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KNOWLEDGE PLATFORM ON INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

Perceptions of European and Dutch Development Cooperation in Africa

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01. Introduction: Why Perceptions Matter Now

1.1 A Relationship in Structural Transition

Relations between Europe and Africa are undergoing a structural transformation that extends well beyond the gradual reform of aid policy. What were once primarily donor-recipient architectures are being reframed, in official discourse at least, as multi-dimensional partnerships encompassing investment, climate cooperation, digital infrastructure, security and economic resilience. European policy frameworks increasingly position Africa as a strategic actor confronting shared global challenges, as evidenced by the Joint Communication Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa and the Global Gateway Initiative (European Commission, 2020; 2021). Earlier analyses of this directional shift noted its gradual character; what distinguishes the most recent strategies is the degree to which the reframing has become politically central rather than aspirational (ECDPM, 2020; Hadfield, 2021).

African policy frameworks have shifted correspondingly. Agenda 2063 and the EU-AU Joint Vision for 2030 assert cooperation grounded in African priorities, structural transformation and long-term self-reliance rather than donor-defined development agendas (African Union, 2022). These documents reflect a sustained institutional effort by the African Union and regional bodies to reshape the normative terms of external engagement, an effort documented in detail by Hodzi (2025) and Carbone (2018) in their analysis of African institutional assertiveness within multilateral frameworks. The frequency with which African governments now invoke these frameworks in bilateral negotiations suggests that the normative environment has genuinely changed, even if the structural conditions enabling real parity remain contested.

This evolution is unfolding in a multipolar environment that materially complicates European positioning. African countries now engage with a widening range of external partners, including China, Gulf states, Turkey and Brazil, which has expanded their strategic options and capacity

to negotiate from positions of greater leverage (Lopes, 2025; Afripoli, 2026, Ikpa, 2025).

Reinforcing Akokpari,(2001), Kondo (2025) situate this shift within a broader reorientation of African foreign policy in which the asymmetries of the post-Cold War aid order are increasingly contested. For European and Dutch actors, this means that presence alone is no longer sufficient; cooperation must be demonstrably competitive on terms that African partners find credible and beneficial (SWP Berlin, 2026; Government of the Netherlands, 2023). The defining question has shifted from how much is provided to how cooperation is structured, negotiated and experienced in practice.

1.2 Why Perceptions Are Analytically Central

Perceptions are not peripheral to the functioning of development cooperation: they are constitutive of whether cooperation achieves lasting legitimacy. How different actors interpret the intentions, fairness and effectiveness of European and Dutch engagement directly shapes its credibility, the scope for productive dialogue and the willingness of African partners to sustain long-term commitment (Keijzer and Lundsgaarde, 2018). A growing body of empirical research demonstrates that perceptions of external actors are shaped not only by material benefits delivered but by how interventions are attributed and contextualised within domestic political settings (Aja eke, 2024; Hackenesch, Heidland and Tull, 2025; Dietrich and Winters, 2015). This is not simply a communications challenge: it reflects the fundamentally interpretive character of international partnerships at the level at which governments, civil societies and citizens actually experience them.

The literature reveals a consistent and analytically significant gap between official narratives and practised reality. European and Dutch policy frameworks affirm partnership, mutual benefit and shared objectives (European External Action Service, 2025). Yet African academic and policy debates persistently document continued

imbalances in decision-making authority, the structuring role of conditionalities and substantive concerns about the alignment of cooperation with domestic priorities (Mkandawire and Soludo, 1998; African Development Bank, 2023; United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2024). Moyo (2009), writing from within the African context, made an early and forceful version of this argument, contending that the architecture of development assistance systematically undermines the ownership it formally endorses. More recent scholarship has refined rather than refuted this claim. These tensions are also visible in digital and media debates, where perspectives tend to be expressed with greater directness and are frequently linked to structural concerns about inequality, historical injustice and the legitimacy of external engagement.

