

Moving from a payer to a partner

The European Union and Africa's knowledge infrastructure, Panel C13, 18 January 2021

In 2018 the then European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker launched the Africa - Europe Alliance for sustainable growth and jobs. The new Commission under Ursula von der Leyen is keen to move further towards a partnership of equals driven by mutual interests. But the panel judged the actual relationship between Europe and Africa still as highly asymmetric, particularly in terms of knowledge infrastructure and effective use of African sources of expertise through co-creation. According to Jean Bossuyt of the European Center for Development Policy Management, there is still too often a tendency for European policymakers to talk 'to' Africa, rather than 'with' Africa.

Patrick Develtere of the University of Leuven, Belgium, added that for the relationship to transform, Europe needs to step away from the idea of being the giver of resources, knowledge and other things to Africa - moving from a payer to a player and partner. He argued for a whole of society approach, including all actors and agencies on the continents, especially when it comes to knowledge transfers.

The panel pointed to the risk of institutional mimicking in Africa. The idea of an African Union modeled on the European Union was seen as inherently a-historical. Many of the assumptions underlying the European model do not apply. This holds true for the centrality of state authority (considering pre-existing actors such as traditional and religious instances in Africa) as well as the economic imperatives for integration. The challenge for Africa is to choose its own integration menu, trajectory and sequencing process, also learning from the limits of the European model (e.g. in terms of agility).

There are much more African study centers in Europe than institutes dealing with Europe in Africa. And very few young Europeans study in Africa. According to professor Léonard Matala-Tala of the Université de Lorraine, France, this will not change until Africa offers the same equipment and standards as Europe. This entails the improvement of infrastructure, including internet, sanitation, and basic necessities like water accessibility.

The panel concluded that the relationship between the continents in terms of knowledge infrastructure and reciprocal uptake remains too one-sided and needs to be transformed in the coming years.

Take-aways

- The actual relationship between Europe and Africa is still highly asymmetric
- Europe needs to step away from the idea of being the giver of resources
- Better African infrastructure is needed to attract European students and prevent Africans from leaving