EU-AU RELATIONS -
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EU-AU RELATIONS - A PROSPEROUS PARTNERSHIP OF EQUALS

The EU-African Union summit aimed at finalising a new 'strategic partnership' between the two continents may have been postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Socialist and Democrat group in the European Parliament hosted its own three day Africa Week between 13-15 October.

In this event report, EURACTIV looks at the S&D group’s priorities in ensuring strong EU-African relations, and that African countries have a prosperous and sustainable future.
Close EU-Africa relations more important than ever, says Socialist group leader

2021 must be EU’s ‘Africa year’, says Borrell

The importance of engaging with Africa
The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of strong EU-African relations, Iratxe García, the leader of the Socialist and Democrat group in the European Parliament, told EURACTIV as her political group launched its Africa week (13-15 October).

Iratxe García spoke with EURACTIV’s Benjamin Fox.

**We were expecting the EU-African Union summit to take place this month. Has the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of close EU-African relations?**

Indeed! The pandemic shows that this bi-continental relation is more important than ever. That is why the decision to move the summit to next year is just to allow a better environment to examine issues beneficial to both. To the existing agenda we now have to add new challenges posed by the effects of the virus. We also expect to have more certainty in respect of trials on vaccines and other interventions. This will help the summit to discuss with a clearer picture than we have now. In any case, we are hosting Africa Week, which in itself reflects the importance we place on the EU-Africa relations.

**African leaders expect better trade relations with Europe and the ability to build up their own domestic and regional**
manufacturing capabilities to export more ‘finished’ goods rather than raw materials. What is the S&D group’s position on this?

We are advocates of value addition and inclusion of Africa in the global value and supply chains; we have in the past, made input to this effect towards the EU-AFRICA strategy. We are of the strong belief that shifting economic models from extraction to manufacturing benefits both continents. More importantly, our values have a pro-worker bias and we therefore view this as a step towards the creation of millions of decent jobs proportionate to projected population growth.

Having said that, it is also important to ensure that the natural resources are used to the benefit of the population, and not just a few. Our group has organised in the past several conferences on the “The resource curse”, and the problem is still there, and it is unfair. We all have a responsibility to turn natural resources into a blessing. Economic growth must be both inclusive and sustainable, and extractive accumulation models are neither. Often basic human rights are not respected.

Besides, the sale of minerals is susceptible to price shocks on the global markets, it creates instability and uncertainty. We do not want our African neighbours to make progress today and regress the following day because metal prices have changed overnight, just like we witnessed during this era of COVID-19.

You talk about Africa “becoming a world leader in the production and use of renewable and efficient energy that respects environmental standards”. What should the EU do to facilitate that?

Africa has huge deposits of natural gas, and most of it receives up to 10 hours of sunshine a day for the greater part of the year. These two factors place Africa in an advantageous position. Since there is already an energy and power deficit in Africa, it would be very easy to phase out the environmentally unfriendly energy. On top of that, power sources like coal are not benefiting the majority of the people, especially in Sub Sahara Africa, therefore the cost of the transition is low.

The EU could offer technical assistance in the transition. In Europe we already have big solar projects – some of them in my own country, Spain – and the experts who can help the transition to self-management in Africa. We also have to bear in mind that companies in the EU can partner with Africans in rolling out the energy infrastructure. This would not only generate energy but jobs on both sides.

The Commission has just published its plans to overhaul the Dublin regulations on EU immigration and asylum. Many African governments want the EU to move on legal pathways before agreeing to do more on migrant returns. What is your position on this?

Let me first say that our goal should be to create opportunities in Africa. I am all for legal pathways for migration, and we are working for that. It is a priority for the S&D. However, I wish that people would not have to leave their home and their families because they need to escape from conflict, or famine, from persecution or simply for desperation for the lack of decent jobs for a decent livelihood. We cannot just accept the brain drain of African youth, because Africa also needs all that energy and ambition. So we have to work both ways: to build a future for the young in Africa, and also to improve the EU response to migration.

