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AU-EU cooperation on climate and energy: IN SEARCH OF A COMMON NARRATIVE

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Climate has been on the agenda of the AU-EU partnership from the start, yet while both the EU and Africa have a strong stake in accelerating climate change mitigation, a clear common agenda has remained elusive, largely due to the historical climate injustice between the two continents.

This note takes a closer look at the engagement between the EU and the AU on climate, the environment and green transition, as well as the interests and incentives that underpin ongoing cooperation. While Europe and Africa have different climate needs and interests, some of the building blocks of a joint AU-EU agenda are starting to appear. These notably include common interests in renewable energy expansion and an ambitious global green recovery narrative. At the same time, a number of critical challenges remain, including perceptions of potential negative economic consequences of the EU's internal transition.

AU-EU cooperation on climate and energy cannot be isolated from the wider global health crisis and the post-COVID economic recovery. Achieving an ambitious AU-EU alliance on climate and green transition will to a large extent depend on the ability of Europe and other powers to ensure an equitable and sustainable global recovery in the short term.

Introduction¹

The Von der Leyen Commission put a lot of political capital into renewing the partnership with Africa and working with the African Union (AU) as an ‘equal partner’. In March 2020, just days before the COVID-19 pandemic hit Europe, it published its communication ‘towards a comprehensive strategy with Africa’, its opening offer in the run-up to the planned 2020 AU-EU summit, in which the European Union (EU) outlined how it would like the partnership to move forward (EC/HRVP 2020). Reflecting the centrality of the European Green Deal (EGD) for the EU, the ‘Africa strategy’ also leads with a proposed partnership for ‘green transition and energy access’, a call to jointly work towards a low-carbon, resource efficient and climate-resilient future.

Preparations for the AU-EU summit have since fallen victim to the COVID-19 pandemic, and while especially the European Council presidency held out hope to get it organised before the end of 2020, the process lost momentum and African support, and the summit was postponed (Laporte 2020). The summit will most probably be further postponed until 2022, given the slow and uneven progress in global vaccine rollout, and the absence of a clear common agenda or joint announcement for the AU-EU partnership. While overshadowed by crisis, the EU in particular is eager to get the process going, with HRVP Borell announcing his wish for 2021 to be the EU’s Africa year (Fox 2020), while Council president Charles Michel called to focus on substance, and engage on climate, among a range of key priorities for collaboration (Herszenhorn 2021).

This note² builds on ECDPM analysis of the external dimension of the European Green Deal (Teevan et al. 2021b; Di Ciommo et al. 2021) and takes a closer look at the engagement between the EU and AU on climate, the environment and green transition. It looks at the interests and incentives that underpin ongoing cooperation and tries to characterise and explain recent developments. It also illustrates the practice of

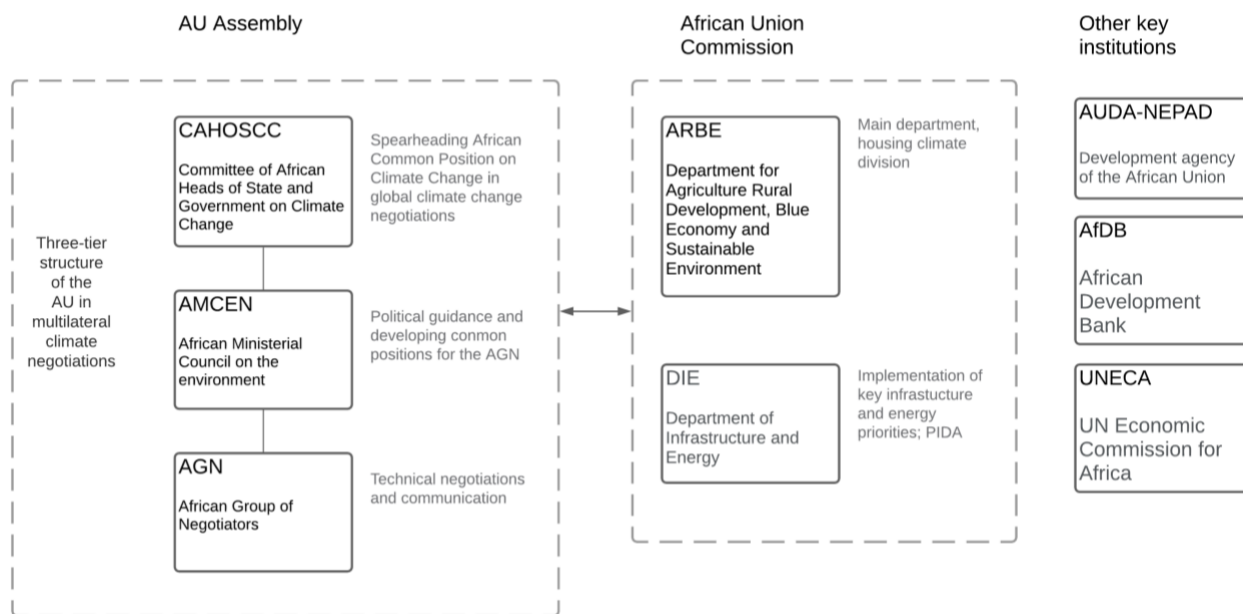
AU-EU cooperation in the fields of renewable energy and adaptation, and identifies strategic options for effective EU-AU cooperation on climate in the short term.

