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Horst Köhler

Crisis and Credibility – Towards New Honesty in EU-Africa Relations

Horst Köhler

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Crises tend to nail our minds to the present. The current pandemic is no different. As we struggle to adapt to manifold ways in which this virus digs into all our lives and only begin to understand the economic and social havoc it will leave behind, we tend to turn inwards and focus on the nearest and most immediate challenges ahead of us. This tendency – however comprehensible and necessary it may be – is dangerous. For the steps we take or fail to take in the midst of this crisis will set the course for the era thereafter. And to allow the crisis to narrow our field of vision would come at great cost.

This applies particularly to relations between the European Union and Africa. The corona crisis has hit both continents in a year that was planned to bring pivotal change to their partnership. Only in March, the European Commission published its new Strategy with Africa. Broad dialogues should follow and lead to an ambitious declaration on the future of cooperation at the EU-Africa Summit in October. It is easy to imagine how the everyday undertow of crisis management could set a blatant hold to these aspirations. This would be fatal.

THE FATES OF EUROPE AND AFRICA ARE DEEPLY INTERTWINED

The virus has proven, once more, how much the well-being of each and every one of us today depends on the well-being of people across the globe. For Europe, this applies more than anywhere to the well-being of people in Africa. A quick survey of the main facts: Africa is separated from Europe only by a narrow sea strait. Its 55 countries are home to roughly 1.3 billion people. By 2050 this number will probably double. In the middle of this century, about 20 percent of the world's population will be African and only 5 percent European. This huge pool of hopeful, creative, and forward-looking young people is not only Africa's biggest resource. It also has the potential to offer vast markets to European companies on a continent that still has a huge thirst for real investment into businesses, roads, hospitals, homes, transport, energy, and manufacturing. And African youth may sooner than we think come to be a welcome source of fresh minds and labor for our continent.

At the same time, this population growth entails enormous challenges. Today, almost half of the long-term unemployed in sub-Saharan Africa are below the age of 25. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that Africa will need to create the immense number of 20 million additional jobs every year – an historically unprecedented challenge. And to offer a real perspective, a substantial proportion of these jobs will have to be created in the kind of future-oriented and high-value-added sectors that in many African economies are still only nascent. The current crisis exacerbates this challenge. The economic fallout from plummeting demand in China and the EU for commodities and raw materials is already being felt throughout the continent. Tourism has collapsed. This leaves African governments with even fewer resources available to adopt similar policies to European governments who are stepping in to prop up their domestic businesses affected by the containment measures. Without bold responses, this crisis will further diminish the prospect of job creation and industrialization in Africa. This would be ruinous. It would fuel political conflict, ravage our neighbor continent, and, of course, also harbor serious risks for European security. The fates of Europe and Africa are deeply intertwined. We have to understand that there is no future in which Europe prospers while Africa suffers.

It would thus be a great mistake for Europe and its nations to turn inwards. While physical isolation is the order of the day, political isolation surely is not. If anything, the virus and the connectedness it underscores give new urgency for Europe to become a credible partner in Africa's economic transformation. However, this requires a serious restart of our relation both in attitudes and in politics.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF EU-AFRICA RELATIONS

Let us start with the attitudes. First of all, we must resist the temptation to let this crisis reinforce trite clichés. These days, much of our thinking about Africa focuses on the possible damage the coronavirus could do on the continent. Often, we do this with the best of intentions. Indeed, if large outbreaks occur, many African countries will need support to avoid a collapse of their public health care systems and, like many other countries in the world, many African states will need globally concerted

efforts to overcome the economic crisis the virus inflicts.

However, we must also be aware that part of these concerns stems from our old habit of imagining Africa as a continent of death and disease, a worry to the world, in need of foreign assistance. We often overlook the fact that many African countries have experience in dealing with infectious diseases and have reacted much quicker to the coronavirus than many of the Western countries. Too often, we still conduct our relations with Africa with an air of superiority and through the prism of dependency and aid, treating our neighbor as an object of European influence, not as a subject of its own political and economic fate. Overcoming this habit is not just a matter of political correctness. It is a fundamental precondition for a credible partnership. And the relationship between the two continents is changing, whether Europe wishes it or not.

First, we must realize that the Western "brand" has lost much of its splendor. Even before the coronavirus, Africans carefully noted Europe's inability to provide tangible solutions for its own most pressing issues. How is it that a decade after the Eurozone crisis, the structural problems of monetary union remain unaddressed? What real solutions for climate change does Europe have to offer? And is the Western economic model really something to strive for if it cannot put a halt to the inequalities and the continuing overexploitation of natural resources within its own societies? The past decade has hardly made a good case for Europe to be a role model for Africa's development. The new images of overcrowded hospitals and overwhelmed public services will further diminish any delusions about Western grandeur. The simple truth is: Europe can no longer afford the hubris it has exuded in its relations with Africa.

