

# **“New Ways of Thinking and Acting in the Vertical – What Is Needed for a Substantially New Partnership between Europe and Africa”**

Speech by former Federal President Horst Köhler  
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Excellencies, honoured guests from African countries,  
Dear members of the parliaments of the European Union,  
Dear Mr Chairman Krichbaum and Minister Wolf,

## I.

Thank you for focusing your attention, as representatives of the European parliaments, on our neighbouring continent of Africa as this COSAC conference draws to a close. Many issues are of course currently consuming your political energies: first and foremost the COVID-19 pandemic, then the transition in the United States, the post-Brexit negotiations and, more generally, concerns about the future of the European Union.

But it would be fatal if we overlooked the significant and growing task on our doorstep. I deliberately use the word “*growing*”: from the middle of the last century to the middle of this century, the population of Africa will have increased tenfold, to two and a half billion people – a quarter of the world population. And while Europe is ageing, half of Africans are under the age of 18 even today. It will depend in part on *our* actions whether a “youth bulge” on our neighbouring continent erupts in unpredictable conflicts – or whether this young generation can become a transformative force for economic growth, peace and stability.

Africa and Europe are united in a community of destiny, whose future is still undecided. Many African countries are entering a transformative phase. More than half of the population now lives in cities. Nowhere else do more people have mobile bank accounts; the digital economy is booming. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) will create a huge domestic market. However, far too few jobs are being created in Africa; manufacturing still accounts for just 11 percent of all GDP, and the continent is still primarily a supplier of raw materials. Value creation itself, which generates jobs and income, takes place elsewhere. Due to the pandemic Africa is sliding into recession for the first time in 25 years – a brutal setback for progress in the fight against extreme poverty or in access to education. Debt crises are looming.

It would be a historic failure if Europe were now to focus inward because of the second wave of the pandemic. The COVID-19 crisis is – after the refugee crisis in 2015 – another wake-up call for Europe to finally recognise the significance of its neighbouring continent for the

future. Europe will need new markets and trading partners to maintain its prosperity amid global economic upheaval. Europe will need allies if it is to continue making its values and interests heard. Africans and Europeans have a common interest in a rules-based international order. In other words: Africa matters! And our relations need a fresh start.

## II.

What is needed for a substantially new partnership between Europe and Africa? For me, it is first of all a question of the attitude we take towards each other. My advice: Europe should stop seeing Africa as an object of well-meaning solicitude and instead understand it as an independent political subject – with its own visions, its own agency and its own options for action.

But the old ingrained perceptions are still powerful. At the very beginning of the pandemic, for example, well-meaning voices warned that Africa would be unavoidably overwhelmed. In fact, the continent reacted early and decisively under the leadership of the African Union. In mid-February, even before the first confirmed case, the health ministers met and coordinated their strategies. Meanwhile, they were astonished to see how unprepared Europe appeared to be and how the reality of the pandemic was even being denied in other parts of the world. It is still too early to say whether Africa has really passed the peak of the pandemic. But we do know that the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, a young pan-African institution, has shown foresight and leadership. Our European view of Africa often reveals more about *us* than about the realities there.

Do we know enough – in our national parliaments, in government offices and in executive boardrooms – about these realities? About the African Union and its commitment to democracy, human rights and good governance? Or about the Agenda 2063, in which the AU presents its *own* vision of the future – “the Africa we want”? Do we engage enough in discussion with African intellectuals and think tanks? Have we fully accepted that the attitude “Africa has problems, we have the solution” is simply outdated?

A process of self-affirmation has long been underway in Africa, involving sometimes critical consideration of Europe. This should neither surprise nor anger us, but on the contrary should make us both happy and curious. Why? Because in a world undergoing a fundamental transformation, we do not need insecure or dependent partners, but self-confident and predictable ones. The days when people in Africa looked gratefully to an all-knowing Europe are certainly over. We have long since ceased to be the only possible partners. Africa has options! China in particular makes attractive political and economic offers. One could say, somewhat flippantly: competition stimulates business. Europe, which remains Africa’s most important economic partner, should in its own interest alone offer the better partnership. And I think that Europe is absolutely in a position to do so.

Much attention has been paid in Africa to the fact that Ursula von der Leyen, on becoming President of the European Commission, travelled to the headquarters of the African Union Commission in Addis Ababa for her first visit abroad. I myself have worked with Chairman Moussa Faki. Both of these top politicians are strategic thinkers – which is exactly what we need for a new start in our relations. And so it was a welcome development when the

European Commission presented the draft of a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa back at the beginning of March. The draft creates a reference point for the necessary discussion, including in the national parliaments of Africa and Europe. Both sides must now come to a clear understanding of their respective "top priorities" for cooperation. The postponement of the AU-EU summit until the spring due to the pandemic has created time for this. I can therefore only welcome the fact that you, ladies and gentlemen, are here today to engage in discussion with your African colleagues. I would, by the way, also like to see discussion within Europe of how our Africa policies here can be better coordinated.