The implication is fundamental: cooperation is assessed not solely by what it delivers but by how it is interpreted within wider political and historical contexts. Perceptions are formed through the interaction between concrete programme experiences and deeper narratives about power, fairness and external intent (Aja-Eke, 2024). A study that neglects this interpretive dimension will systematically misdiagnose why cooperation succeeds or fails in generating durable legitimacy and trust.

1.3 Purpose and Scope of This Review

This literature review aims to provide systematic analytical foundations for an empirical multi-country perception study on how European and Dutch development cooperation is understood across African contexts. Its focus is deliberately on how cooperation is experienced in practice rather than how it is designed in policy frameworks, particularly across the dimensions of partnership, ownership, trust, power and effectiveness. A further concern is variation: perceptions differ by country, sector and actor type, shaped by the interaction of direct experience with structural and historical narratives. Identifying these patterns and their sources is essential for informing ongoing debates about how cooperation can better reflect African priorities and build genuine, sustained legitimacy. For this reason, we undertook a social media scraping and secondary data analysis to capture broader public narratives, informal discourse, and digitally mediated perceptions

surrounding European and Dutch development cooperation across diverse African contexts.

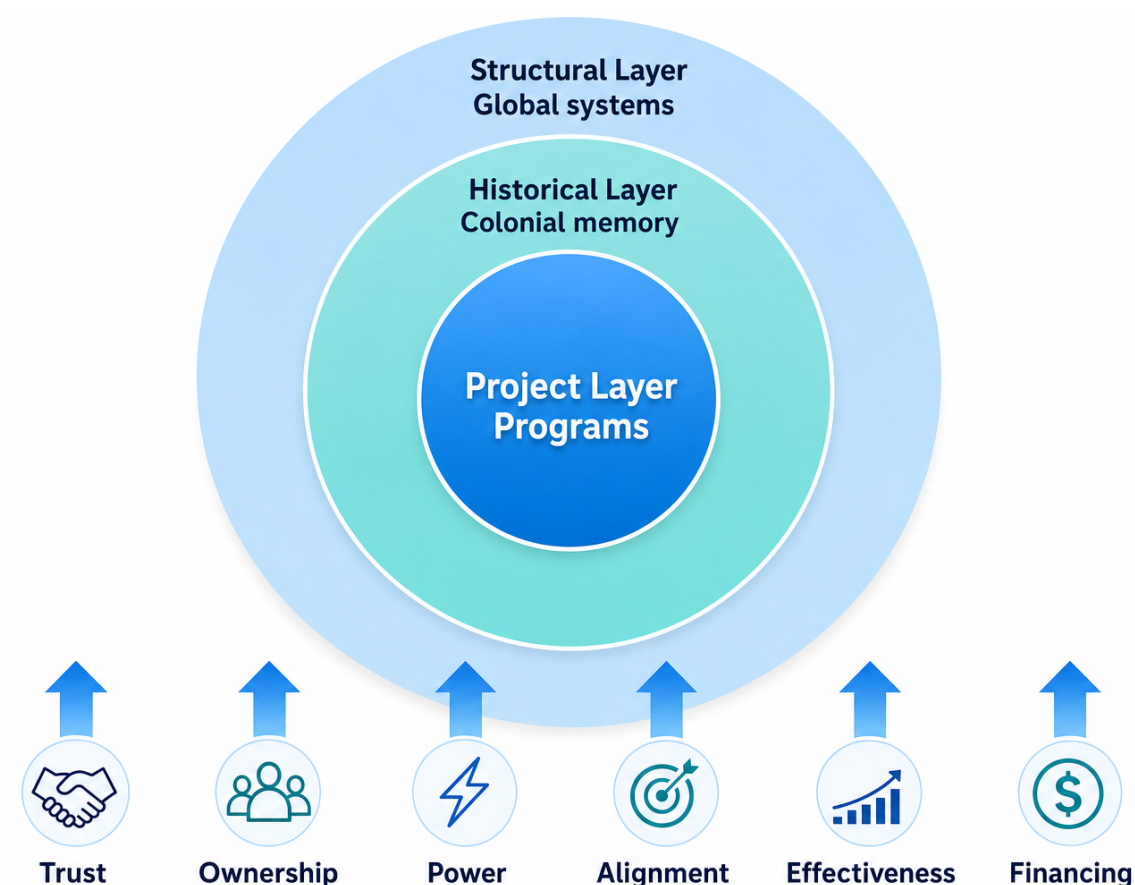
The review is organised in two parts. Part I (Sections 1-5) establishes the conceptual framework, synthesises the key evidence patterns emerging from the integrated analysis and examines African perspectives in the scholarly literature in depth. Part II (Sections 6-10) turns to European and Dutch policy and evaluation narratives, digital and social media evidence, and the cross-cutting synthesis and policy conclusions.

