

“Africa and Europe – a new partnership for a post-Covid world?”

Videotalk with Marco Vollmar/ Eka Neumann

International Journalists' Programmes¹ (IJP)

on the occasion of the series "Africa Talks" of the IJP Southern African Journalists' Programs

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The IJP Southern African Journalists' Programme is an exchange programme for journalists from southern African Nations and Germany. This year, as no physical exchange was possible due to Covid-19, a 10-piece series of “Africa Talks” was initiated, dealing with current developments in economy, digitization, poverty reduction, education, agriculture, health and the media. In a special edition of the “Africa Talks” series, streamed live via facebook and youtube, former Federal President Horst Köhler gave a brief opening statement. This is followed by his speaking notes.

Many thanks to you, Marco Vollmar and Eka Neumann, for bridging these difficult times where you can't meet in flesh with these “Africa Talks”. And a special welcome to all the current and former scholarship holders from both continents. With your work, you contribute to shape the way we perceive each other – and thereby also contribute to shape our actions. And that is much needed, because Africa is changing much faster than the image of it.

The title of our talk suggests “a new partnership for a post-Covid world”. Now, we still are in the midst of the pandemic that has wreaked havoc all over the world. I hope it will be a wake-up call that makes it clear to everyone: Interdependency is the political reality in the 21st century.

To me, the most important step is to understand Africa as a real partner, not as an object of care or fear. Africa and Europe have a special closeness through history and geography. Europeans should finally move beyond attitudes of superiority of power or wealth. We should acknowledge our differences as well as our common interests – and come to a basis of solidarity, and hopefully, mutual learning. We need every single good-willing, innovative and engaged person to find solutions to all the big challenges that threaten us all.

Europe has to finally realize to what degree the futures of our continents are intertwined. I am glad that EU Commission and its President Ursula von der Leyen seem determined to tackle the necessities, challenges and benefits of a renewed partnership.

Africa has a huge potential for wealth and wellbeing of its people. But far too long, governments have been talking about that potential instead of tapping it. Providing decent living conditions and perspectives to Africa's rapidly growing population requires – first and foremost – courageous and honest leaders.

Let me add a disclaimer: I often get asked as an expert on Africa. But I am not, I couldn't be, because there is no one “Africa”. Africa is a continent with extreme diversity and thus complexity of challenges. Should I nevertheless speak of "Africa" in the next hour, please take it as an act of audacity....

But for one thing, I am sure that I am right to generalize: Africans must get the chance to be vaccinated against COVID-19, like everybody in the world. There has been a lot of talking about vaccines as “a global public good”. We now must come to global cooperation for production. I fully agree with a recent statement of the Mo Ibrahim Foundation: “There will be no economic or social recovery, unless we prioritise an equal global health recovery. It is a matter of shared interest, not of charity”. Nobody will be safe until everyone is safe.

Dear fellows and listeners, I look forward to exploring all these questions in more depth!

Question: What are the most important steps towards a new partnership?

I see three fundamental steps – and some very urgent ones:

- 1) Europe has to change perceptions about Africa and adopt to the new realities.
- 2) Both sides must take their respective responsibilities (Africa: good governance; and structural reforms; Europe: no double standards and corresponding structural transformations).
- 3) We need to build a strategic economic partnership to make Africa a global growth hub.
- 4) Urgent steps: providing Africa access to vaccines, monetary liquidity and debt relief.

1. Changing perceptions

Question: What do you mean by “changing perceptions” and adapting attitudes?

Our European view of Africa often reveals more about us than about African realities.

- There had been warnings that Africa would be overwhelmed by COVID-19. But in fact, it was rather *Europe* that appeared unprepared and overwhelmed, while the African response to COVID-19 showed readiness, cooperation and innovation, especially with the new Africa Centers for Disease Control under John Nkengasong.
- Of course, there is need for caution. The second wave is hitting African countries harder than the first one. And also in Africa there are countries whose leaders downplay the severity of the coronavirus.

Europe must finally stop seeing Africa as an object, as a continent always acted upon. It should understand it as a political *subject* with own visions, agency and options for action.

- Africa has agency internally (African Union Agenda 2063 “the Africa we want” with its 15 continental flagship projects, f. ex. the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), an African passport).
- And Africa develops agency in the world (f.ex. common position of AU member states at the Climate Conference in Copenhagen, successfully voicing Africa’s interests).
- It is good that Europe and Germany are strong advocates of cooperative global politics. But anyone who wants multilateralism to succeed must also be prepared to invest political energy in the long overdue reform of the UN Security Council – and give Africa a stronger voice there.

European policies should acknowledge developments in Africa.

