



EU-Africa relations during the COVID-19 pandemic - a partnership that must be preserved

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The partnership with Africa was clearly highlighted by the EU institutions as one of the main priorities for the coming years, but the COVID-19 pandemic might threaten closer cooperation. This was the topic of a webinar organised on 29 April by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), where participants agreed that consolidation of supply chains and an agreement to ease the external debt burden of African countries were key issues.

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, Africa was expected to have the highest growth rate in the world and the EU institutions had voiced their intention to start a new relationship with African countries as strategic partners. The pandemic has changed the landscape: according to the World Health Organization (WHO), COVID-19 could cause between 300 000 and 3.3 million deaths in Africa and the economic effects might be catastrophic, with a sharp drop in exports and a rise in unemployment and poverty that could lead to famine, war and violence.

Despite all these negative indicators, **Luca Jahier**, President of the EESC, pointed to the fact that, in March, the European Commission had released its new strategy for Africa, which aimed to transform the EU-Africa region into the new centre of world development. "We are in a different era now, but now, more than ever, we should focus on Africa as a key priority; what we do now will have an impact in the future", said Mr Jahier.

Vera Songwe, Under-Secretary General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa, agreed that there was a need to enhance the connection between African and European economies, the EU being the main investor and trade partner for Africa. Ms Songwe also stressed the need to work on two key issues: consolidation of supply chains and the external debt. "African countries need liquidity, and also time to figure out how to service their debt", she said, referring to the need for an agreement with African countries to cancel or postpone the payment of their external debt.

Ambassador Ranieri Sabatucci, Head of the EU Delegation and European Union Special Representative to the African Union, insisted on the need for transparency on this issue: "It is not just a matter of postponing service of the debt, we have to look again at the debt payment as a whole and it has to be done in a transparent way, as many actors would prefer to go bilaterally". The issue of external debt was also mentioned by Luca Jahier, who recalled that 40% of African external debt is in the hands of China and put forward the idea of converting external debt into investment.

The other big challenge mentioned by all participants was consolidation of supply chains. As Ambassador Sabatucci said, "It is hard to predict the evolution of the health crisis in Africa, but that is not the case for the economic crisis: there will be a food issue because of the disruption of the supply chains". **Stefano Manservigi**, former Director-General for International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO) at the European Commission, agreed: "Europe needs to restructure supply chains, but it would be a mistake to do it only internally; we have to discuss it with African partners".

As Vera Songwe pointed out, the solution for the potential food crisis in Africa goes beyond supply chains: "African countries need to work on how to store their products and improve transport. And technology is key for that".

Dilyana Slavova, President of the Section for External Relations of the EESC, pointed to the important role which civil society can play to tackle this issue: "Civil society organisations have a crucial contribution to make in ensuring interconnectivity between countries in Africa and reaching the target audience; they have shown their potential in fighting not only the COVID-19 outbreak, but also hunger".

Ms Slavova admitted that EU-Africa relations are under stress, but also expressed her firm belief that, as a result of the crisis, the partnership will become stronger. This view was shared by Stefano Manservigi, who insisted on the need to put an end to the old paternalistic approach towards Africa: "We should not stop transmitting our values, but we have to understand and respect other ways of doing things; we can do a lot, but we also have to listen".