The Dublin Regulation only relates to the distribution relocation of asylum seekers who are already on EU territory, while the proposal for an EU resettlement regulation which has been on the table since the last legislature remains a priority, as well as our S-D legislative initiative for a humanitarian visa, regrettfully remained unanswered so far.

My Group is also very active to facilitate legal migration. In the Committee on Civil Liberties, our members are leading negotiations to revise the EU Blue Card Directive, to simplify procedures and improve intra-EU mobility. Our vice-president Miriam Dalli is also drafting an own-initiative report on legal labour migration, and she will present it in only two weeks.

How have the plans for an Africa-EU Partnership been affected by the pandemic?

Obviously, the foundation of the programmes we were targeting has changed. Well, the socio-economic

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circumstances have changed, and in most cases, we have to wait longer to reach certain milestones we were targeting in the short to medium term. In other words, most goals are now long term, the short-term goal is now entirely that of surviving COVID-19 and protecting our population. The medium-term is the management of the transition. This also means we have to redirect resources otherwise meant for other projects to deal with an emergency of the pandemic, unfortunately.

The S&D group talks about a ‘more mature and contemporary’ EU-Africa partnership. What would this look like?

It should be mutually beneficial with shared responsibilities and decisions made by both sides. It is about treating each other with respect, not having plans imposed on the other. I think that this is important because any relation is built on trust and equality. This is something that Europe has not always understood in its relations with Africa. No one should feel short-changed or manipulated because they negotiated from a point of weakness. This is our target.

What is likely to change from the Commission’s paper on the ‘EU-Africa Strategy’ published in March, and what influence can the European Parliament have over it?

In the short term, all the focus will be on dealing with COVID-19, and on working together to see it through and continue to protect the people in our two continents. That also includes redirecting resources in the long term to promote civic engagement and participation. It also includes the urgent response to the pandemic and associated issues like feeding vulnerable populations whose livelihoods were affected by the measures meant to combat the virus. Providing these safety nets costs money which was not budgeted for when the strategy was initially drafted.

The aftermath, of course, involves dealing with a recession which will affect the entire globe. Therefore that also changes priorities for us. It is important to get people back to work so that they can provide for them and their families. Millions of jobs have been lost in Africa, and the most affected industries are travel and hospitality.

The World Bank has just stated that two of Africa’s biggest economies, Nigeria and South Africa, will shrink by double figures, which means it will be even harder for smaller economies. Where we were focusing on creating new decent jobs we now have to start by the restoration of the old ones.

Our influence is to help put together priority areas, which are beneficial to the people and in particular to women. The pandemic has even tougher consequences on women and girls, so they need special attention. For us, it is important to strengthen contacts with civil society and political cooperation. We must avoid vaccine nationalism while emphasising border closures should be a last resort and acknowledge the important role played by civil society, opposition parties, an independent judiciary and a free press in holding governments to account during this crisis.

What is the status of the EU’s post-Cotonou negotiations? What will happen if there is no new agreement by the end of 2020?

On the post-Cotonou, we have been informed that negotiations have made significant progress hoping to conclude soon. Both negotiating parties are satisfied with the results achieved so far. Although there are some sections, including the multiannual financial framework (MFF), which is still in progress. So we are still working to improve the outcome.
With plans for a new EU-Africa ‘partnership’ blueprint delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic this year, 2021 should be “the Africa year for the European Union,” the EU’s chief diplomat, Josep Borrell, said during the Socialist and Democrat group’s Africa Week.

That, plus the insistence by speakers that EU-African relations must be a “genuine partnership of equals” was the main message of the centre-left group’s fourth Africa Week on 13-15 October.

With the EU-AU summit postponed because of the pandemic, the three-day online gathering was a chance to feed into the process ahead of a ‘mini-summit’ in early December and a full EU-AU summit next year.

The African economy is likely to contract by 3.3% this year before rebounding by a similar level in 2021. However, that will result in real GDP falling to 2007 levels, according to the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

“We must listen to what you, African leaders and African citizens have to say. It must be a two-way conversation that is a real partnership,” said the S&D group leader, Iratxe García Pérez, adding that “only via honest exchange based on trust can we develop a true partnership in which both can work together.”