- Too many people over here still don't know about the swelling Mega-Cities (with all their chances and problems); about the booming digital economy with its pioneering services; about the flourishing design or film industry or about the successes in education.
- They know little about the rising self-confidence of an ever-growing youth – and about their rising frustration and anger in the face of long-term rulers and lack of decent jobs.
- And still too many people have no idea what these transformations will mean for Europa.

Part of the new realities is: Europe is no longer Africa's "natural partner of choice".

- African leaders told me already about two decades ago "China is an option". China has brought a lot of infrastructure to Africa. And Europe shouldn't deny the African leader's capability (and responsibility!) to consider also the downsides of heavy Chinese engagement.
- Europe should – in its own interest alone – offer the better partnership, including more investment in African infrastructure.
- Europe and Africa share a lot: geographical proximity, values, historical ties (even if not easy ones) – and interests: Both continents have to assert themselves in a world of new great power competition. Both need multilateralism as the answer to global problems. Both have an interest in opening up new markets and winning new trading partners.

A new generation of Africans are searching for their cultural roots – and letting something new grow out of them. Europe should rejoice about Africa's growing self-confidence.

- This year's African Union special theme is "Arts, Culture and Heritage: Levers for Building the Africa We Want". It may seem falling out of time in times of many pressing problems. But I believe it is a good choice, because being sure about one's own roots and culture is an important element of self-confidence – and self-confidence is the best basis for a genuine partnership.

Question: In a speech you said that we "need to develop an awareness of our long-repressed colonial past". How could that awareness be achieved?

- We cannot undo past wrongs, but we must be better prepared to confront them. It is not yet common knowledge in Europe that an estimated 90% of Africa's artistic heritage is located in French, British and German museums. This afternoon, the German Bundestag will discuss several motions around former German colonial rule and of our colonial heritage. I very much hope that this is an occasion to show humility and openness in connection with the question of returning colonial cultural artefacts.
- I believe that if Europeans manage to come to an honest confrontation with their colonial past, they will gain the credibility needed to counter those African rulers who place all the blame on the colonial past in order to hide their own responsibility.

2. Collaborating politically

Question: Ursula von der Leyen did her first visit abroad as President of the European Commission to the headquarters of the African Union Commission in Addis Ababa. The European Commission presented a draft of a “Comprehensive Strategy with Africa in March 2020. Is this an opportunity for a new start?

There clearly is political will on both sides. And the Pandemic is the most recent wake-up-call to the urgency of a “policy of interdependency”: We need shared solutions that help us all.

- But the pandemic has stalled the necessary process: The EU-AU summit in autumn 2020 was postponed; To be optimistic: This gives both sides more time to reflect and prepare.

Both sides must clarify their “top priorities” and define the way forward towards cooperation

- I welcome that the new “Africa Europe Foundation” (that has recently been founded by the think tank “Friends of Europe” together with the “Mo Ibrahim Foundation”) has offered its help – and that this offer has been accepted by the European Commission and the African Union Commission. The Africa Europe Foundation has created 5 so called “Strategy Groups”, mandated to search for common approaches across five priority domains of partnership: 1. Health; 2. Digital; 3. Agriculture & Sustainable Food Systems; 4. Energy & Green Transformation, 5. Transport & Connectivity.
- A new start for cooperation also requires better coordination of EU member states’ diverging Africa policies. And it requires the AU – beyond all difficulties – to find its own position.

Question: What should be the “top priorities” for cooperation?

Besides the immediate needs (we will come back to vaccines), a new partnership should respect the institutional framework of the AU and be tailored to African priorities.

- First: Invest in education and exchange: China offers grants to tens of thousands of African students. Germany and Europe should scale up exchange programs and scholarships. What we need is not "brain drain" which draws the best talent away, but "brain circulation".
The International Journalist Programme is a good example for that.
- Second: Faster and more effective technology transfer: There is also room for experimenting together – and for big win-win-projects. The German government rightly so focuses on cooperation with Africa in its National Hydrogen Strategy.
- Third: The African Continental Free Trade Area is a crucial project for economic and political integration in Africa. It will boost growth and job creation. But it requires hard and difficult work.
- Europe should continue to offer all the possible technical support to the implementation: from harmonization of tax laws and reduction of tariffs to the harmonization of standards, collective bargaining with external actors and exchange of expertise, training and services.

And Europe should come forward with ideas on how to invest in infrastructure and local production, how to help building industrial clusters and enable vocational training.

Question: In different statements and speeches, you mentioned that Africa and Europe have mutual responsibility? What do you mean by this?

Responsibility for the development in Africa lies first and foremost with Africans themselves.

And it requires first of all good governance.