Understanding Africa and the AU as a climate actor

Africa has been collectively represented in multilateral climate negotiations since COP1 in 1995, but especially since the COP15 in Copenhagen it is seen as a key player. African countries generally converge around their call for taking account of the special circumstances of African countries, namely that Africa faces higher climate vulnerability than other parts of the world, while it is responsible for less than 4% of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. African leaders therefore often consider the agenda of reducing GHG emissions to be a clear responsibility for the industrialised world, while Africa’s climate related challenges are more a matter of adaptation and environmental protection. They also feel that the push towards net zero emissions should not prevent the continent from developing its economy, energy access and industrialisation process. African positions in the UNFCCC process most clearly converge on issues like ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ (COP21) and ensuring African access to ‘means of implementation’ through climate finance (COP25), showing that African multilateral climate engagement has a strong grounding in the concept of climate justice.

These overall African climate interests are also reflected in the AU’s institutional structure for addressing climate change. Contrary to the EU for example, the AU places climate change among a range of environmental challenges, under the lead of the AU Commissioner for Agriculture Rural Development, Blue Economy and Sustainable Environment (previously Agriculture and rural development).

Figure 1: Key African political and institutional structures relevant to climate change



Source: Author, based on [AU](#), [NEPAD](#), and [Chin-Yee et al. 2020](#).

On the continent itself, the AU has focused on a number of major priority projects, such as the Great Green Wall of the Sahara and Sahel Initiative (GGW),³ while also integrating climate in several key programmes, such as the AU’s Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP). The AU’s own draft Climate Change strategy has been under development since 2014 (AU 2014), and is reportedly again on the agenda of the new AU Commission that started in 2021.

Overall, while there is a relatively clear African positioning in the UNFCCC process, the AU’s institutional and regulatory power in the field of climate change is limited, when compared to the EU. Member states are firmly in the driving seat when it comes to the African climate agenda and show a broad convergence on a number of issues, including the need to tackle growing climate risks and to work along the climate-security nexus. African leaders also increasingly see opportunities in renewable energy deployment, and opportunities for leapfrogging outdated technologies to accelerate electrification. Some countries, Morocco, most notably are also leading examples of renewable energy. At the same time, the continent is home to vastly different economies, ranging from long-term fossil fuel exporters like Nigeria and Algeria to coal dependent economies like South

Africa or an aspiring gas hub like Mozambique, all of which have profoundly different needs and interests in green transition.

EU interests and expectations

The EU’s expectations with regard to Africa are multilayered and diverse, as are its diplomatic and cooperation efforts. While the EU aspires to a strong political partnership with the AU, the very different structures and competencies of the two institutions mean that such a partnership is partial at best for the time being. The EU thus continues to engage in large part at the level of AU member states and with the RECs. This is also the case on climate and green transition.

The EU’s ‘green deal diplomacy’ aims to bring climate and green transition into all of its external partnerships, and this is also the case for AU-EU relations. The EU hopes that on the environment and climate, the EU and AU can ‘speak with a common voice’ especially in a crucial year for global key commitments, notably due to COP 15 and COP 26. Leaders including Josep Borell, Charles Michel and Ursula von der Leyen have all expressed their wish to engage with Africa on climate, energy and the environment (Fox 2020; Herszenhorn

2021). However, beyond the thematic priorities in the EU's Africa strategy and overall partnership rhetoric, there is no clear joint climate agenda on the table yet. While this is often seen as a shortcoming, it also shows a different approach to the African Union as a strategic partner.