In the meantime, García Pérez and other speakers called on the EU to lead the push for an ambitious international debt restricting programme to ensure that African countries are not pushed into debt distress as a result of the pandemic.

“Campaigning for debt suspension is not enough. It is necessary to

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restructure external debt,” said García Pérez.

That message was echoed by Borrell, who warned that “in Africa, the economic consequences will be bigger than for health.”

“We have to talk about debt relief and not just about the freezing of debt payments,” he said, adding that “for most countries, if we do not give debt relief then they will be in debt crisis.”

Despite the warnings that a handful of African sovereigns will likely face default because of the pandemic, little progress has been made to avert the crisis.

At the autumn meetings of the IMF and World Bank, and the G20, leaders agreed only to a six-month extension of the G20’s debt service suspension initiative and a commitment to publish a ‘Common Framework for Debt Treatments’ in November, setting out debt restructuring proposals on a country-by-country basis.

Borrell said that more than €8bn of EU funding had been mobilised for sub-Saharan Africa but conceded that “I know that it is far from what is needed”.

“It is one of the rare occasions where the word ‘strategic’ is justified. The future of our partnership matters.

We share a common strategy with Africa,” Borrell said and added that the European Commission was seeking to make “our partnership more ambitious and more political”.

He also underscored the potential of the African continent to become the world leader in renewable energy production, a point reinforced by García Pérez, who added that the continent could also lead in sustainable agriculture.

Borrell also emphasised the need to ensure that African governments see the EU’s Green Transition as an economic opportunity.

“ ‘We have to explain that the European green deal is not hidden protectionism – it should be perceived as a new model of economic growth,” he said.

Nathalie Yamb, an advisor to the Freedom and Democracy (LIDER) party in Ivory Coast, urged the EU to focus on promoting democracy in African countries.

“We expect from you is to reinforce the democratic pillar on which Europe has been built. If youth know that they are not excluded from elections and can take part in a democratic process and have hope in the future in their own country then they will be fine,” she said.

Ruka Sanussi, executive director of the Ghana Climate Innovation Center, called on policymakers to take more account of small businesses in Africa, pointing out that SMEs in Ghana account for 85% of jobs but their needs are rarely considered by lawmakers.

The EU-AU summit is expected to focus on the blueprint drawn up by the European Commission in March for a ‘strategic partnership’ between the EU and Africa. The paper promised to “build a more prosperous, more peaceful and more sustainable future for all”, around five proposed partnerships on energy, digitalisation, inward investment, peace and migration.

“The main narrative was that we want an equal partnership – we don’t want to have a donor-recipient relationship. Even though the strategy is still valid, COVID-19 has changed a lot,” said Jutta Urpilainen, the EU’s International Partnerships Commissioner.

That is likely to prompt an expansion of the agenda to include provisions to reinforce health care systems across all African countries and increase EU investment in education.
The importance of engaging with Africa

By Carlos Zorrinho and Udo Bullmann | S&D Group

To paraphrase the words of the American political activist Ralph Nader – if you’re not turned on to Africa, Africa will turn on you.

Udo Bullmann is the S&D group Coordinator on the European Parliament’s Development Committee.

Carlos Zorrinho is an S&D MEP and Co-President of the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly.

For decades, the Socialists and Democrats have been turning on to Africa, as a constant theme of our political engagement in the European Parliament. Far from seeing the African continent as a problem, the S&D Group sees the opportunities and every year we curate a fully-fledged event on Africa-EU relations with African personalities, politicians, young people and representatives of civil society joining us to discuss and outline our common future. This year is no exception – despite the global Covid-19 pandemic.

The S&Ds’ 2020 ‘Africa Week’ will mainly focus on democracy, digital

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transition, inequality, decent jobs, climate change and a new Africa-EU partnership for sustainable development.