Second, Europe today is by no means the only partner available to Africa. China's growing presence in the region has often been maligned, and Europe watches Chinese billions pouring into new investments in Africa's infrastructure and natural resources with growing concern. Similarly, India is increasingly keen on deepening economic relations, and last year Russia joined the bid for influence on the continent with the first-ever Africa summit hosted in Moscow. Of course, this new scramble for Africa is probably no less exploitative and no more devoid of geopolitical interests than European approaches have been in the past. However, what these new partners do have to offer are new political and economic options for African politicians. And this means that Europe can no longer claim the prerogative of interpreting what direction Africa's development should take.

Third, the relationship is also changing due to the growing self-confidence with which many Africans are now claiming their place on the global stage. We can see this self-confidence in the way in which African leaders are enacting bold economic visions such as the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA), which aims to remove 90 percent of tariffs on intra-African trade. Once fully established, the agreement will turn into the world's largest free trade area and one of the best chances Africa has to boost growth, investment, and job creation.

We can also find growing self-confidence in the ongoing process of cultural and scientific self-assertion. Many African writers, designers, filmmakers, researchers, and academics are reaffirming the diversity of their roots and identities and changing the narratives about their continent. For our part, we should – first – be a lot more curious about these debates. We should – second – be ready to question our own narratives and allow those of others. And – third – we should be ready to massively engage in the process of mutual cooperation, which, by the way, also means removing obstacles like denying entry visas for academics. I am happy to see new academic clusters like the "Africa Centre for Transregional Research" at the University of Freiburg, which intends to conduct its research not only *on* Africa, but *with* Africa. I strongly recommend listening to African voices and taking note of African research, for example through Afrobarometer surveys or through the work of the Mo Ibrahim Foundation on good governance. And I think we must answer the call for respectful intercultural dialogue that was recently voiced in an open letter from African intellectuals to Germany's Chancellor Merkel and President Steinmeier. Their conclusion reso[1]nates with me: "The reconciliation of humanity with itself and with all living beings is the only way to face the great dangers of the century. (...) Its foundations must be truth and justice, without distinction of race, religion or nationality".[1] A process that, by the way, also includes the righteous claim for Europe to return the artistic heritage it has robbed from the continent over the past centuries. A call that Europe, I believe, finally must answer. And, last but not least, we can witness this self-confidence in the vibrant creativity and entrepreneurial power with which the young generation in particular is expediting the technological transformation of their home. A power that good old Europe may well be able to learn a thing or two from: for example, how Kenya has become the world leader in mobile money, or why 4G connectivity in Côte d'Ivoire is better than in Germany. I am always amazed by the refreshing matter-of-factness with which this young generation simply takes it for granted that the 21st century is theirs to shape. And they are absolutely right to do so.

All of this shows us that the not-so-subtle hierarchies that still rule much of European thinking about Africa are not just offensive and outdated. They are

[1] See, https://secure.avaaz.org/fr/community_petitions/angela_merkel_chanceliere_allemande__soutien_des_intellectuels_africains_a_achille_mbembeafrican_intellectual_support_

also increasingly ridiculous. The EU should vigorously embrace this change, for it forces Europeans to set aside our own preconceived notions of our relation to Africa and reset our politics in ways that allow for a more credible, reliable, and productive partnership for both sides.

THE NEED FOR A NEW CREDIBILITY IN EUROPE'S PARTNERSHIP WITH AFRICA

Now, the idea of such a partnership is not a new one. In fact, Europe has used the language of equal partnership at least since the EU-Africa Summit in Lisbon, in other words for almost 15 years. The term has been used so frequently that it runs the serious risk of being reduced to dusty rhetoric, a mindless tool to gloss over the lack of substantial movement on the part of the EU. However, this does not make the concept any less important. I am convinced that in order to truly turn the page on its cooperation with Africa, Europe needs exactly this kind of partnership. However, this requires our politics to become more honest with Africa and, even more so, more honest with ourselves.