As the EU is trying to rebalance the AU-EU partnership on a more equal footing it has also become more careful not to unilaterally propose agendas, joint declarations and initiatives, and is hoping to use its continent-to-continent dialogue to jointly fill in the agenda, particularly for the upcoming summit. In terms of the European green deal and green transition, EU officials emphasise that they do not try to replicate the EU model in their outreach to the AU, but to work with the AU. This means supporting it in setting out and implementing key priorities, most notably the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), but also the AU's Climate Strategy and Circular Economy Action Plan, and Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA). There is also broad agreement, in theory, on wider environmental challenges such as desertification, reforestation and biodiversity.

At the same time, the EU has strong interests in green transition in Africa, and is trying to adapt to the needs of different partner countries in Africa so as to develop a shared agenda on relevant aspects of the green transition. In bilateral cooperation with African countries, the EU has focused on a range of priorities including sustainable food systems, renewable energy, water and circular economy, depending on local needs. The EU is particularly interested in the opportunities of a growing renewable energy market (accompanying the AfCFTA). This is an area in which the EU has been seen to lose ground to the Chinese offer, both in large-scale infrastructure and in decentralised renewable energy systems and is therefore part of a geopolitical play for influence.

Shifting the narrative to energy and the environment

Climate has been a formal priority for the AU-EU partnership since the launch of the Joint Africa-EU

strategy (JAES) in 2007, yet in reality never made it to the top of the agenda, and never led to a clear common project between the two partners mostly because of a deficit of political support on both sides (Tondel et al. 2015). Instead, EU-Africa summit declarations included a regular restating of broad common interests in tackling climate change, while the Abidjan declaration (2017) makes reference to the Paris Agreement.

While AU and EU members share an interest in limiting global heating and staying well within the limits set by the Paris Agreement, they are on opposite sides of the spectrum between the industrialised world and developing countries. As a result, the narrative of 'climate change' (and especially reducing GHG emissions) has not always been the best entry point for common action. There is clear common understanding of the urgency and severe risks climate change entails for Africa, there is less than full agreement, however, on the responsibility for financing green transition efforts, or the specific pathways for a greener industrialisation (Lopes 2021a). More recently, the European green deal has also been met with scepticism and a degree of apprehension in Africa, where especially the EU's future Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) is seen as a potentially protectionist measure, which could harm African economies that are already struggling (Bauer-Babef 2021).

In the past few years, the EU has made a conscious effort to shift the narrative towards a more positive engagement on energy, green jobs and investment, both in its relations with Africa, but also in its climate (and energy) diplomacy more widely. On 23 April, following a series of 'green talks', the Portuguese presidency of the EU hosted High-Level EU-Africa Forum on Green Investment, where the European Investment Bank presented €350 million of new support to green energy and clean water access in African countries, building on the announcement of a record €5 billion EIB engagement in Africa in 2020 (EIB 2021a, 2021b).

Focusing on energy access and green jobs, but also issues like clean water infrastructure or circular economy (van Seters 2020) helps make the link to African priorities and urgent needs (see Lopes 2021b).

EU officials in particular also see this as an agenda which “they can work on”, and move beyond the level of repeated declarations and summitry, while also opening the door to clear EU geopolitical and internal transition interests. Environmental protection and biodiversity also present opportunities for a common narrative, however this is less well developed at this stage.⁴

The months ahead of COP15 and COP26 offer some opportunities to move the agenda forward on the basis of a more positive and cooperative narrative, both on energy and a more interlinked climate-environment approach. There are several opportunities to engage, including the G20 development ministerial in June 2021 and leadership summit in October 2021 (Teevan et al. 2021a). What is needed in the short run, however, is a clearer set of joint actions/ambitions to underpin a meaningful AU-EU agenda.

Box 1: AU-EU cooperation in practice: renewable energy

EU cooperation with Africa on (renewable) energy predates the European green deal. It also illustrates the multilayered approach of the EU’s relations with Africa, and shows both the value added and limitations of AU-EU cooperation on green transition.