1.4 Analytical Framework and Approach

The review integrates multiple forms of evidence: academic research, policy and evaluation reports, African institutional perspectives and digital and social media analysis. The inclusion of social media as a primary evidence source requires brief justification. These platforms are not representative public opinion surveys, but they are consequential spaces in which perceptions are actively formed, contested and disseminated, often reaching audiences and articulating perspectives that formal literature systematically misses (Mutsvairo, 2016; Papacharissi, 2014). An analysis that ignored them would produce a structurally incomplete account of how cooperation is received and interpreted.

The analytical framework guiding this review conceptualises perception formation across three interconnected levels: structural, historical, and project-level factors. Within this framework, the review examines six key dimensions through which development cooperation is experienced and evaluated: trust and credibility; ownership and local agency; power and decision-making asymmetries; alignment with national and regional priorities; perceived effectiveness; and financing modalities. Each dimension is grounded in OECD evaluation principles, European cooperation research and African institutional perspectives (including frameworks, like the one proposed by Kizito, Tshiyoyo and Mazenda, 2025). Together, they provide a consistent basis for comparing perceptions across countries, sectors and actor groups, while ensuring that both the technical and political dimensions of cooperation are captured and critically examined.

Analytical framework for understanding perceptions of European and Dutch cooperation in Africa



This figure presents the analytical framework guiding the study of perceptions of European and Dutch development cooperation in Africa. The framework is organised into three concentric layers. The outer layer represents the structural context, including global economic relations, financing systems and patterns of inequality that shape how external engagement is understood. The middle layer captures the historical dimension, including colonial legacies, collective memory and identity, which inform trust, legitimacy and expectations of external actors. The inner layer reflects the project level, where concrete programmes, investments and sectoral interventions are experienced and evaluated.

Cutting across these layers are six analytical dimensions: trust and credibility, ownership

and local agency, power and decision-making asymmetries, alignment with national and regional priorities, perceived effectiveness, and financing modalities. These dimensions provide a consistent basis for analysing how cooperation is interpreted across different contexts and actor groups.

The framework highlights that perceptions are not determined by projects alone. Instead, they emerge from the interaction between layers, where positive or negative experiences at project level are reinforced, qualified or contested by structural and historical narratives. This approach enables systematic comparison across countries and stakeholders, while capturing the political and relational nature of development cooperation.



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02. Key Patterns in the Evidence

Before examining the literature in depth, it is useful to establish the main patterns that emerge from the integrated analysis of academic research, policy documents, African institutional sources and digital narratives. These are not preliminary observations to be set aside once the detail begins: they are the organising claims that the subsequent sections develop, substantiate and test against competing interpretations. Presenting them upfront reflects our conviction that a good literature review should argue, not merely survey.

