Following my inspirational mission to Ethiopia last June, I felt it was my duty to maintain high expectations after the start of the new Commission, which put EU's commitment to Africa at the top of its priorities.

It was no coincidence that President Ursula von der Leyen decided to visit Ethiopia and the African Union headquarters in Addis Ababa for her first official trip outside of Europe, sending a strong political message. She has made it clear that the European Union (EU) wants to establish greater political, economic and investment opportunities between Europe and Africa, and move towards a partnership of equals beyond a donor-recipient relationship.

My trip to Senegal last month reflects this promising trend. The European Union will soon adopt its new Strategy with Africa. Negotiations are ongoing to reach an ambitious Post-Cotonou agreement, and the historical launch of the African Continental Free Trade Area agreement (AfCFTA) last July are clearly mapping the path towards a successful Africa-EU Renaissance, in which civil society and citizens take a full role.

Senegal is a major country in West Africa, which enjoys political stability, a well-functioning democratic system and an active civil society.

Senegal's population stands at 15.4 million and it is expected to reach nearly 20 million in 2030. Demographic growth and a large youth population (more than 60% of inhabitants are under the age of 25) represent the greatest national assets but they also represent significant challenges, especially in terms of employment opportunities. These opportunities could offer the main viable alternative to religious radicalisation among young people, a common feature of neighbouring countries but as yet unlikely in Senegal.

In 2022, Senegal will hold the 4th edition of the Youth Olympic Games. This will be the first time the YOG has been held in Africa. Dakar and other cities in the country will host the competitions with athletes aged 15-18 and sport teams coming from all over the world. They will enjoy discovering Senegal's fascinating cultural sites, such as Saint Louis, a UNESCO world heritage centre. Clearly, these games are also a major opportunity to engage in reflections and to coordinate efforts and resources on the issue of offering future perspectives to young Africans on their continent, also providing an alternative to migration to Europe.

This was probably the major concern raised during my visit: what prospects can be offered to the vast majority of the growing educated young population that wants neither to be trapped in the murky waters of the informal economy nor to leave the country?

A renewed EU-Africa partnership could bring the right answers to Senegal's challenges, such as an enduring high poverty rate, informal labour, low wages, limited social protection and the underdeveloped potential of its primary and secondary sector.

President Macky Sall, whom we had the chance to meet during the mission, further explained the main priorities of his second term in office: youth, education and job creation, structural transformation of the economy to attract investment, administrative reform, improvement of living conditions and environmental protection. These are Senegal's most urgent and pressing problems and Europe should step up its action before other medium-to-large world powers occupy the political vacuum.

The implementation of phase II (2019-2023) of the Emerging Senegal Plan (Plan Sénégal Émergent, PSE) will be at the centre of President Sall's second term and interestingly it contains a multifaceted 'green' pillar, entailing a number of initiatives, such as a ban on disposable plastic bags and a "national cleaning day" to be held every month, and robust investment in renewable energies. Just last year, Senegal opened its first wind farm, which will become West Africa's largest, and is working to expand wind and solar power in the country. This is just a small example of a much more forward-looking environmental agenda put in place by President Sall. But in my view it illustrates the great impact that EU and Africa policy can have if we align on global challenges, such as the fight against climate change and the implementation of the SDGs.

Senegal, like Ethiopia and Rwanda, is a country that could lead by example and pave the way for an economic, social and cultural EU-Africa "Renaissance", as President Senghor argued over 40 years ago.

A similar and powerful push towards future inclusive prosperity, social stability and a democratic life that respects the rights of minorities, as well as the balance of powers, the participation of social forces, and the promotion of peace in its external relations, starting with the neighbours, is widely shared. Not only by the leadership of the different institutions, but also by entrepreneurs, both foreign and Senegalese, by the trade union movement, and by the various civil society organisations, both in the capital and on the ground. A particularly positive role is also played by women in setting up companies and generating new economic dynamics in rural areas.
This energy is evident everywhere in the country, as people are aware of the challenges to their external security but also of the strength of society, which sees and wants to exploit the opportunities, at the same time striving to face constructively internal challenges and inequalities.

I think that Senegal is at a crossroads and the direction it takes will depend primarily on its future social and economic development.

Although the country is experiencing positive economic growth (over 6% since 2014), and the forecast remains optimistic, particularly with oil and gas production expected in 2022, there are serious concerns about sustainability and inequality in the medium term. The government's role in sustaining growth potential—for instance, through the provision of infrastructure and reforms to improve the business environment—is key and government representatives are well aware of citizens' expectations. In particular, Senegal's social and development needs also rely on fiscal sustainability and this will require a significant improvement in public spending efficiency and the fight against corruption.

If the current situation, after the expected public investments in the oil and gas, fails to improve, the Senegalese will not remain passive. People are well aware of the power of the right to vote. The presidential elections in February 2019 witnessed a remarkable voter turnout of 66%, despite the tensions between the opposition and the majority, and an electoral clash that was tough and unpredictable. However, the next day the whole country recognized the winner and resumed its ordinary rhythm.

The various reforms being implemented, often under a so-called "fast track" strategy, should also include a democratic space for consultation, dialogue and criticisms. Open public debate is the only way to sustain any government agenda over the long term.

I am confident Senegal will find its own way and Europe will be a constructive partner in accompanying the country's process towards sustainable progress. We can already count on a well-structured dialogue with the country's authorities and civil society organisations, that the EU Delegation in Senegal is nurturing through several initiatives and projects.

We visited several, but one in particular will remain engraved in my mind: the help that the EU is giving to the "Maison de la Gare" in Saint Louis, a shelter for talibé children who are forced to beg in the streets, missing out on their basic rights, such as access to primary education or health, and are often exposed to extreme violence and sexual abuse.

Children's protection and their well-being is a basic building block of any country's future. Despite much progress in terms of legislation, there is still a long road ahead before all obstacles are removed.

But as the African proverb says: If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.