- The “Ibrahim Index of African Governance” (IIAG) measures progress in areas such as the rule of law, participation, education or health. Since the turn to the 21st century, it has recorded slow but steady progress. But the last two years, it documented regression.
- For example constitutions got revised to allow presidents to remain in power. This undermines a core foundation of democracy – that power is only conceded for a limited time.
- Press freedom is another fundament that recently has been challenged. On the 2020 World Press Freedom Index map, 21 African countries appear in red or black, meaning that those who produce news and information are working in difficult, even critical, conditions.
- These are worrying developments. It is necessary to speak out, but without self-righteousness. In other parts of the world, events have shown the fragility of freedom and democracy, too.
- Africans themselves speak out loudly about all this. Jakkie Cilliers for example, the founder of the Institute for Security Studies in South Africa, in his book named “Africa first” calls for “honest and accountable leadership”. The most courageous protests against corruption and bad governance come from the ranks of African civil society itself. And a survey carried out by the polling organisation Afrobarometer indicated that a majority of Africans consider democratic accountability to be more important than the mere efficiency of their government.

African political will and responsibility are key. But there is also a European responsibility:

- First: Illicit financial flows also flow on European bank accounts. Providing the necessary tools and legislation for transparency is also the duty of industrialized world. And Europe should advocate for a new, global taxation structure which grants African countries access to a fair share of taxes and places limits on base erosion and profit shifting by international companies.
- Second: Trade rules and subsidies need to be reviewed in order to offer African economies the chance to diversify their economies and move up in global value chains (we will come back to this topic later).
- Third: Agriculture is important, not only for food security, but also for job creation. No doubt that hunger and dependency on food imports in Africa is primarily due to domestic political failures. But Europe’s agricultural system with its regulations and its billions in subsidies makes it more difficult for Africa to build up a competitive agricultural business.

At the same time, there is no longer any doubt that our European industrial agriculture comes at the expense of soil, groundwater and biodiversity. A mutual "Landwende" (land transition) as proposed by a German governmental expert panel on sustainability (the "Wissenschaftlicher Beirat Globale Umweltveränderungen" WBGU) could 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 jobs and income for millions of people.

The overall conclusion is: The necessary structural transformations in Africa need to be supported by change in the industrialized world. Herein lies the real test for a new partnership!

3. Boosting trade and industrialization

Question: Some African countries and country groups have negotiated Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with the EU. What is your impression of the EPAs?

The Economic Partnership Agreements should be reviewed. The goal must be a more rapid diversification of African economies. I see in particular three questions:

- First: Do they provide African countries with sufficient support for the development of agricultural and industrial value creation?
- Second: Do they offer sufficient protection for its infant industries? And third: Do they help or obstruct the implementation of the AfCFTA?

Question: The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) was launched last month. It will connect 1,3 billion people across 54 African states – the largest free trade area in the world (in terms of the number of participating countries) since the foundation of the World Trade Organization (WTO). This leads to high expectations for growth, prosperity and an increased income for millions of people. What are your expectations for the African Free Trade Area?

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is an important strategic lever to boost growth and job creation in Africa. It can free the continent from post-colonial economic traps, deepen political integration and give Africa a stronger global voice.

- Intra-continental trade accounts for only 16% of the total in Africa – compared to up to 70% in Europe. AfCFTA should reduce Africa's over-reliance on exporting commodities. That requires building up a manufacturing industry. More intraregional trade – especially in manufactured products – would increase employment opportunities for trained and untrained workers.
- To date, 35 of the African Union's 55 member States have ratified the agreement. The new Secretary General of the AfCFTA, Wamkele Mene from South Africa, has taken up work.

- AfCFTA faces enormous challenges, due to the number of nations and their geographical and historical diversity. It will take time. But it deserves all possible support to bring it forward.

Question: Due to COVID 19, Africa has entered a recession last year (2020) for the first time in 25 years. Progress in poverty reduction will suffer a brutal setback.

From your perspective which development do you foresee? Where is the hope?

In many Sub-Saharan countries, the Covid-19 pandemic may set back years of hard-won development gains and upend the livelihoods of millions.

- According to the latest World Bank report, economy in sub-Saharan African region contracted by 2.8% in 2020. Recovery in 2021 is foreseen to be at 3.1%. But this still means a huge set-back, knowing that Africa needs an average growth rate of 5 to 7% in order to overcome extreme poverty.
- Recovery will be made harder by the fact that remittances from Africans abroad could drop by 25% and foreign direct investment by 40%.
- Africa's debt will soar to about 70% of GDP in current US dollars, with debt exceeding 100% of GDP in at least seven countries.

So where does hope come from?