2.1 Structural and Historical Narratives As a powerful Interpretive Context

The most consistent finding across all sources is that perceptions of European and Dutch cooperation are shaped, and in many of the sources reviewed appear to be shaped strongly, by broader structural and historical narratives. These include long-standing concerns about unequal economic exchange, the extraction of resources and the enduring legacies of colonialism. Such narratives function as interpretive frames within which contemporary cooperation is assessed: they do not disappear when a well-designed programme appears, but instead can shape what that programme is taken to mean. Mkandawire and Soludo (1999) captures this dynamic precisely in their analysis of how African publics distinguish between the stated aims of development cooperation and its structural effects on African economies and political systems.

It is important to be precise about the mechanism at work here, because imprecision on this point generates persistent policy misdiagnosis. Experiences with specific programmes can influence perceptions at the margin; they can confirm, nuance or occasionally complicate structural frames. The available evidence does not establish, with the precision that would be needed to call this a robust finding, how consistently or how strongly structural narrative overrides positive project experience rather than merely coexisting alongside it. What the evidence does show is that even demonstrably successful projects are frequently evaluated within a context of scepticism rooted in structural inequality and historical injustice. The relative weight of structural narrative versus project-level experience appears, from the material reviewed, to vary by country, sector, actor type and degree of direct exposure to cooperation - a variation that is itself one of the more policy-relevant patterns in this review, and one the empirical phase should test directly rather than assume.

2.2 Partnership Is Evaluated Through Practice, Not Rhetoric

While European and Dutch strategies place partnership, mutual interest and shared responsibility at the rhetorical centre of their engagement, these claims are evaluated in practice rather than accepted at face value. The evidence is consistent on this point: partnership is assessed through observable shifts in power and decision-making authority, not through discursive alignment or policy language (Rutazibwa, 2010; Westerveld, 2021). The relevant questions African actors ask are who sets priorities, how decisions are made and how resources are allocated. Bergamaschi (2014) demonstrates this in his detailed analysis of aid negotiations in Mali, showing that formal partnership language



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coexisted with substantial donor control over programme design. Where conditionalities, financing modalities and European-interest priorities, particularly in migration and security, are seen to dominate these processes, partnership language loses credibility regardless of the sincerity with which it is advanced.

2.3 Dutch Cooperation Has Low Standalone Visibility

Compared to larger actors such as France, China or the United States, Dutch development cooperation has limited visibility as a distinct presence in public debates and digital discourse across Africa. In most contexts, it is not recognised as a separate actor but is absorbed into broader narratives about Europe or the West. The Netherlands becomes more legible in specific circumstances, where historical ties are salient, where particular controversies attract attention or where sectoral programmes are deeply embedded in practice, but these are exceptions. The practical consequence is that Dutch cooperation is predominantly interpreted through the lens of European engagement as a whole, carrying the structural and historical associations that entails.

2.4 A Persistent Gap Between Commitment and Practice

A recurring theme across African academic and policy sources is the gap between stated principles - ownership, equality, mutual benefit - and actual implementation. The concern is not that these commitments are absent from European rhetoric but that they are only partially realised in practice. The gap is most clearly visible in the continued concentration of agenda-setting authority among European actors, in the structuring influence of conditionalities and in the limited policy space available to African governments for genuinely autonomous decision-making. Hyden and Court (2003) identified this tension between ownership rhetoric and ownership reality as a defining feature of aid relationships well before the Paris Declaration formalised it, and subsequent research confirms that the gap has proven stubbornly resistant to normative reform. Perceptions of cooperation are shaped as much by how consistently principles are implemented as by what those principles declare.

2.5 Digital Narratives Amplify and Frame Perceptions

Social media platforms add a qualitatively distinct dimension to the evidence base. On TikTok, X and Meta/Facebook, perceptions are expressed in more direct and emotionally charged registers, foregrounding themes of extraction, inequality, neo-colonialism and sovereignty. These narratives are not representative in a statistical sense, but they are consequential: they circulate widely, attract high engagement and establish the interpretive environment in which specific programmes and policies are subsequently understood.

