the Libyan migrant crisis of 2011 – focused heavily on Brussels’s security concerns. In contrast, the AU’s 2018 Migration Policy Framework for Africa (MPFA) conceptualised human mobility as a barometer of development, and thus provides the EU with an example of how to approach migration from a more positive perspective, informed by evidence-based research.



COVER OF THE NOVEMBER 2020 AFRICA MIGRATION REPORT.

IMAGE SOURCE - Reliefweb
LINK - <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/africa-migration-report-challenging-narrative>

Europe and Africa have been impacted by COVID-19 in diverse ways, with both continents currently experiencing a second wave of infections. By 1 June 2021, Africa had officially recorded 4,895,695 cases of COVID-19, including 131,317 deaths. The EU has been more severely affected, with 32,149,247 cases and 726,918 deaths by 2 June 2021. A September 2020 IOM report on *Migration in West and North Africa and Across the Mediterranean* noted that the overall flow of irregular migration to Europe from Africa decreased by 25 per cent, compared to 2019. EU countries responded in various ways: some, like France, fast-tracked citizenship application processes for migrants, while others such as Spain, closed migrant detention centres, citing the inability to implement social distancing measures as a health risk. African and EU non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have highlighted human rights abuses and violations of non-refoulement practices – the legal principle which prevents destination countries from sending refugees and asylum-seekers back to conflict zones – that contravene international statutes such as the 2018 UN Global Compact for Safe, Regular, and Orderly Migration. While the COVID-19 crisis has stymied migration flows from Africa to Europe, the root causes of migration such as poverty, conflict, and climate change will continue to trigger irregular migrant flows, if not urgently addressed.

Furthermore, the precariousness of migrant jobs in Europe has negatively affected the crucial remittances sent home by African migrants. Portuguese UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, projected in May 2020 that remittances from Europe-based migrants to Africa were expected to drop by 23.1 per cent: from \$48 billion in 2019 to \$37 billion in 2020. According to the World Bank, remittances to Africa, however, recovered from this decline: in 2020, \$42 billion was sent to Africa which represented a 12.5 per cent decline from 2019, while \$43 billion was projected to be remitted to the continent in 2021, suggesting both the resilience of migrants in supporting their families under harsh economic conditions, and the uncertainty of predicting the impact of the major structural changes caused by COVID-19. In the third quarter of 2020, Africa had the highest remittance transfer fees globally at about 8.5 per cent. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of 2016–2030 projected a 3 per cent remittance transfer fee by 2030, and private sectors in both Africa and Europe will have a critical role to play in achieving this goal. There is thus an opportunity for African and EU governments jointly to increase and facilitate remittances from Europe to Africa as a means of contributing substantively to Africa's aspirations for socio-economic development.



“ The precariousness of migrant jobs in Europe has negatively affected the crucial remittances sent home by African migrants. ”

AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS HARVEST CLEMENTINES IN CORIGLIANO-ROSSANO, CALABRIA, ITALY, IN DECEMBER 2020. AGRICULTURE IS ONE OF THE SECTORS THAT REMAINED ACTIVE DESPITE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

IMAGE SOURCE - Info Migrants
PHOTO CREDIT - Picture alliance / abaca | Di Vincenzo Alfonso/IPA/ABACAPRESS.COM
LINK - <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/29885/europe-few-routes-for-unskilled-migrants>

5. Policy Recommendations

The following five key policy recommendations emerged from the one-day policy dialogue in November 2020:

1. First, AU and EU governments should build alliances that promote win-win frameworks for all parties, and address the historical power imbalances inherent in this partnership. The immediate focus of the relationship should prioritise COVID-19 support, debt relief and cancellation, and economic assistance to African countries.
2. Second, there is an urgent need for evidence-based research that informs decision-making and policy designs to ensure that the root causes of African migration to Europe are speedily addressed, and that the often negative European perceptions of African migrants as parasitic aliens is altered to embrace more positive and sympathetic views.
3. Third, in order to promote safe, orderly, and regular migration, African and European governments should consider effective border management systems that take into account issues such as trade, security, public health, and the risks of cross-border COVID-19 transmissions.

4. Fourth, EU governments must ensure that African migrants are included in their responses to COVID-19, health coverage, and other social protection schemes, as the cost of migrant protection is minimal compared to the much larger contributions of African migrants to European economies.
5. Fifth, the fee for transferring remittances from the EU to Africa must be reduced to less than 5 per cent from its current 8.5 per cent, especially in the era of COVID-19 during which jobs have become precarious, and in view of the increasingly important role played by remittances in many households and national economies across Africa.



“ AU and EU governments should build alliances that promote win-win frameworks for all parties, and address the historical power imbalances inherent in this partnership. ”

PARTICIPANTS AT IPATC'S ONE-DAY POLICY DIALOGUE ON "AFRICA/ EU RELATIONS IN THE ERA OF COVID-19".

IMAGE SOURCE - IPATC

LINK - <https://ipatc.joburg/1-africa-european-union-eu-relations-in-the-era-of-covid-19/>



This policy brief is part of a project supported by the German Federal Foreign Office in Berlin through the *Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen's* Zivik Programme.

