



Walking Together Differently: Transforming the Africa–Europe Relationship

A REOS PARTNERS PUBLICATION

By Mahmood Sunday, Mille Bøjer, and Ellen Sow

May 2026

reospartners.com





Walking Together Differently: Transforming the Africa–Europe Relationship

Africa and Europe are deeply interconnected, yet their relationship is being reshaped by shifting power dynamics, new global actors, and unresolved historical tensions.

Drawing on two decades of facilitating multi-stakeholder engagement across both continents, Mahmood Sunday, Mille Bøjer, and Ellen Sow explore why the partnership is important, what is holding it back and what it will take to transform it — offering practical insights for policymakers, practitioners, and leaders working at the Africa–Europe interface.

Why Africa–Europe Relations Matter More Than Ever: The Changing Global Landscape and Africa's Rising Influence

Africa and Europe are at a crucial juncture.

On the one hand, the two continents and their populations are deeply and inextricably *interdependent*. Millions of Africans live in Europe; European languages, institutions, and cultural references are woven into the fabric of African public life; and the flow of people, goods, capital, and ideas between the two continents is vast and growing. The European Union remains Africa's largest [trading partner](#), a key investor in infrastructure, and a significant provider of development finance and tied aid. Europe, for its part, has significant economic interests in Africa for energy resources, critical raw materials, and labour markets. Security dynamics in the Sahel and elsewhere further entangle both continents, alongside concerns centred on security and migration, though these concerns are not always experienced or prioritised in the same ways across both continents. In an era when collaboration across the North Atlantic is unravelling, Europe is acknowledging the need to shift its strategic partnerships, including building more equitable and resilient alliances with Africa.

On the other hand, the relationship is in flux. African countries are increasingly asserting their agency, diversifying their global partnerships, and challenging traditional power dynamics.



This strategic shift is visible in Africa's growing drive for fairer trade agreements, equitable value chains, [just energy transitions](#), and a post-colonial reckoning. It shows up in the growing prominence of African-led convenings and platforms such as the “[Unstoppable Africa](#)” gatherings alongside the annual UNGA, the Africa CEO Forum, the Ibrahim Governance Weekend, and the Africa House meetings in Davos, which are vibrant, dynamic, and future-oriented. As Africa strengthens its regional integration and reduces dependence through initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area ([AfCFTA](#)), and as anti-European sentiments grow in former colonies, Europe faces the challenge of adapting to a new, more balanced, yet also more complex partnership.

THE MULTIPOLAR COMPETITION FOR INFLUENCE IN AFRICA

Europe is by no means the only external partner vying for Africa's attention. African states are actively diversifying their alliances, and a range of actors — whose growing presence reshapes the landscape — will significantly shape what a productive Africa–Europe partnership can look like.

Russia has dramatically escalated its hybrid warfare across the continent. The European Council on Foreign Relations' (ECFR) October 2025 report “[The Bear and the Bot Farm](#)” documents coordinated disinformation campaigns operating across numerous African countries. These often amplify pre-existing and legitimate African grievances against European institutions. The effectiveness of Russian disinformation in this context is not incidental: it succeeds precisely because it names structural conditions that official European narratives routinely understate.

China continues to deepen its structural presence — controlling the mines that produce [over 70% of the DRC's cobalt](#) and importing the bulk of Africa's [manganese ore](#), with South Africa, the world's largest producer, accounting for 37% of global output and an estimated 70% of known reserves, while the [Tanzania-Zambia Railway \(TAZARA\) modernisation agreement](#) (US\$1.4bn, signed in Beijing in 2025) illustrates Beijing's continued infrastructure diplomacy. Other actors are also significantly expanding their footprints, including *Turkey* (with 44 embassies across Africa), *Gulf states* (through DP World ports and agricultural investments), and *India* (with its first Africa–India maritime exercise in April 2025). South Africa's complex balancing act within BRICS — voting in favour of a UN resolution affirming Ukraine's sovereignty in February 2025, while simultaneously hosting joint naval exercises with Russia, China, and Iran — illustrates how African states are increasingly making strategic calculations rather than simply reacting to external pressure.

THE CASE FOR A TRANSFORMED PARTNERSHIP

Europe's ability to frame the relationship with Africa on its own terms is thus diminishing. This makes the case for a genuinely transformed partnership — a relationship that earns the name partnership rather than merely adopting its vocabulary — more urgent, more demanding, and more interesting.



