

The success of the relaunch of the EU strategy to counter China will be decided in Africa

Berlin – On July 12, EU foreign ministers agreed on a new version of the connectivity strategy that was decided in 2018 yet never properly implemented. The strategy aims to finally breathe life into the idea of a globally connected Europe, and drive forward the implementing EU institutions. By the spring of 2022, concrete proposals are to be drawn up on how the European Union can counter China's aspirations for greater global influence.

The key question is whether the relaunch of the strategy will also be accompanied by a change in thinking on the part of the politicians who intend to implement it. The need for this is particularly evident in Africa, where the strategies of Europe and China could not be more different. Beijing sees Africa not as a continent of problems, but as one of opportunities, and acts accordingly. It is investing enormous sums there – without any concerns that even one African refugee will ever reach China. The perception of German and European politicians, however, is still too clouded by concept of Africa as a continent of crisis. Between 1960 and 2004, 600 billion dollars of Western development aid flowed to the continent without any critical self-reflection as to whether this led to sustainable value creation or to improvements in the circumstances of the people there. European donor countries still place too much focus on improving social infrastructure. Unfortunately, this has led neither to many new jobs nor to a noticeable improvement in local value creation. These are precisely the factors that play a very important role in China's Africa strategy, which is why the country seems to be successful on the continent.

European Union plans to make use of the new connectivity strategy to closely link itself with other continents over thousands of kilometres can only succeed if investments in Africa play a prominent role. No other continent has a greater need for jobs created through the construction of new air, land, and sea transport links. The same applies to the development and expansion of digital networks, including both mobile and landline connections, as well as cable and satellite links. New energy networks, powerlines, and natural gas pipelines are also needed almost everywhere on our neighbouring continent.

These kinds of investments by the EU in Africa, with the goal of rapidly and cost-efficiently creating sustainable added value through the exchange of goods, services, and information, would ultimately be of much greater benefit to all parties than the prevailing policy of "we help Africa." The EU's goals of optimising the international division of labour, opening up new sales and production markets, achieving lower transport costs, and thereby increasing prosperity can only be achieved if we finally recognise Africa as a continent of opportunity rather than a continent of crisis. This also requires a much more nuanced view of the developments in the individual countries of Africa and their political, economic, and social circumstances. There are 54 very different countries in Africa that cannot be covered by one or two agreements based on their current level of development.

If Europe is really serious about relaunching the connectivity strategy as a counterweight to China's ambitions, then it needs to be clearly ensured that European companies also carry out the projects financed by the EU, preferably in cooperation with European and African partners. The failure of the strategy would be pre-programmed if – in line with the current logic of development financing – the thousands of kilometres of new roads and rail lines ended up being built by China's state-owned construction companies because Germany and Europe put the

contracts out to international tender themselves or through state-owned African partners – the German government alone has awarded a total of 344 contracts to Chinese companies in Africa since 2013. A financing model in which Africa and Europe win in the end is therefore urgently needed. It should also be kept in mind that the main need is often not money, but rather that implementable projects are first developed. As such, there is still much to be done before concrete projects are realised in Africa as a result of the new version of the connectivity strategy.

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