

# A Seat at the Table for Youth

## Fostering better EU-Africa cooperation through youth agency and leadership

Can young people play a leading role in all areas of cooperation between Europe and Africa, from health and climate to education, employability, mobility and peacebuilding? What are youth leaders' recommendations on the ways forward for a reinvigorated and prosperous partnership? How can the Africa Europe Foundation support youth leadership and raise young people's collective power to scale up the impact and priority of their work?

These questions gave food for thought in the 'Special Dialogue with Youth Leadership Networks', organised under first Africa-Europe Foundation (AEF) Forum. Broadcast online from Brussels on 1 July 2021, the event featured youth leaders from the founding organisation's associated youth networks, as well as other young participants from both continents.

Moderator **Dharmendra Kanani**, Chief Spokesperson at Friends of Europe, explained that the discussion would focus on what young people today want out of the relationship between Africa and Europe. How can their voice and activities be mainstreamed into policymaking in everything from governance to infrastructure, ahead of the African Union-European Union Summit in 2022?

**Mo Ibrahim**, Chairman & Founder of the Mo Ibrahim Foundation and Co-Founder of the Africa-Europe Foundation said that the AEF specifically aimed to build a bridge between the European and African continents. He reinforced that youth must play a central role going forward: "Putting young citizens in the driving seat of dialogue and debate is the way forward and critical to finding solutions to the world's most pressing challenges."

## A seat at the table and a clear voice

Young people across Africa and Europe want one thing above all: a seat at table. With the next AU-EU Summit on the horizon, youth representatives from both continents emphasised the need to move from token engagement to real policy impact. This means going beyond the usual silo approach to youth engagement.

"Within the next three decades, 41% of the world's labour population will be young Africans. The Africa-Europe partnership now needs to be mainstreaming youth in the conversation and the policies being drafted," said **Mandipa Ndlovu**, a researcher at Leiden University.

The Covid-19 crisis was discussed repeatedly. **Manal Benani**, a medical doctor and an advocate from Algeria, felt that too few young health professionals were invited to key decision-making meetings during the pandemic. She also recommended that youth experts be involved in reporting, analysis and research “so that we get to know their concerns and proposals.”

European Commission Deputy Director-General **Martin Seychell** underlined the need for youth to be active in decision-making. The Commission has therefore set up a youth sounding board for international partnership, nominated Bitania Lulu Berhanu as a special advisor for youth and set up an African Union-European Union youth cooperation hub to design and develop projects. Some 17 projects in Africa and Europe currently benefit 150,000 young people. **Bitania Lulu Berhanu** stressed that meaningful engagement with youth needs to be more than just a seat at the table but embedding this demographic in policymaking.

There were also calls for young people to be involved in interinstitutional exchanges between Africa and Europe. It was highlighted that exchanges between Africans and Europeans in civil society organisations should be stepped up.

### Recognising diversity and diverging solutions

Participants were clear that there can be no one-size-fits-all solutions. A concern raised by **Gabriel Klaasen**, African Climate Alliance and activist, is that solutions proposed for Africa are often too Eurocentric. A better approach would be to invest more time and resources finding African solutions, whilst understanding that Africa comprises individual countries and different communities rather than being a homogeneous continent. Europe has the opportunity to be a partner which listens and recognises the structural power imbalances within certain governance architectures which create obstacles for young people to hold their leaders accountable.

**Mary Fitzgerald**, European Young Leader and journalist specialising in Libya, replied that Europe is equally diverse, underlining the need for a more nuanced approach to its relations with Africa. She added that this conversation between the two continents was also being driven by renewed interest in decolonisation.

On growth, job creation and the green transition, youth representatives cautioned that these words take on different meanings across both continents. Industrialisation, boosting manufacturing capacity and creating a conducive environment for SMEs were seen as urgent priorities. The green and economic transitions should not be skewed towards European notions of success.

“Africa has to industrialise,” stressed **Ma Soukha**, Now Generation Network and AfDB Private Sector Development Officer. “We have to have manufacturing companies, creating jobs. [...] We know the numbers are quite disappointing when it comes to manufacturing in Africa because we still export our

primary resources not only to Europe but also other parts of the world.” She concluded: “We need to move higher up in the value chains and that’s really what we want from a partnership with Europe.”

### Culture, research and digital as a bridge-builders

**Merryl Omondi** from the One Africa Europe Task Force pinpointed the digital transformation as a key area for more cooperation. “Let’s establish a coalition for innovation and industry, with three tiers of membership – including start-ups, to facilitate the transfer of technology from both continents and to support research commercialisation,” she remarked.

**Eleanor Batilliet** from the One Africa Europe Task Force called for youth to be included in the five AEF Strategy Groups. She also wanted more focus on improving the quality of education: “Labour markets are going to change quickly with AI and the energy transition. We need educational reform that prepares youth for the future. That means investing in digital skills, creativity, critical thinking and promoting cross-cultural exchanges.” She also suggested promoting investments in future-proof jobs, such as renewable energy, which has a higher job creation potential than investing in fossil fuels.

Ultimately, youth networks expressed the need for increased dialogue, mentoring and capacity-building – as well as appropriate financial support – in order to move to a new phase of youth engagement in Africa-Europe relations. A concrete proposal was the set-up of an advocacy platform for mainstreaming youth at the Africa-EU Summit.