From a pragmatic perspective, there are numerous compelling reasons for deeper, more innovative collaboration between Africa and Europe, and no shortage of policy or technical solutions on offer, often mediated by diplomatic approaches. But today's pressing shared challenges also call for new forms of partnership — a partnership that is reciprocal, eye-level, brave, and powerful.

This means moving beyond transactional exchanges and diplomatic courtesy toward relationships built on genuine co-creation, shared risk, and mutual accountability, where both sides bring their full agency to the table and have a real stake in the outcome.

Achieving this is neither simple nor straightforward. Realising the full potential of the Africa–Europe relationship requires a transformative journey. Through our two decades of facilitating multi-stakeholder engagement across both continents, [Reos Partners](#) has encountered a range of visible and invisible barriers that hinder effective progress, as well as conditions that, when present, open up what is possible. From this experience, we have identified a set of key insights and practical lessons that can enable more effective and equitable collaboration between African and European actors.

Understanding the Africa–Europe Interface

The Africa–Europe interface is not singular, but rather a complex ecosystem of relationships. We see the relationship operating at several distinct but interrelated levels. At the most formal level sits the AU–EU institutional relationship, mediated through joint summits (most recently the 7th Summit in Luanda, November 2025) and joint declarations. Below this sits the European Commission's trade and development cooperation architecture — including the Global Gateway strategy, Economic Partnership Agreements, and the Critical Raw Materials Act. Alongside these run an increasing number of bilateral state-to-state relationships (such as the EU–South Africa Strategic Partnership summit in March 2025). And cutting across all of these are the relationships between non-state actors — business councils, diaspora networks, civil society organisations, research institutions, and private foundations — which often carry as much, or more, practical consequence as formal diplomatic channels.

Each locus of encounter manifests a different “cocktail” of rules, opportunities, needs, interests, assumptions, traumas, and emotions. We have worked and engaged across a diversity of these interfaces. This article is a joint reflection on what we have seen, what we have heard, and what, in our experience, can enable genuine and fruitful collaboration. The lessons and recommendations in this article apply differently across these layers. Leaders hoping to advance collaboration and enable progress on shared challenges — be they policy-makers, intergovernmental organisations, academics, business executives, or facilitation practitioners — will benefit from being clear about the specific interface they are operating in and seeking to transform.



Structural and Relational Barriers to Africa–Europe Collaboration

Advancing a constructive relationship between Africa and Europe will require acknowledging and addressing a set of obstacles and internal contradictions, among them: structural power imbalances and systemic inequalities; constrained mindsets and lack of trust; unresolved historical wounds and trauma; and the growing fragmentation of information environments across the two continents.

POWER IMBALANCE, SYSTEMIC INEQUALITY, AND MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Power imbalances undermine the foundation of any genuine partnership and can be extremely difficult to navigate effectively. Although power dynamics between Africa and Europe are shifting, significant disparities persist. European interests often take precedence over African-led solutions, and despite the rhetoric of an "equal partnership", Europe frequently retains neocolonial control over economic and political relations. This problematic reality is more visible from Africa than from Europe, and in our experience, many Europeans reveal blind spots regarding the severity of the power imbalance.

These imbalances are not abstract — they are embedded in the structures of trade, finance, and climate policy. Structural trade imbalances persist: 68% of Africa's exports to Europe are raw materials, while 65% of Europe's exports to Africa are manufactured goods, an echo of colonial-era economic structures (McNair, 2024). Trade policies continue to favour European economic interests, reinforcing Africa's role as a supplier of raw materials rather than supporting its emergence as an industrial hub. The European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) heavily subsidises European farmers, undercutting African agricultural products and diminishing their competitiveness in global markets. European aid, meanwhile, is often portrayed as generosity, yet it can perpetuate dependency, obscure Africa's economic strengths, and is by no means the full picture of financial flows between the continents. Many African countries face unsustainable debt burdens linked to loans with unfavourable terms, and calls for debt cancellation are a key aspect of addressing this inequality.

Climate is another major domain where asymmetries run deep. Despite contributing the least to climate change, Africa is most severely impacted. Europe built its prosperity on industrial pollution, yet now imposes strict environmental standards on African nations without fully acknowledging its historical responsibility for climate degradation. Many African leaders have voiced frustration with policies like the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which disproportionately burden African economies while largely benefiting European industries — African countries could lose up to \$25 billion while proposed amendments may not benefit African exporters (African Climate Foundation & LSE, 2023). Meanwhile, European firms extract Africa's natural resources for green energy technologies, even as they impose constraints on Africa's ability to utilise its own fossil fuels for development (Lopes, 2024).