Mutsvairo and Bebawi (2019) analyse this dynamic in the African context specifically, showing how digital platforms enable the rapid horizontal spread of critical narratives about external actors in ways that bypass the gatekeeping functions of traditional media. They are particularly influential among younger and more digitally active audiences, for whom these platforms are primary sources of political information about international actors.

2.6 Positive Perceptions Exist but Are Narrower in Scope

Positive assessments of European and Dutch cooperation are present in the evidence, but they are more limited in reach and in the diversity of their sources. They tend to concentrate in specific sectors or programme types, including technical assistance, service delivery and agricultural investment, where tangible and attributable benefits are visible. They are also expressed predominantly by official or institutional actors engaging with cooperation at a programmatic level, rather than by wider publics whose reference points are more likely to be structural and historical. Wood, Burkot & Howes (2017) document this actor-type divergence in their analysis of how different stakeholder groups assess the same aid interventions, finding substantial variation between institutional evaluators and citizen-level assessments of the same programmes. The existence of positive perceptions matters analytically, but it does not necessarily neutralise the structural and historical narratives within which even positive assessments may be contextualised.

These positive assessments deserve the same analytical scrutiny as critical ones, rather than being treated only as an exception to the structural pattern described above. Where trust in Dutch or European cooperation does form, the material reviewed points to a cluster of recurring conditions - technical reliability, predictability, visible and locally attributable results, and sector-specific expertise, particularly in water management and agriculture - that appear to generate confidence even where broader structural scepticism persists elsewhere in the same discourse. A key open question for the primary empirical study, rather than one this review can resolve, is not only why scepticism persists, but under what conditions positive, direct experience with a programme does or does not translate into broader trust and perceived legitimacy.

2.7 The Overarching Implication: Perceptions Are Relational

Taken together, these patterns support a working conclusion, to be tested rather than assumed in the empirical phase: perceptions of European and Dutch cooperation are not formed solely at the level of individual projects. They are produced through the interaction between concrete experiences and wider narratives about history, power and global economic relations. This conclusion is consistent with the three-layer analytical framework developed in the accompanying design document, which identifies structural, historical and project-level dimensions as the interlocking contexts through which cooperation is assessed (Kizito, Tshiyoyo and Mazenda, 2025; OECD DAC, 2021; Papacharissi, 2015). The practical implication is direct: improving perceptions likely requires, though this review cannot yet specify to what degree, engagement with the structural and historical dimensions that conditions how project quality is read and evaluated, not simply improvements in project quality itself.

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Perceptions are produced through the interaction between concrete experiences and wider narratives about history and power.



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3. Conceptual Foundations and Analytical Framework

3.1 Contested Concepts: Development Cooperation, Partnership and Ownership

The concepts central to this study, including development cooperation, partnership, ownership, trust and power asymmetries, are not analytically neutral instruments. They are sites of ongoing political and scholarly contest, and their meanings differ significantly depending on whether one approaches them from within OECD evaluation frameworks, European policy traditions or African critical scholarship. Acknowledging these contestations is not an academic formality: it is necessary for understanding why cooperation designed in good faith can nonetheless generate scepticism and resentment among the populations it aims to benefit. Gould (2005) makes this point forcefully in his analysis of the ‘conditionalities culture’, demonstrating that technical concepts in development carry embedded assumptions about agency and legitimacy that are not universally shared.

Development cooperation is conventionally understood, particularly within the OECD Development Assistance Committee tradition, as a set of organised interventions aimed at reducing poverty, supporting self-reliance and promoting economic and social development (OECD DAC, 2024; OECD DAC, 2025). This framing treats cooperation as a bounded, largely technical enterprise with identifiable objectives and measurable outputs. Browne (2012) and Eyben (2014) offer a more critical reading: they argue that contemporary development cooperation is increasingly characterised by the interpenetration of development objectives with political, economic and strategic interests, producing fundamental ambiguity about what cooperation is ultimately for. Mawdsley (2012), examining development cooperation from the perspective of emerging donors, adds that this ambiguity has been intensified by the diversification of the donor landscape and the resulting contestation of norms that were previously presented as settled.