- Africa did not sit passively and wait for the pandemic to devastate their economies. The AU appointed four eminent personalities (Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Donald Kaberuka, Tidjane Thiam and Trevor Manuel) as special envoys to engage with multilateral institutions, pushing for debt relief. The AU quickly established a continental COVID-19 Response Fund. It raised US\$400 million for medical supplies, tests and socio-economic support to the most vulnerable. These have been encouraging signs of African agency and cooperation.
- The acceleration of the digital transformation – driven by the pandemic – will contribute to the modernization of African economies. Digital payments surged. African start-ups provided digital solutions to counter the pandemic. “FabLab” from Kenya for example has developed an application called “M-Safari”: If you board a public transport (“Matutu”), with this app you can register your ride and later track and inform about possible sources of infection. Over 640 tech hubs are active across the continent. Digital solutions are being tested in agriculture, manufacturing, services.
- Another reason for hope is the boost in renewable energy due to falling prices for solar and wind, making the much-needed access to electricity for all kinds of economic activity easier.

And a sign of hope to me is also that African Leadership is getting visible on the global stage.

- Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala from Nigeria has been appointed Director-General of the WTO;
- Senegalese Finance Minister Makhtar Diop will become the head of World Bank's International Finance Corporation (IFC). And Tedros Ghebreyesus from Ethiopia is heading the WHO.

And last but not least, I see hope in the youth of Africa. With their creativity and persistence, they are a powerful force of transformation for the continent.

4. Conclusion

Question: What should be done first in the upcoming months?

Top priority must be to ensure Africans have equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines, as quickly as possible. Richer countries must step up to help – in their own interest.

- If the virus is allowed to spread, it will transform and re-infect the whole world. The race against the virus mustn't be a race between countries, but a common race against time!
- To be fair: Europe has invested both political energy and money in creating the global „Access to Covid-19 Tools Accelerator“ and the COVAX platform, together with WHO. It gives poorer countries access to vaccines at a lower price or free of charge. Germany has recently pledged another 1,5 billion Euro; the US have finally joined under the new President Biden and pledged a total of 4 billion US-\$. This *global distribution mechanism* is helpful, not political “vaccine diplomacy”.
- But in a world where only ten countries have administered 75% of vaccines, and 130 countries have not even received a single dose, we also need to *share already existing vaccines*. Federal German President Steinmeier (like French President Macron) called on rich countries to share existing vaccines, saying "It's not easy, but it's a question of humanity and a question of our own standards."
- And most important: Money and sharing alone won't *make more vaccines available*. Production is a critical bottleneck. I fully endorse UN Secretary General Guterres who recently called on the G20 to establish an “emergency task force”, including all countries with a capacity to produce vaccines.

Financial support will be needed to avoid economic breakdown:

- The G20 have prolonged their initial Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) until June 2021. That is a good start. But for some countries, more debt relief and possibly also debt restructurings may prove necessary.
- African governments urgently have to get access to new resources to confront the economic fallout of the COVID crisis. While advanced economies spend around 24% of their GDP for recovery measures, low income countries spend only 2%, leaving them even farer behind.
- So it is good news that yesterday, the US Secretary of the Treasury, Ms Yellen, announced the support to a new allocation of Special Drawing Rights of the International Monetary Fund. Vera Songwe, the head of the U.N. Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), proposed the same day in the “Financial Times” the issuance of SDR 500 billion (about \$659 billion) and suggested furthermore that G7 and G20 countries should voluntarily reallocate their SDRs to an interest-bearing facility to support low-income countries. This proposal deserves serious consideration.

Question: What do you expect for 2021 with regard to the African-European Partnership?

It's a hope, not an expectation: That both continents will move beyond their decades-old behaviour patterns – and realize their common interests. Let this crisis be a turning point!

- Get people vaccinated, in Africa like in Europe, and move beyond this pandemic.
- Find effective ways for liquidity support and debt relief and bring the economies on a new, sustainable path of growth.
- And finally, define a long-term strategy of partnership between Africa and Europe; based on a new culture of encounters and mutual learning. The two continents could set an example and show that cooperation is in the enlightened self-interest for both; and that the well-being of the other is an investment in one's own future.

I hope that you, as journalists, will be the voices of this culture of mutual learning and a transformative force to the best of our neighbouring continents.

1 International Journalists' Programmes (IJP) offer a bursary to up to six young Southern African (SADC-Member States: Angola, Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe + Kenia) and up to five young German journalists. For two months the Southern African delegates have the chance to work in Germany. They are integrated into the day-to-day journalism of their host newsroom while also researching stories for their home media. The IJP Southern African Journalists' Programmes try to deepen the dialogue between Africa and Germany.