The legacy of these extractive arrangements — whether via trade conditionalities, carbon



border taxes, or selective migration controls — often reveals more about Europe's need to retain global influence than a willingness to reimagine genuine co-creation. There is a self-deception that maintains a façade of partnership while obscuring asymmetries of voice, agency, and benefit (Lopes, 2024). Yet it is worth noting that self-deception in partnership is not a purely European phenomenon: some African governments similarly deploy the rhetoric of sovereignty and development while maintaining extractive relationships with their own citizens, or court external partners primarily to secure regime survival rather than advance long-term social goods. This, however, is not a free-standing moral equivalence. African elite extraction does not operate in isolation — it is enabled, banked, and diplomatically protected by an international system that is no longer exclusively Western: offshore centres — in London and Geneva, but also Dubai and Mauritius — have been known to hold stolen wealth; arms suppliers from multiple continents underwrite security apparatuses; and strategic partners of varying provenance provide legitimacy in exchange for access. The question of who among these actors bears greater or lesser responsibility is genuinely contested. What is not contested is that the circuit runs in both directions, and that genuine mutual accountability must name the full geography of complicity.

MINDSETS AND LACK OF TRUST

Mutual perceptions between Europeans and Africans often hinder meaningful collaboration, shaped by historical legacies and persistent stereotypes. Many African leaders and citizens still view European policies as paternalistic, reinforcing a donor-recipient dynamic rather than fostering genuine reciprocity-based co-created partnerships. There is a widespread sentiment that Europeans do not truly see Africans as equals, which undermines trust and fuels scepticism toward European engagement. The burden of mindset shift is greatest on Europe, but it is not purely one-sided. Some Africans also hold a simplified view of Europe, focusing primarily on its colonial past while overlooking the continent's complexity, internal diversity, and contemporary challenges. These one-dimensional narratives on both sides create barriers to open dialogue and mutual understanding.

Without confronting and reshaping these perceptions, Africa–Europe collaboration risks remaining imbalanced and superficial, falling short of its transformative potential.

As Lopes (2014) articulates, both continents must confront the entrenched narratives and self-serving policy frameworks that perpetuate inequality. This includes not only Europe acknowledging its agenda-setting tendencies, but also African nations reckoning with internal disunity and the harmful effects of external dependency. A more balanced narrative would acknowledge the diversity of actors and contexts within Africa, where a renewed sense of agency, possibility, and optionality exists alongside internal fragmentation and governance challenges. The Africa–Europe relationship is not only constrained by what Europe does or fails to do. It is also shaped by the choices, legitimacy, and accountability of African governments and institutions.



WOUNDS, TRAUMAS, AND LACK OF RESTORATIVE HEALING

The lack of reckoning with history and the enduring wounds of colonialism and slavery continue to cast a long shadow over Africa–Europe relations. What Europeans are taught happened long ago is recent memory from an African perspective. Historical injustices remain largely unaddressed, and the failure to fully return cultural artefacts or engage meaningfully with the question of colonial reparations deepens a sense of unresolved grievance.

These unresolved memory politics are not just symbolic. They shape the emotional and political landscape of collaboration. For many Africans, the reluctance of European nations to acknowledge their historical responsibilities reinforces perceptions of denial and moral evasiveness, making it difficult to build trust. The ongoing controversies around repatriation and reparations serve as constant reminders of an unjust past that has yet to be properly confronted.

Until these issues are addressed with sincerity, humility, and a willingness to engage in restorative justice, efforts toward partnership will remain fragile.

INFORMATION FRAGMENTATION AND DIVERGENT NARRATIVES

A less visible yet increasingly consequential barrier is the growing divergence in the information environments shaping how Africans and Europeans perceive one another and the world. People on the two continents are, to a significant degree, living in different information bubbles — consuming different media, shaped by different algorithms, and exposed to different narratives about shared challenges and events. We see this showing up even in our own teams.

This fragmentation has several dimensions. European media coverage of Africa often remains thin, crisis-driven, or filtered through a development lens, reinforcing stereotypes and obscuring the continent's dynamism and diversity. African audiences, meanwhile, increasingly encounter narratives — sometimes amplified by deliberate disinformation campaigns — that frame Europe primarily through the lens of colonial exploitation and present-day hypocrisy.

The result is that even well-intentioned efforts at dialogue can flounder on radically different baseline assumptions about what is true, what is fair, and who bears responsibility. Building a genuine partnership requires not only shared spaces for conversation, but a shared enough foundation of information and mutual understanding to make those conversations productive.