The AU and EU have been involved in the Africa-Europe Energy partnership since the Joint Africa EU Strategy (JAES), which provides a platform for high-level dialogue and feeds into key joint initiatives (AEEP 2017). In 2014, in parallel to the US’ PowerAfrica initiative, the EU allocated €2 billion in grants alone to sustainable energy in Africa. Under the previous EU Commission (2014-2019), the EU also made a significant push for greater (private) investment in African energy infrastructure. Following the EGD, the EU’s focus has shifted to renewable energy in particular, notably moving away from natural gas, but support to the energy sector is a key priority and area of strategic interest for the EU.

While the high-level political dialogue with the EU is generally seen as a useful entry point, particularly on issues like priority continental infrastructure (PIDA), in reality most EU-AU cooperation takes place at the member state level. The AU has limited regulatory power over member states in the energy sector, and most transnational energy cooperation takes place either through regional economic communities (RECs) or dedicated sub-regional constructions (Medinilla et al. 2019). Clean energy (in the broad sense) will be a substantial feature of the EU’s cooperation with African countries; however, the EU is also just one external player among many in Africa’s growing energy sector.⁵ It does have a number of specific features, that can (potentially) set it apart in the years to come:

- **A clear regional and continental outlook.** A siloed, national approach to energy reform has contributed to slow progress in Africa’s electrification. The partnership with the AU and regional approach of the EU means that it can support energy systems reform as an accompanying measure to the AfCFTA, focusing not only on generation but also regional interconnections, grid renewal and maintenance. These are efforts that can come with high upfront costs, or offer only indirect, and long-term returns.
- Increasing use of **blended finance** allows the EU to integrate ‘bankable’ investments in a broader sectoral reform approach, which can open doors to new opportunities in the short to medium term.
- Working bilaterally and with the RECs, allows the EU to support critical **regulatory reforms** and strengthen its position as a norm- and standard-setter on energy transition (Pastukhova 2020). While direct integration with Europe is most important for North African countries, the EU also has an interest in supporting regional interconnections within Africa, as well as helping achieve organised pathways for better integrating decentralised solutions in national energy systems.
- Finally, the EU has an interest in ensuring a clear **joint research and innovation** approach with Africa on renewable energy, ensuring a clear link with job creation and technology and skills transfer, as the innovation drive under the EGD picks up speed. This appears to be a moving target. In 2020-2021, the EU launched several initiatives for supporting renewable energy, specifically framed in an AU-EU and EGD context, including under a Horizon 2020 EGD call (European Commission n.d.), and a dedicated facility for intercontinental consortia (LEAP-RE n.d)

Conclusions: Connecting AU-EU cooperation to a green recovery agenda

Climate has been on the agenda of the AU-EU partnership from the start, yet while both the EU and Africa have a strong stake in accelerating climate change mitigation, cooperation has remained superficial and piecemeal. The AU-EU process in particular has long since failed to produce a strong joint agenda, while the link between high-level political dialogue and (bilateral) cooperation has been weak at best. The strong push for accelerated climate targets and European plans for a CBAM, also risk sharpening the sense of a historical climate injustice in Europe-Africa relations. Africans fear they have been handed the short end of the stick twice, not having contributed to global climate breakdown, while now being forced to make costly transitions that will leave them with significant stranded assets.

While these structural factors have limited the scope for an effective AU-EU alliance on climate in the past, the AU-EU narrative has increasingly shifted from climate to energy access and green jobs, opening up opportunities that respond to African interests, as well as the EU's ambitions to lead on green technology, and to be a standard setter in the energy sector. The bulk of cooperation takes place at the level of AU member states and RECs, but AU-EU dialogue on renewable energy and green jobs offers a long-term entry point moving forward. However, the EU's eagerness to engage in renewable energy should not come at the expense of a strong signal on climate change adaptation and environmental protection (Knaepen 2020).

EU cooperation with Africa continues to rely heavily on EU ODA resources, and while EUR 29.3 billion of the new NDICI have been earmarked for Sub-Saharan Africa, the eventual impact of these funds will be limited. To put this into perspective, African countries lose several billions in infrastructure due to climate shocks every year (Karombo 2021).⁶ Significant efforts have been made to mobilise EU climate finance and using blended finance, which is especially relevant in

the field of energy infrastructure (EC 2015). African climate finance needs however, remain to a large extent unmet, and the EU has an interest in mobilising OECD partners to not only live up to the 2020 commitment of \$100 billion per year, but to treat this as a starting point, not a ceiling. Adaptation finance in particular, focusing on water cooperation, sustainable agriculture and nature-based solutions, is facing a serious gap on the continent (Knaepen 2020).