The fact that the fourth edition of Africa Week is organized in a hybrid, half on-site/half remote way sets the tone for the new challenges we face. The pandemic has hit the two continents like a hurricane. Millions of jobs are being lost. Inequality and poverty are growing, small businesses are closing and many countries are experiencing the worst recession since WWII. Covid-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities within and between countries, and has put at risk the progress made so far in reducing poverty.

A socially just approach is the only way out of this crisis. Our values of solidarity cannot change. On the contrary, they should be our compass to foster a sustainable economic and social transformation.

We will be working to ensure that the new Africa-EU partnership is based on equal footing, respectful dialogue, mutual ownership and shared responsibility, respecting the interests of both sides. In a continuous and bold multilateral effort, we need to work together with the EU Commission and with the African Union to combat the pandemic and overcome its social, economic and health consequences through fair and sustainable growth and cooperation, implementing all aspects of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

Multilateralism, Joint Assemblies and fair and trustful exchanges of experiences and best practices are the basis for a common understanding which will benefit all citizens of both continents.

This crisis has shown the precarious nature of today’s economy, with 700 million people living in extreme poverty and 1.3 billion unable to meet their basic needs. The vast majority of people living in countries in sub-Saharan Africa are employed in the informal sector and receive no unemployment, sickness or other benefits. And more than a third of all jobs and incomes in Africa could be lost as a result of Covid-19.

While it is true that the population of sub-Saharan Africa is projected to double by 2050, this needs a strategic approach if we are to turn a potential vicious circle into a virtuous circle of opportunities.

To this end, the individual policies the EU is putting forward cannot stand alone but must have a coherent approach across all policies. Each of them should have a positive impact on climate. Each of them should have a positive impact on fighting socio-economic inequalities. This can only be done by empowering younger generations through massive investment in education, human rights, health, digitalisation and democracy.

First and foremost, the EU should invest more in education for all – especially for girls – as it represents not only one of the pillars of the SDGs but the base for decent work and decent lives. We also have to provide digital knowledge and digital skills to young people in schools and colleges. No one must be digitally left behind.

It will not be sufficient to create jobs. They have to be decent jobs. This means ensuring that the right employment and labour policies are set, the health systems in all African countries are reinforced in order to address the needs of the population and the supply of skills is boosted, as well as the levels of wages and social protection coverage.

It is essential, in considering meeting basic needs, to identify responses that also take into account the new challenges of energy and climate change.

CO2 emissions, global heating, floods and drought know no boundaries. The paradox of climate change lies in the fact that the region that has contributed the least to global emissions, which is also the world’s poorest region and the least able to adapt, is the continent set to be worst hit by extreme weather. 70% of Africans make a living through agriculture, so changing weather patterns, loss of biodiversity and destruction of the natural environment have immediate effects on a huge part of the population.

The EU Green Deal provides a good opportunity to reshape Africa-EU relations based on coherent, fair and climate-proof cooperation. A green recovery in Europe that doesn’t take Africa into consideration risks failing to achieve the overall objectives of the Paris Agreement and the SDGs.

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We need predictable, accountable and transparent EU support in scaling up climate action and adaptation in African countries. The EU should demonstrate fair burden-sharing and scale-up technical and innovative financial support for the climate-risk-management mechanism in order to address losses and damage on the African continent.

On energy and raw materials, we can no longer turn a blind eye. Due diligence should play a role here and instead of continuing to exploit African raw materials and developing fossil fuel industries in the region, the EU should invest in renewable energy in Africa, in order to counterbalance Chinese economic penetration as well.

Hence, relying on our experience and values, we should urgently assist African countries in developing their Free Trade Area agreement to include a customs union, allowing young people with skills across Africa to seek opportunities without the hindrance of borders.

We are at a crossroads where tough decisions need to be taken. The next Africa-EU summit will be crucial to open a just, progressive and sustainable chapter of our relationship. If we were waiting for an opportune time to demonstrate that progressives, not extremists and the far right, are the solution to the current global challenges, now is the time.