Urgent Domains for Collaboration

Despite and in light of the obstacles, effective Africa–Europe collaboration is paramount and possible. It can be effectively facilitated in a series of domains, including but not limited to migration, transition minerals, restorative justice, digital transformation, misinformation, health equity, and climate. Here, we highlight three areas in which our work and interactions have offered insight into Africa–Europe relations and how they can be strengthened.



MIGRATION, RACISM, AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

Migration represents a critical area where Africa and Europe should work together, yet current approaches are riddled with contradictions that undermine trust and collaboration. While Europe faces demographic decline and an increasing demand for labour in sectors such as healthcare, agriculture, and construction, it continues to enforce restrictive migration policies that limit meaningful mobility from Africa. These policies are often shaped by underlying currents of racism, Islamophobia, and security concerns, which distort public discourse and fuel fear-based narratives.

In many European countries, African migration is weaponised in the political discourse and portrayed as a crisis or threat that is out of control, rather than a complex and necessary component of economic resilience and demographic sustainability.

At the same time, European countries actively recruit skilled African professionals, creating a selective system that welcomes talent but blocks broader forms of mobility. This double standard (courting African doctors, engineers, and IT specialists while erecting barriers for asylum seekers and lower-skilled economic migrants) exposes a deep policy contradiction. It not only weakens Africa's human capital but also reinforces perceptions of exploitation and inequality in African societies. Many Africans view these policies as unjust and hypocritical, contributing to growing resentment and mistrust toward Europe.

Addressing migration as a shared responsibility grounded in fairness, dignity, and mutual benefit offers a practical pathway for reimagining Africa–Europe cooperation. This means shifting from crisis-driven border control to long-term strategies that include legal migration pathways, circular migration schemes, and joint investments in education, training, and job creation. Without this shift, migration will remain a source of division rather than a bridge for collaboration and exchange.

CRITICAL TRANSITION MATERIALS

The race to secure critical minerals for the global energy transition has brought Africa to the centre of Europe's strategic priorities. African countries are rich in essential resources such as lithium, cobalt, nickel, and rare earth elements — materials vital for batteries, electric vehicles, and renewable energy technologies. Europe's shift toward green energy has intensified demand for these resources, positioning Africa as a key partner in achieving climate goals. However, current European policies and trade frameworks often prioritise the extraction and export of raw materials at the expense of Africa's industrialisation and value addition. Europe has made some concrete moves: the EU has signed Critical Raw Materials Memoranda of Understanding with [South Africa](#) (2025), [Rwanda](#) (2024), and the [DRC and Zambia](#) (2023), and [committed around €1 billion to the Lobito Corridor](#). These are meaningful steps, even if their equity implications require scrutiny.



Crucially, and as mentioned earlier, Europe is not the only actor in this space; China plays a dominant role in Africa's cobalt and manganese sectors. Any analysis of African resource governance must grapple with the fact that the competition for African minerals is a multi-actor contest, and that African states are increasingly using that competition to negotiate better terms.

African leaders are increasingly vocal in demanding fairer trade terms and greater opportunities for local beneficiation, processing minerals within Africa to stimulate industrial growth, job creation, and technological development. However, European reluctance to revise trade policies, investment frameworks, and procurement standards to support these goals has created growing friction. The ongoing debates surrounding the European Critical Raw Materials Act exemplify this tension. While the Act seeks to secure stable and diversified supply chains for Europe, it [largely overlooks Africa's industrial aspirations](#), reinforcing the view that Europe remains focused on resource extraction rather than partnership.

If left unaddressed, this misalignment risks deepening mistrust and missing a vital opportunity for shared prosperity. A new approach is needed, one that balances Europe's green ambitions with Africa's need for sustainable economic development and resilience.

This could include joint ventures in mineral processing, African-owned technology development and genuine knowledge transfer (where intellectual property is ceded rather than licensed), institution-strengthening on African terms, and infrastructure investment, underpinned by African industrial policy and equitable trade agreements. The analysis and recommendations set out in the Africa–Europe Foundation [report](#) on *Revamping Cooperation on Transition Minerals: A Strategic Agenda for the Africa–Europe Partnership* offers a useful starting point to advance this domain of collaboration.