In the run-up to COP26 in 2021 and in the wake of the pandemic, AU-EU cooperation on climate and energy is not a conversation that can be held in isolation from the wider challenge of economic recovery and global health crisis. The EU adopted the green deal as its own green recovery strategy. A similar narrative is starting to emerge in Africa as well. In March 2021, UNECA launched its Building Forward for an African Green Recovery report, which makes a case for a "recovery centred on sustainable use of resources and [bringing] value throughout the production and consumption cycle as part of a circular green economy" (UNECA 2021). AU leadership have also adopted a green recovery narrative, putting a lot of emphasis on renewable energy and finance (AU 2020).

As the US overturned a previous veto for IMF Special Drawing Rights (SDR) in April 2021, the road to approve a proposed \$650 billion global package, supported by the EU and member states, looks clear (Fabricius 2021). \$33 billion of this SDR allocation would be directly available to African countries, and at the May 2021 summit on financing African Economies in Paris, France, and a number of other advanced and emerging economies committed to transferring SDRs to Africa on highly concessional terms, with a view to triple available resources to \$100 billion (Georgieva 2021). As the momentum for ambitious debt restructuring increases, other debt relief measures that have been proposed include debt-for-climate swaps and debt-for-nature swaps. The IMF and World Bank are currently working to present options for such 'green swaps' by November (Shalal 2021). While these measures do not directly involve the AU-EU partnership – the EU does not own debt directly – public support through the G20 and other fora for an ambitious green recovery will be key in the months to come. Ultimately, the EU is both looking to support and asking for goodwill from its

African partners for the success of the European green deal, and will need to use all the (diplomatic) resources it has available to secure this support.

The AU-EU summit will most likely be postponed until 2022, which means it will take place after COP15 and COP26 (provided those dates remain fixed), yet a joint ministerial meeting is likely to take place over the summer in 2021. A joint declaration ahead of COP26 therefore is not currently on the cards. Some of the building blocks of a joint AU-EU agenda on climate are starting to appear, particularly around common interests in renewable energy expansion and an ambitious global green recovery narrative. At the same

time, a number of critical challenges remain, including perceptions of economic risks presented by the EU's internal transition. The more open tone of AU-EU relations, and increasing involvement of (internal) line DGs in political dialogue in the past few years may be an opportunity for a frank direct exchange on difficult issues like the CBAM, stranded assets, particularly in relation to recent expansion of African natural gas production. The coming months will also be an opportunity to present a clearer common narrative around green recovery and climate finance, particularly for an ambitious adaptation and resilience drive in the most vulnerable African countries.

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Endnotes

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- ² This note is one of a three-part series produced in collaboration with the Open Society European Policy Institute. The series unpacks the evolving EU financial and policy framework for addressing climate and green transition in its external relations, focusing specifically on the (in)direct external effects of the European Green Deal, EU climate finance and international cooperation and the role of climate in the EU-Africa partnership.
- ³ The GGW initiative is a flagship project conceived by the AU in 2007 to combat desertification with the world's largest (re-)forestation campaign. While results have been attained, progress has been uneven across member states, and in 2020 it was reported that a mere 4% of the target area has been covered so far (Watts 2020).
- ⁴ The EU's Africa strategy and EGD communication included plans for a NaturAfrica initiative, yet these were later met with criticism from the environmental and minority rights communities for promoting an unsustainable and outdated conservation model (Eisen et al. 2020).
- ⁵ While it is difficult to give a precise estimate of Chinese aid and investment in African energy, researchers identify a steep rise in the 2010s. Between 2000 and 2018 total finance from The China Development Bank (CDB) and the Export Import Bank of China (CHEXIM) to Africa's energy sector amounted to an estimated \$41.8 billion (Shen 2020).
- ⁶ German Watch estimates that Mozambique in 2019 alone suffered total damage and economic loss of over \$4 billion from extreme weather events (Eckstein et al. 2021).

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