New chapter in EU-Africa relations can only succeed with support of civil society

Both European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel have chosen to travel to Ethiopia for meetings with the African Union (AU) to speed up EU-AU cooperation on a multitude of policies, from climate to innovation, from cyberspace to security, and from migration to trade.

Now, following the AU summit last week, Ms von der Leyen is planning a second visit to Addis Ababa to push forward EU-AU cooperation and prepare the ground for the AU-EU Summit, scheduled to be held in Brussels next November.

This time she will be accompanied by the EU’s foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell and 21 Commissioners.

It is undeniable that there is finally a keen and genuine interest to switch from a “donor-recipient” relationship towards genuine peer-to-peer cooperation based on complementary interests.

As president of the EESC, I have also put Africa at the centre of my priorities, calling for an EU-Africa renaissance. Since the beginning of my term in office in 2018, I have already visited the continent twice to strengthen links with civil society on the ground.

In May 2019, I went to Ethiopia and the African Union to raise the possibility of further cooperation between civil society organisations, which must be part of the equation for the new EU-Africa strategy.

The reform agenda and the upgraded process of democratisation launched by Ethiopia’s prime minister Abiy Ahmed, which gained him international recognition and the Nobel Peace Prize, can positively fertilise the rest of Africa.

This prize is blowing winds of hope across the continent and opening up new opportunities to ensure stability and security not only for Ethiopia and Eritrea but also for other African countries.

While peace and security – including the key issues of migration and refugees – hallmarked my high-level mission to Ethiopia, sustainable development and climate change were the main issues I discussed during my second visit, which took place in Senegal this January.

As one of the African countries most engaged in the 2030 Agenda, Senegal can lead the way on sustainable development thanks to its robust investment in renewable energies, as well as a number of consumer-led initiatives such as the ban on disposable plastic bags and a “national cleaning day” held every month.

These initiatives have proved that they can only take off if there is a strong dialogue with the organised civil society.

Not only Senegal, but the entire African continent is waking up on sustainable development. The continent is young, well connected and has great potential. Six of the world’s 10 fastest-growing economies are in Africa.

The continent’s GDP growth is expected to reach 3.9% in 2020 and for the first time in a decade, investment accounted for more than half the continent’s growth, with private consumption accounting for less than one third, even though economic performance and prosperity vary greatly from country to country.

Let’s not forget that the EU is currently Africa’s first partner in development, trade and foreign investment.

The launch of the operational phase of the African Continental Free Trade Area has created, geographically speaking, the largest single continent-wide market for goods and services in the world, in which 54 countries will progressively come together into one internal market, contributing to the movement of capital and the well-being of the people – a process strikingly familiar to Europeans.

Plans to ramp up existing funding channels to ensure the EU can back projects such as roads and rail routes are more than welcome, as clearly confirmed in the first declaration by the newly elected AU president, the president of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa.

As Charles Michel said this week, “we need to think big and use our policies on trade, innovation, climate change, cyberspace, security, investment and migration to give substance to our rhetoric about being equal partners”.

Civil society can help substantially in this by multiplying concrete partnerships between EU and African enterprises, especially small and medium businesses but also cooperatives, foundations, NGOs and organisations from the cultural sector. At all levels, this is the right time. We should not waste this momentum.
If the EU is determined to offer its developing partners a sound alternative to non-reciprocal models, with a partnership rooted in universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity and based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law, the upcoming Commission’s comprehensive strategy on Africa must recognise the role played by civil society.

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

That will be finally the beginning of a new era for a shared renaissance of a shared, peaceful and sustainable future. An alliance of what is soon to be more than two billion people, 50% of them younger than 35.

That's the future, the good one.

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