MEMORY POLITICS, REPATRIATION AND REPARATIONS

The repatriation of cultural artefacts and broader conversations around reparations continue to expose deep power imbalances in Africa–Europe relations, serving as both symbolic and practical challenges that demand honest reckoning. Tens of thousands of African cultural artefacts remain housed in European museums and private collections, many taken during colonial conquest, looting, or coercive exchanges. While some steps have been taken to return these objects, such as the recent restitution of the Benin Bronzes by several European institutions, progress has been piecemeal, slow, and often shaped by bureaucratic conditions set by Europe rather than through good-faith engagement that recognises the painful history these artefacts evoke. These acts, though important, are frequently framed as acts of goodwill rather than acknowledgements of historical wrongdoing or pathways to justice.

The case of present-day Namibia, where Germany formally acknowledged genocide of the



Herero and Nama people during its colonial rule but offered limited development aid instead of meaningful reparations, exemplifies the reluctance of many European governments to fully confront the legacies of colonial violence. Across the continent, similar disputes persist — not only over cultural heritage, but also for the extraction of resources, land dispossession, and systemic violence during the colonial era.

Against this backdrop, a significant shift has taken place on the African side: the African Union has declared 2026–2036 the Decade of Reparations, extending what had been a single-year focus in 2025 into a ten-year continental commitment to secure justice, restitution, and compensation for the legacies of slavery and colonialism. Led by Ghana's former President John Mahama, who chairs the AU's reparations initiative, this represents [a qualitative change in how Africa is approaching the reparations question](#) — moving from moral appeal to a structured, multi-year political programme. The first concrete result came on 25 March 2026, when the UN General Assembly adopted — by 123 votes to three — a Ghana-led resolution formally declaring the transatlantic slave trade the gravest crime against humanity. Notably, fifty-two countries abstained, including the United Kingdom and European Union member states. The significance for Africa–Europe relations is considerable: Europe will increasingly need to respond to a coordinated and institutionally-backed African demand, rather than managing ad-hoc requests from individual states.

For European governments inclined toward genuine partnership, this creates an opportunity to engage proactively and constructively — defining the terms of dialogue rather than being reactive. For those who continue to resist, the reputational and diplomatic cost of doing so is likely to rise.

Either way, the Decade of Reparations shifts the terrain: it is no longer possible to treat reparations as a marginal, cynical, or symbolic issue on the Africa–Europe agenda.

Present-day actions also deeply influence memory politics. The varied European reactions to the conflict in Gaza, particularly considering the genocide case brought before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), were closely watched across Africa. The political and military support for Israel from some of Europe's most powerful states — even as other European nations have made encouraging moves to condemn the violence and recognise Palestinian statehood — can evoke painful memories of colonial-era double standards. This perceived inconsistency was powerfully illustrated by the International Criminal Court's (ICC) arrest warrants. The unified European praise for the warrant against Russia's president contrasted sharply with the fractured and, in some cases, hostile reactions when the Court's prosecutor sought warrants for Israeli leaders. This dissonance undermines European claims to a moral, rules-based foreign policy and reinforces deep-seated mistrust in Africa, complicating efforts to build a partnership on equal terms. It is worth noting that European positions on this issue have not remained static: by May 2025, the UK, France, and Canada jointly warned that Israel's blockade of Gaza risked breaching international humanitarian law,



and a growing number of European states moved to recognise Palestinian statehood at the UN General Assembly in September 2025. These developments nuance a perception of uniform European hypocrisy and may offer some grounds for cautious re-engagement on this theme. The underlying issue — the credibility of European claims to a rules-based order — remains live, but the picture is evolving.

Repatriation and reparations are not only matters of the past. They are vital to shaping a more honest, balanced, and constructive Africa–Europe relationship. Tackling these issues together through transparent dialogue, legal reform, and joint cultural initiatives can serve as a powerful foundation for healing historical wounds and building trust. These domains illustrate the complexity of the terrain; the question is how to navigate it differently.

Practical Lessons for Transforming Africa–Europe Collaboration

Based on our work across the European and African continents on these types of structural challenges, we have drawn out a set of important lessons to inform and enable effective ways forward for collaboration at the Africa–Europe interface.

NAMING POWER AND INEQUALITY

Rebalancing power in Africa–Europe relations is a long-term process, but a crucial first step is the simple yet profound act of naming power and inequality. Too often, these dynamics remain unspoken when Africans and Europeans are engaging with one another, operating beneath the surface and silently shaping decisions, priorities, and relationships.

By openly acknowledging imbalances — whether historical, economic, political, or cultural — both sides can begin to move beyond polite diplomacy and engage in more honest, effective collaboration. Building “power literacy” is key: recognising that power is not only held and shared through institutions or money, but also through symbols, norms, voice, knowledge, networks, and cultural capital. When these diverse forms of power are brought to the surface and understood, it becomes easier to design more equitable and mutually beneficial partnerships.