Let us begin with a basic fact: The relationship between the EU and Africa is a political one. This sounds self-evident, but too often the EU still approaches Africa in the technocratic spirit of solutionism. Take the current debate on "fighting the causes of migration". This discussion often implies that Europe just needs to find the right buttons to push, the most efficient way to spend money, the best-tested development tools – and the phenomenon of young Africans seeking better economic fortunes in Europe will simply go away. Of course, the causes of migration need to be addressed in the interest of both Europe and Africa. But it will not be a matter of technical fixes and it will not be solved somewhere in Africa. The increase in migration tells us that the current levels of economic inequality across countries cannot be sustained in a globalized world. Addressing this cause of migration is not an exercise in effective philanthropy. It is a political challenge for all humankind. And, like all politics, it is a question of who gets what and how, and it will mean us Europeans giving up some of our privileges.

Another fact Europe needs to be honest with itself about: Some European policies are still part of the structural barriers that hamper Africa's economic transformation. Agriculture today accounts for 32 percent of African GDP and it is one of the sectors that offers the greatest potential for poverty reduction and job creation. According to the World Economic Forum, growth generated by agriculture in Africa is about 11 times more effective in reducing poverty than growth in other sectors. However, among factors impeding this development are subsidized European agricultural exports that outcompete local producers and EU trade barriers on processed food that make it difficult for African producers to increase value addition. African governments have pointed to this for years, and their arguments sound very similar to the justified concerns Europeans are now raising about unfair trade practices on the part of China. Nonetheless, too little has changed. Let us be honest: Effecting change will be costly. Some European producers stand to lose from reforms to the current system of trade and subsidies. However, it is these kinds of trade-offs that Europe has to take seriously if it wants to be a credible partner.

A credible partnership also requires us to apply the same kind of standards on both sides of the table. The protection of infant industries has been a main point of contention between Africa and the EU for a long time. While African governments have often insisted on industrial policy measures to safeguard nascent sectors, especially in manufacturing, the European side tended to portray such measures as protectionism in disguise. Now industrial policies are making a striking comeback in European politics as the EU is seeking to adapt its own economic rulebook in order to foster growth in its nascent digital industries. All of this is undertaken on the premise that we need to enable our vulnerable industries to compete with rising competition from China and the US. The implication of double standards might be unfair but the impression that Europe is more open-minded to pragmatic approaches within its own borders than in Africa does weigh heavily on the Union's credibility.

Finally, building a credible partnership also requires taking an honest look at why some aspects of cooperation are not yet producing the desired results. For example, we know that foreign direct investment is key to economic development and that Africa could benefit immensely from European firms bringing new capital, technologies, and know-how into local markets. However, so far, too little European investment is taking place and existing commitments often do not provide enough spillovers in local markets. Too much of Europe's investment still focuses on natural resources and the infrastructure linked to their extraction and has therefore contributed to the lack of diversification that is now making Africa especially vulnerable in the current crisis. For Europe, this means a need to think about new approaches to encourage outward investment in different sectors and make sure that European companies create the kind of forward and backward linkages that domestic economies need to benefit from foreign capital.

Realizing that the relationship between the EU and Africa is political and shaped by both interdependencies and differences of interest does not mean falling back into the trap of zero-sum thinking. On the contrary, I am convinced that having no illusions about the asymmetries in our partnership will allow us to use them more constructively.

Why not let the insight that the EU's current agriculture system is a roadblock for African development

guide us to seek new synergies between the economic transformation of Africa and the ecological transformation of Europe? I believe there are plenty of ways in which we can build a greener and healthier agriculture system in Europe and give African producers a fair chance to compete. Why not turn the creativity that the EU now puts into developing new industrial strategies in Europe into a more open-minded approach to the promotion of infant industries in Africa?

The economic recovery programs in the current crisis will give new impetus to the need to diversify African economies and build more sustainable and resilient local value chains. Being open about the fact that European investment, so far, has often failed to produce the desired effects may serve as a starting point to reflect on the kinds of investment Europe wants to bring to Africa. Maybe sometimes smaller is bigger, and African businesses may benefit if large-scale projects are complemented with the engagement of small and medium-sized firms with a stronger tendency to entrench into local economies.

FIRST SIGNS OF A NEW PARTNERSHIP

For all the historical baggage and missteps of the past, I am cautiously optimistic that relations between Africa and the EU are moving in the right direction. Africa should be a focal point of the new "geopolitical" Commission, and for that the African Union should be a central partner. I was happy to see that last year, the new President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, chose Addis Ababa as the destination for her first official trip and that she revisited this year together with a delegation of 20 European Commissioners to meet with their counterparts in the African Union.

