

The future EU-Africa Partnership Agenda: no sustainable growth without decent work

Position paper CNV Internationaal Roundtable Parliament, February 9 2022.

By Elles van Ark, Managing Director

“Africa is the European Union’s partner and neighbour. Together we can build a more prosperous, more peaceful and more sustainable future for all”. These are the words of Ursula von der Leyen when presenting the EU’s new strategy for Africa. The EU strategy towards Africa proposes to work together on five key priorities. There are partnerships foreseen on 1) the green transformation, 2) the digital transformation, 3) sustainable growth and jobs, 4) peace, security and governance, and 5) a partnership on migration and mobility.

Our focus as an international trade union is on inclusive sustainable growth and decent jobs. These are cross-cutting themes. Indeed, sustainable growth and decent jobs as reflected in SDG8 are essential to achieve the goals of the other partnerships as well. However, during the upcoming [EU-AU summit on 17-18 February](#), decent jobs are not on the list of roundtables with topics to be discussed. What is included is “private sector support and economic integration”. When the aim is to launch an ambitious Africa-Europa Investment Package, decent jobs should be on the table. We count on the Dutch government to bring the importance of social dialogue to achieve decent jobs forward. In general, a decent job is a job that pays a living wage and in which workers are free to organize (freedom of association).

COVID-19 increased inequality

SDG8 is central to our work as a trade union: “Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”. According to the World Bank, around 400 million people in Africa live below the poverty line. The COVID pandemic has led to more socio-economic inequality. Incomes and living standards have fallen, there is increased food insecurity and more people are in debt. This is especially true for youth employability, gender equality and including the informal sector. However, civil society was not or not well represented during the negotiations leading up to the EU-AU summit.

The importance of focussing on youth, gender equality and the informal sector

Around 70% of Africa’s current population is under 30. Unemployment among youth and women has increased dramatically in recent years. The continent has a large gap between the supply and demand of labour. In line with the EU-AU strategy, we also see that most young people lack competencies needed in the world of work. Therefore investments in technical and vocational skills and in soft- and digital skills for the 21st century are of utmost importance. Trade unions cannot generate work, but they help organising youth by providing training programmes to get their voices heard and to support them to advocate for improved youth policies at the national level.

It is much needed that young people and women get a seat at the dialogue tables, because young people and women are overrepresented in the informal sector. Informal workers do not receive social any social protection and are often not protected by the labour law. Private sector investments should focus on female entrepreneurship and groups in the informal sector so that they can move to formal jobs and small businesses. Trade unions can help people in the informal sectors towards decent jobs and advocate for their labour rights.

Participation of civil society in policy making

The EU-AU partnership should be an equal partnership, in which African people have an important say. Not only African policymakers or politicians, but also civil society, including young people and women. The African population, represented through civil society such as local trade unions, should be part of the policy decision making processes. The EU delegations in those countries should have the capacity and means to make this possible. Civil society in African countries should be invited on a regular basis to discuss effective and adequate policy measures and their budgeting and implementation. The Joint EC communication towards a comprehensive strategy with Africa was drafted with only a reactive role for *European* civil society. It is of crucial importance that the priorities and concrete actions of the future strategy run through an open and inclusive dialogue with all relevant actors. If only because of the shrinking civic space in Africa. The EU should work with its African counterparts to ensure that for example trade unions can play their role. In order for economic growth to be sustainable, an inclusive dialogue is essential.

Strengthen the role of civil society in trade relations

In recent years the EU has seen improvement in the participation of civil society in monitoring trade agreements. The Netherlands has given valuable input in the Dutch-French non-paper. The European Commission is now working on the review of the action plan for Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD) chapters in trade agreements. These agreements need to ensure monitoring of human rights and the environment by civil society. Therefore, an EU agreement with The African Continental Free Trade Area should include the lessons learnt by the Domestic Advisory Groups:

- Independent representation of civil society and proper funding is needed to make monitoring effective
- Representation should also be balanced. The AfCFTA is the largest free trade area in the world, and it should be made sure that there is representation of civil society for each member country.

Investments in education, governance and democracy are essential preconditions for sustainable economic and trade relations. Next to strengthening local productivity and the capacity to process raw material locally, the EU also has an important role to play in strengthening the African internal market. We should aim for a common strategy towards the AU, instead of bilateral trade agreements. Furthermore, instruments for private sector development should pay attention to gender equality and economic empowerment for young people. This means that companies and business projects proactively look for business practices that have a positive impact on addressing gender inequality and supporting women's rights and development for youth.

What is needed from the Dutch government?

Ensure policy coherence so that the Dutch policy does not negatively affect African countries. A good implementation of the SDGs should be a central aim. The SDG check ("SDG-toets") is a good instrument for this, if applied well. Policy coherence is crucial, also inside the Dutch ministry. As both the European Commission and the Dutch government are now working on due diligence legislation, Dutch trade policy towards Africa should also integrate the principles of Corporate Social Responsibility.

One way to ensure this coherence is by letting civil society actors support the Africa Taskforce. CNV Internationaal and our African partner unions would like to offer the Taskforce advice on social dialogue and due diligence, in order to make investments more sustainable. Special attention should be paid to working conditions and labour rights, especially with regard to youth employability and gender. It is not clear how the Taskforce currently includes all these dimensions.