Naming power creates space for accountability, shifts the tone of dialogue, and invites more inclusive participation. It helps both Africans and Europeans step into collaboration with greater awareness, humility, and clarity about what it will take to truly co-create solutions rather than perpetuating old hierarchies under the guise of cooperation. It also helps to build shared power, rather than seeing power as a zero-sum game.



Read “[Exploring Funding, Power and Participatory Grantmaking](#)”.

A report by Reos Partners, [The Ubele Initiative](#) and [Impact on Urban Health](#).

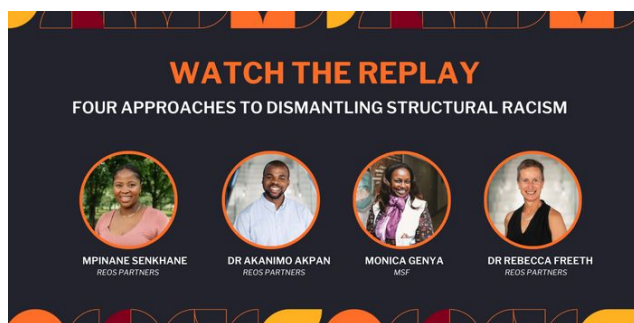


In our experience facilitating the [RINGO Lab](#), a multi-year [social lab](#) focused on re-imagining the international NGO sector, naming power dynamics was not only a conceptual exercise but a practical prerequisite for genuine collaboration. The lab brought together INGO leaders from the Global North alongside civil society actors from the Global South. When conveners explicitly named the structural imbalances at play — including the fact that open recruitment had skewed participation toward large, headquartered Northern organisations — it shifted the tone. Global South participants reported feeling less like token voices and more like co-designers of the process itself.

CREATING SPACES FOR RELATIONAL HEALING

In our view, transformative collaboration requires us to confront trauma. We cannot and should not ignore that there is trauma in the history of the Africa–Europe relationship. That does not mean that everyone has experienced this trauma directly or evenly. However, many people carry wounds related to race and colonisation, which can lead to defensiveness, apprehension, or hyper-vigilance. As a result, simply being in this relationship can carry emotional strain.

In Reos' work supporting Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) to [dismantle structural racism](#) within its own organisation, we found that creating early space for participants to share personal experiences of race and identity, before attempting any analysis or problem-solving, was transformative. People reported feeling "validated, seen and understood" in ways that reduced defensiveness and made it possible to engage honestly with uncomfortable truths. The process involved developing a shared language for structural racism that helped participants recognise its presence in organisational norms, not merely in individual behaviour. This distinction, between racism as individual prejudice and racism as embedded in systems of whiteness and institutional culture, turned out to be essential for moving the group from acknowledgement to action.



Systemically addressing racism in organisations requires a shift in societal norms, beliefs and values. Drawing from our experience in supporting MSF's effort to dismantle structural racism, we share practical approaches, and explore how we might change the culture that drives and guides our organisational systems.

Watch [“Four Approaches to Dismantling Structural Racism”](#).

Depending on the circumstances, this can be attended to at different levels — explicitly or implicitly. But as conveners, designers and facilitators of these interactions, it is important to be aware that nerves may be on edge and that there may be conscious or unconscious internal struggles at play. Sometimes simple human interactions are sufficient — creating opportunities for people to share their story, look one another in the eye, greet and welcome, and to build personal relationships and understanding before expecting people to speak up in a room full of strangers. If race and healing are explicitly central to the content, it may require more explicit trauma-informed approaches.



MOVING BEYOND REPRESENTATION

In the evolving relationship between Africa and Europe, it is no longer enough to simply include African voices for the sake of appearance. Representation must be matched with real influence. Too often, African participation in European institutions or policy dialogues is still limited to token gestures, where voices are present but not empowered to shape outcomes. We have also repeatedly witnessed sole Africans on panels asked to speak on behalf of and be accountable for the entire continent, in a way that doesn't seem to happen to Europeans. This symbolic inclusion does little to shift underlying power dynamics or foster genuine collaboration.

Moving beyond representation means embracing African leadership, knowledge systems, and priorities, not as peripheral inputs, but as integral to the formulation of shared strategies. Only when African actors are recognised and treated as equal partners with agency and authority can the Africa–Europe relationship evolve from one of asymmetry to one of mutual respect and co-creation. African leaders also have a role to play in affirming their role and position, strengthening coherence, asserting their autonomy, and rejecting inherited tropes and stereotypes.

