



## The EU and Africa tackling COVID-19: the power of resilience

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**Contrary to the highly pessimistic predictions of disaster, the African continent is far from being the most affected by coronavirus, accounting for only 1.76% of deaths worldwide. This example of resilience was discussed in a webinar held by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), during which the speakers highlighted the opportunities for closer cooperation between Africa and the EU once the crisis has passed.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged health systems worldwide, with more than 9 million people infected and almost half a million deaths. Many expected Africa to become the epicentre of the pandemic and the most pessimistic predicted at the beginning of the crisis that a million would die. However, in actual fact, Africa is thus far doing better than Europe or North America, and this was discussed by the participants in the EESC webinar on *The EU and Africa: tackling the COVID-19 pandemic together*.

EESC President **Luca Jahier** opened the debate, recalling the strategic importance of Africa for the future of the EU and the need for closer cooperation to deal with the consequences of the pandemic: "*We must not forget that health infrastructure is weaker in Africa and the consequences of a new wave of the disease could be disastrous.*"

**Aminata Touré**, President of the Economic and Social Council of Senegal, praised "*the resilience of the African countries, who have beaten the odds*". Ms Touré said that this was no accident but thanks to the preventive and protective measures taken by the African governments, which have proved to be effective.

### The economic impact

However, Ms Touré stressed the economic impact of the pandemic: "*The situation is bleak in Africa; trade has declined, as have transfers from the African diaspora to the world. National resilience plans therefore need to be established, to increase businesses' and citizens' confidence and cooperation.*"

The President of the Moroccan Economic Social and Environmental Council, **Ahmed Chami**, emphasised the economic aspect of the pandemic, taking as an example Morocco, whose GDP looks set to fall by 5 or 6%, with over 200 000 businesses ceasing trading and 900 000 employees temporarily laid off as a result of the crisis. "*I salute the African governments' efforts to reduce the impact of the pandemic, but the solutions put in place often involve technologies that are not available to everyone and we are in danger of creating inequalities; for example, in the field of education a large number of students are without internet access and therefore cannot attend remote classes.*"

**Irène Mingasson**, the EU Ambassador to Senegal, also applauded the efforts of the African governments, while pointing also to the swift reaction of Europe: "*As ambassador I am very proud of the way the EU responded, in Africa as well as at home; that proves that in emergencies Team Europe is up to the task.*"

In this regard, Ms Mingasson felt it was very good news that the EU-African Union (AU) summit, scheduled for October, is still going to be held. "*The proposals to strengthen the partnership between the two continents must undoubtedly be revised to take account of the effects of the pandemic, with the active involvement of the African countries*", said the ambassador. "*There is a lot to learn from how Africa has been able to mobilise solidarity and citizen response*", she concluded.

### A shared future

The participants in the debate also pointed to the changes in the international arena and the potential opportunities for further deepening cooperation between Europe and Africa. For example, **Luca Jahier** talked about the EU's desire to relocate strategic industries, saying this could be placed at the heart of the partnership agreement: "*I am not talking about exploiting the low cost of labour, but about a real common strategy for creating synergies between the two continents*", he explained.

**Aminata Touré** took up this idea, stressing the importance of reproducing local solidarity schemes on a large scale: "*Resilience must be converted into real capacity, it must not be lost once the pandemic is over; for instance, we must work towards pharmaceutical sovereignty, producing cheaper medicines in Africa so that we do not have to rely on the outside world. We must move from resilience to victory*", she concluded.

For his part, **Ahmed Chami** said that the EU must engage more with Africa's development in areas such as energy transition and industrial relocation, where Europe can provide not just funds but also technology and know-how: *"I have the impression that the EU has yet to realise that the future of Europe lies south of the Mediterranean."*

**Irène Mingasson** stressed that the issue is not increasing funds for development aid but acting more quickly. She also said that *the focus on the pandemic does not mean that other matters can be overlooked: "We must put people back at the centre of our policies; the health and education systems must be strengthened and put back at the heart of the EU-Africa partnership."*

**Mr Jahier** reiterated this idea, referring to the spirit of solidarity which has emerged as a result of the pandemic: *"We are wearing masks to protect ourselves, but also, above all, to protect others, and it would be a good idea to apply this logic to other areas such as tackling climate change, which is a much more serious crisis than the pandemic."* The EESC President concluded the debate on an optimistic note: *"I firmly believe that Europe and Africa have a bright future before them, provided they choose the future and not the past and put resilience at the heart of their policies".*