The coming weeks and months will show whether these visits will remain symbolic or whether the EU is finally giving its neighboring continent the political priority it deserves. The role that Europe plays in working with Africa to set the agenda for recovery from the current pandemic will be a litmus test. The most recent joint statement of 18 African and European leaders outlining a collective strategy to fight Covid-19 and its widespread economic, social, and humanitarian damage gives some hope. It urges in strong words for an economic stimulus package of at least USD 100 billion, an immediate moratorium on all bilateral and multilateral debt payments, both public and private, and asks the IMF to decide on the allocation of special drawing rights to provide additional liquidity for the procurement of basic commodities and essential medical supplies. German Chancellor Angela Merkel was amongst the signatories. I think the implementation of this statement should be an issue for Germany's Presidency of the Council of the European Union in fall 2020.

There must also be stronger efforts to coordinate the various Africa policies of European countries. To date, in some African countries, European governments and organizations are competing rather than working with each other. A more coherent approach, embedded in our Common Foreign and Security Policy, would make the EU a much stronger, more credible, and more reliable partner. I see some promise in the Commission's new Africa strategy published at the beginning of March. Much of the detail will have to be discussed in the coming months. But I think it is encouraging that cooperation in the areas of the green and digital transformation has been put front and center. Not just because I believe there is a lot to be gained from closer collaboration, for example, on green energy investments or the digitalization of schools and education in Africa. But also because the Commission – by highlighting the flagship initiatives of its own tenure in the strategy – is showing that it is starting to structure its thinking about relations with Africa not along the lines of dependence and support but in the spirit of addressing common challenges and a mutual transformation. I very much hope that the two initiatives the German government has put forward in recent years – the "G20 Compact with Africa" and the "Marshall Plan with Africa" – will also work in this direction. There is plenty of room to work on stable roots for a new, credible partnership.

ENVISIONING NEW FUTURES

Let me end with three ideas that would allow Europe and Africa to transform their existing asymmetries in productive and mutually beneficial cooperation and so set a new long-term course for our common future. First, let us find ways to build stronger financial bridges between the rich and ageing societies of Europe and the young, poor, investment-hungry countries of Africa. Here, the piles of idle savings in the North could contribute to real investment with both an economic and a societal dividend. Again, this requires reforms on both sides. African countries will have to find ways to provide more secure investment environments, including more rigorous efforts to fight corruption. And Europe will have to think about financial regulation that enables institutional investors to engage, for example, in infrastructure financing in Africa. The benefits on both sides could be immense.

Second, let us build stronger legal migration pathways into Europe and let us make circular migration an expression of normality in the 21st century. Not because we feel bad for Africa or because we are afraid of Africa, but because we ourselves could benefit greatly from plugging the gap arising in our ageing labor force. The remittances that African migrants send home already exceed the sum of foreign aid. And because whenever I talk to African youth, I hear the same wish – let us come to your country, to study, to learn, to grow, and then we are better equipped when we return and build our communities. Europe should be generous towards that wish. Our answer to the

rise of migration should not be to build walls, but to offer more internships and scholarships and exchange programs on all levels, so that more of Africa's youth can become global citizens who contribute with their creativity and their skills to the whole of humanity.

And third, let us not leave all initiatives for deeper economic cooperation to governments. My impression is that European businesses – and not least German ones – have made themselves a bit too comfortable in waiting for governments and international organizations to provide them with ideal investment conditions in Africa. Many companies need to acknowledge that they themselves have a vital interest in realizing Africa's growth potential. In fact, events in recent weeks have again underscored this by highlighting the risks that the current over-reliance on Asian markets can pose to the functioning of supply chains and production. European companies should, therefore, be creative and take a much more proactive stance in promoting African markets. For example, European business associations could use their vast expertise on the development of regional economic hubs to work proactively with African governments and regional institutions and develop concepts for special reform zones. Such zones could combine a favorable local business climate with the promise that European businesses will not only embark actively on industrial cluster building, but also invest in the training of local employees and branch out to African suppliers. The room for experimentation and learning is large, and I believe that projects along these lines could turn into nuclei of structural transformation in Africa and, at the same time, into long-term engines of real growth for European firms.

Crises are turning points. The steps we now take or fail to take will have a major impact on the Europe-Africa partnership. If the African Union and the European Union are able to forge a relationship that gives the right answers to this crisis – answers about partnership, common goals above diverging interests, and new honesty above old slogans – the two continents could send a sign of hope to the world that multilateralism is not obsolete. On the contrary, that two continents are putting hope and confidence into achieving an economically, socially, and ecologically more prosperous future for them both through cooperation. In that case, this year really would be a year of pivotal change.