CHECKING ASSUMPTIONS

Meaningful Africa–Europe collaboration depends on both Europeans and Africans being willing to check their assumptions and question the narratives they bring into the partnership. European leaders often approach Africa with a limited understanding of the continent's political, social, and cultural complexities, leading to policies and engagements that feel “tone-deaf” or out of touch. We have noticed many Africans describe the experience of hearing European leaders speak “to” them rather than “with” them, sensing a fundamental disconnect, as if the speaker does not understand who they are addressing. Dismayed European leaders got a taste of this experience at the Munich Security Conference in 2025, when the US Vice President delivered a fiery [speech](#).

Building authentic partnerships requires a deeper cultural and historical awareness that goes beyond technical assistance or development frameworks. This means investing in long-term exchanges that foster mutual familiarity and respect. While Africa tends to know Europe well through media, education, migration, and colonial history, the reverse is often not true. Yet, Africans can also fall into simplified narratives about Europe, shaped by an external gaze that overlooks Europe's internal diversity, struggles, and complexities.

Furthermore, in conversations about the global moment, it is easy for Europeans to fall into the trap of talking about humanity as a single “we”. Of course, at one level, we have a shared human identity. Yet despite this and our interconnectedness, we are not all on the same boat. Speaking from a position of privilege, assuming collective emotion, an aligned response, or a shared point of view, paradoxically risks creating separation rather than alignment and solidarity.



The challenge we are confronted with, then, is how to have global conversations without assuming universal perspectives and interests, and how to ground such discussions in presence and empathy. One simple but important move that helps is to name our positionality — our vantage point in relation to the conversation — especially when we are in spaces of power differentials and low familiarity or trust. True collaboration begins when both sides recognise their blind spots and engage with each other not through outdated assumptions, but through curiosity, humility, and a shared commitment to learning.

ENABLING CONTAINERS FOR DIALOGUE, COLLABORATION, AND CO-CREATION

In our experience, the complexity of Africa–Europe collaboration benefits from enabling spaces that foster dialogue, co-creation, and trust, and that attend to relationships and capabilities rather than only to content. These spaces go beyond the formal agenda. They are shaped by the physical environments in which people meet, the design of the program, the balance of perspectives among speakers, and the often-unseen dynamics of who holds power behind the scenes.

The [RINGO Lab](#) offers one illustration. Rather than opening with a formal agenda, the lab's inception process began with storytelling circles — spaces explicitly designed for relational connection rather than collective output. Sessions were deliberately left unrecorded and undocumented, honouring the vulnerability they invited. Group onboarding calls, paired across stakeholder groups, enabled participants to encounter one another as human beings before encountering each other as institutional representatives. The result was a foundation of trust that made subsequent hard conversations — about power, about accountability, about who sets the agenda — navigable rather than explosive.



This overview document presents the full process of the RINGO Project, covering our social labs approach, how we can work together to bridge divides, and the practicalities of what it takes to build trust and establish lasting partnerships.

Read “[Re-Imagining INGOs: Ringo Project](#)”.

Structured dialogue spaces should be facilitated by diverse, balanced teams — African and European, gender-diverse teams — who are capable of navigating complexity with empathy and clarity. Such settings move beyond polite conversation, scripted talking points, or adversarial debate to become spaces of brave, honest engagement, where mutual teaching and learning are encouraged, and people feel safe being vulnerable while advancing productively on shared challenges. When convened with intention and humility, in ways that encourage a reclaiming of identities and a mutual appreciation of rituals, ceremonies, and shared stories, these spaces can become transformative arenas where participants are not just representatives of institutions or interests, but active agents who are co-travellers on a shared path toward a better future.



What It Will Take to Move Forward

Africa and Europe are deeply interdependent, and the relationship is evolving.

The 7th AU-EU Summit in November 2025 demonstrated that high-level political will exists: its joint declaration on multilateralism and the €150 billion Global Gateway commitment provide building blocks that merit tracking and accountability. The AfCFTA, now ratified by 49 countries and covering an estimated \$3-trillion market, creates a platform for genuine trade rebalancing — if Europe can revise its Economic Partnership Agreements to support African value addition rather than the export of raw materials. The Africa–Europe Foundation has called for a permanent inter-summit mechanism, a joint think-tank or secretariat function, to maintain momentum and accountability between high-profile political moments. These are not aspirational ideas; they are actionable next steps that would give the “transformative journey” real traction.