### III.

This brings me to a second essential element of a substantially new partnership: reciprocal responsibility. Responsibility for a positive future for the African continent lies primarily with Africans. And for a long time now, they themselves have been expressing what is most important for this: "honest and accountable leaders". African civil society has long since made the issue of good governance its own. The Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) measures progress in areas such as the rule of law, participation, education and health. For ten years this index has recorded progress; last year it documented a regression for the first time. This is a worrying development which must be mentioned – but without self-righteousness. We Europeans should be aware of how long our own path to democracy, the rule of law and good governance has been. And we do not have to look far from home these days to see that what has been fought for and won is by no means guaranteed for all time.

But African responsibility is also matched by European responsibility. Corruption and illicit financial flows, for example, involve European bank accounts, too. Europe must also address the question of whether the Economic Partnership Agreements provide African countries with sufficient support for the development of agricultural and industrial value creation, whether they offer sufficient protection for its infant industries, and *whether* and *how* they contribute to the implementation of the large-scale African domestic market. These examples show that we Europeans must finally recognise where African interests converge with ours in the long term – and where they thus entail shared responsibility.

One example which appears to be particularly sensitive for Europe is agricultural policy. There is no doubt that hunger in Africa is primarily due to domestic political failures. But in addition, European agricultural policy with its regulations and its billions in subsidies makes it more difficult for Africa to build up an efficient agricultural business. At the same time, there is no longer any doubt – at least within the scientific community – that our European industrial agriculture with its focus on increasing yields more and more comes at the expense of soil, groundwater and biodiversity, and that our meat industry and meat consumption contribute to deforestation and climate change in other parts of the world. A mutual "Landwende" (agricultural transition) would bring benefits to both continents. Europe should convert from industrial to ecological agriculture and use public funds to reward ecological value creation rather than land ownership. Africa in turn would thus have more space for its own productive agricultural business, with work and income for millions of people.

This example makes it clear that – like in a system of communicating tubes – certain structural reforms in Africa and Europe are mutually dependent. What we need are literally new ways of thinking and acting in the vertical: from Africa across the Mediterranean to Europe and vice versa. This is precisely the idea behind a foundation set up by former French government minister Elisabeth Guigou and former President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker. Within the framework of the programme La Verticale Afrique-Méditerranée-Europe (AME), figures from politics, business and think tanks on both continents will be working together to develop visions for the future. I believe this merits the attention of the AU and EU commissions and the heads of state and government. La Verticale could, for example, explore where and how the obvious asymmetries between Africa and Europe can become shared opportunities – not only in agriculture but also, for example, by considering how to combine the immense real economic investment needs of Africa’s young, capital-poor societies with the idle savings of ageing Europe.

#### IV.

One thing is certain – both Africa and Europe must redefine their position in this radically changing world. We knew even before the months of the pandemic where one-sided dependencies lead. European companies in particular thus have every reason to help develop Africa’s future markets. The coming free-trade zone has the potential of a domestic market which will soon count over two billion people on Europe’s doorstep. Just wanting to sell there alone will not suffice. The European business associations should, in their own interest, develop ideas and strategies – why not together with African partners – on how they can contribute to making Africa a new growth hub within the global economy: with investments in infrastructure and local production in association with the local economy, with industrial clusters of large and small companies, with technology transfer and training opportunities. In its draft of a "Comprehensive Strategy with Africa", the European Commission has named support for African Continental Free Trade Area a “top priority” – quite rightly! But this step must now be followed by the mobilisation of all relevant forces for its implementation.

#### V.

Ladies and gentlemen, the pandemic is a rupture. It can become a turning point for both continents. Crises also unleash new forces and ideas. First things first: A vaccine against COVID-19 must be available to Africans, like all other people, as a “global public good”. I support the call by the initiative People’s Vaccine for leading pharmaceutical companies to share technology and intellectual property via the World Health Organization. And Europe must now advocate for debt relief for African countries.

But beyond that, Africa and Europe should join forces as partners in the major search processes of our time. Both continents have a need for change, albeit in very different ways. Both must find paths for future development that enable a life in dignity for all people without destroying the planet. Both continents stand only to gain through cooperation. The political framework is already in place: the United Nations’ Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and the Paris Climate Agreement. This is the strategic alternative to a world of national egoism and geopolitical escalation.

Together, the European Union and the African Union represent around 40 percent of the international community. Imagine what we can achieve if we develop common positions as part of multilateral initiatives, for climate protection and the preservation of ecosystems, for shaping digitalisation or for fairer world trade. On that note, incidentally, I am delighted that the EU has united behind the candidacy of Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala as the new head of the World Trade Organization (WTO). This strengthens Africa's voice in the world and brings a capable woman to the top who can bring new momentum to the stalled debates on reforming the WTO.

I am convinced that if Africa and Europe cooperate in a substantially new partnership, with a new attitude, with mutual responsibility and joint investment, then not only Africa can achieve prosperity; an African-European vertical could also become a new weight on the world stage.