At the same time, countries across Africa are forging their own futures, negotiating better deals, and demanding more from international partners. The current geopolitical moment is unusually fluid. There is an openness and a malleability now that can lead Europe and Africa to drift apart or to make strides together. For the latter to be true, a paradigm shift is necessary — one that moves from interactions based on stereotypes, charity, and traditional power structures to reciprocity-driven co-creation grounded in shared human values.

This shift in interactions requires honesty, courage, and vulnerability as well as pragmatism and ambition. It will benefit from heightened attention to the spaces where Africans and Europeans are coming together, the processes by which they engage with one another, and the level of shared, balanced facilitation and leadership in those processes.

There is an extensive road to travel, and there will be obstacles and failures along the way. But it is more important than ever to keep walking together — differently and further.



About the Authors

Mahmood Sunday



Mahmood Sunday is Managing Director of Reos Partners Africa. He designs and leads multi-stakeholder processes that address power asymmetries and the decolonisation of global partnerships, particularly in contexts where inequality and questions of proximity — to power, to communities, to the problem itself — shape who sets the agenda.

He has worked across public health, climate, governance transitions, and economic inclusion, with a focus on centring local voice and agency in collaborative responses to complex challenges that shape people's lives. Before joining Reos, Mahmood held senior roles in the private sector, government, and venture philanthropy, bringing a cross-sector lens to systemic change work at different scales, from local to global. He has published in peer-reviewed journals including the [*Journal of Business Ethics*](#) and the [*Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change*](#), writing on collaboration, ethics, and structural racism.

Mille Bøjer



Mille Bøjer is Managing Director of Reos Partners Europe. She is an experienced facilitator and architect of multi-stakeholder processes and platforms, particularly in situations of high complexity, uncertainty, and conflict. Mille has an extensive track record in futures work and systems change and has worked on large-scale multi-stakeholder projects addressing challenges in drug policy, education, democracy, health, peace, and justice.

She has worked at community, national, regional and global levels, applying a transformative approach to scenario development and systemic approaches to social innovation. Mille is the author of numerous blogs, chapters, and articles, and the lead author of the book [*Mapping Dialogue: Essential Tools for Social Change*](#), which outlines a variety of dialogue methodologies, principles and approaches.

Ellen Sow



Ellen Sow works at the intersection of Africa-Europe relations. With German and Senegalese roots and having grown up in France, she brings a deeply personal perspective to navigating cultural and political dynamics between the two continents. She studied European Studies at Maastricht University and African Studies at University of Basel, focusing on historical legacies, power dynamics, and possibilities for more equitable partnerships.

Her work is driven by a longstanding interest in how identities, worldviews, and lived experiences shape collaboration across difference. Alongside her masters' studies, she worked with Reos Partners as an intern and consultant.



About Reos Partners

Founded in 2007, Reos Partners works with leaders and organisations to address complex, systemic challenges.

Our proven approach enables transformative collaboration in even the most highly complex, uncertain, and polarised situations, creating practical pathways for developing, implementing, and institutionalising equitable and durable solutions.

Having worked in over 80 countries, we are committed to advancing effective and inclusive collaboration on the most critical global challenges.

reospartners.com

Sources

African Climate Foundation & Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa (LSE). (2023, May). *Implications for African Countries of a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism in the EU*.

Africa–Europe Foundation. (2025, June 3). *Scoping Paper: Revamping Cooperation on Transition Minerals: A Strategic Agenda for the Africa–Europe Partnership*. Africa–Europe Foundation.

Fakir, Saliem and David McNair (2024) Podcast episode: *A New Vision for European Engagement in Africa (Beyond Confronting China)*. China in Africa Podcast episode July 25, 2024.

Lopes, C. (2024). *The Self-Deception Trap: Exploring the Economic Dimensions of Charity Dependency within Africa–Europe Relations*. Springer.

McNair, D., & Denwood, K. (2024). Introduction: Why Europe Needs Africa (and Africa Needs Europe). In D. McNair (Ed.), *Why Europe Needs Africa* (pp. 1–10). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

African Union and European Union. (2025, November). 7th AU–EU Summit Joint Declaration: Promoting Peace and Prosperity through Effective Multilateralism. Luanda, Angola.

Africa–Europe Foundation. (2025). *The State of Africa–Europe Relations 2025: Financing Our Future*. Africa–Europe Foundation.

European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). (2025, October). *The Bear and the Bot Farm: Countering Russian Hybrid Warfare in Africa*. ECFR.

Edited and formatted by: [Sam Mabaso](#)