The concept of partnership is where this ambiguity becomes most politically acute. European policy frameworks present partnership as a move towards genuine mutuality and shared responsibility, implying a meaningful departure from hierarchical donor-recipient dynamics. The critical literature pushes back on this framing with considerable empirical force. Rutazibwa (2014) argues that partnership discourse can function as a performative device that legitimises existing power arrangements while appearing to transcend them; the language of equality, she contends, frequently coexists with structural asymmetries in agenda-setting and resource control that the language itself does not alter. Fraser and Whitfield, (2009) offers a complementary analysis focused on West African cases, showing how partnership frameworks adopted after the Paris Declaration reproduced donor authority at the level of implementation even as they shifted the language of the relationship. Westerveld (2021); Baydag and Klingebiel (2022) and OECD (2023) document how this operates in practice in the Dutch context, showing how stated commitments to partnership persist alongside external influence over financing and policy priorities.

The more policy-oriented literature offers a partial counter-argument that deserves serious consideration rather than dismissal. Keijzer and Lundsgaarde (2018) find that partnership frameworks can generate genuine improvements in coordination and alignment even when deeper structural inequalities remain intact, suggesting that the relationship between discourse and practice is not simply one of ideological mystification. Knack and Rahman (2004), drawing on cross-country data, find that donor coordination and recipient ownership are positively associated with aid effectiveness outcomes, lending empirical weight to the view that partnership frameworks carry operational significance. Both sets of observations can be simultaneously true: partnership language can facilitate real improvements in some dimensions of cooperation while leaving structural asymmetries largely undisturbed. The tension between these readings is not an impasse but an analytical resource - it identifies precisely the conditions under which partnership claims become credible rather than merely aspirational.

Ownership presents a parallel and equally illuminating debate. Since its installation as the cornerstone of the Paris Declaration (OECD, 2005), ownership has been formally endorsed across the aid system. Yet Tandon (2008) and in more recent times Lopes (2019) argue, from an African perspective, that ownership is structurally constrained by external financing architectures and conditionalities that pre-determine the range of policy choices available to African governments. Whitfield and Fraser (2010), in their comparative study of aid-recipient negotiating capacity, demonstrate empirically how structural power asymmetries shape the space within which ownership can be exercised, even in countries with relatively capable and assertive governments. OECD evaluations tend to acknowledge these constraints but frame them as implementation challenges rather than as features of the system itself - a framing that deflects attention from the political economy of conditionality and naturalises constraints that are the product of negotiated and negotiable power relations.

Trust is both an outcome and a precondition of effective cooperation. Experimental work by Blair and Roessler (2021) and Heitzenroder (2021) demonstrates that aid can build trust when it is visible, locally attributed and perceived as aligned with domestic institutions. These findings constructively complicate simple narratives of aid-generated dependency or resentment. Dietrich (2013) adds nuance by showing that the delivery channel matters significantly: aid delivered through non-governmental rather than state channels can actually reduce trust in government, producing unintended political effects that output-

level evaluations do not capture. Yet qualitative research consistently shows that trust is fragile where cooperation is experienced as externally driven or insufficiently responsive to local priorities (Brautigam and Knack, 2004; Sogge, 2002). The key variable is not the scale of resource transfer but the quality of the relationship through which resources flow.

Power asymmetries are the structural reality within which all other concepts operate. There is broad agreement in the literature that asymmetries in financial resources, institutional capacity and discursive influence shape cooperation profoundly. The disagreement concerns implications: some authors hold that asymmetries can be partially mitigated through transparency, accountability and coordination (Keijzer and Lundsgaarde, 2018; Booth, 2012), while scholars within decolonial and African critical traditions argue that they constitute structural limits on what equal partnership can mean in practice (Tandon, 2008; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). We do not resolve this debate, but we take it seriously as a productive tension that shapes how cooperation is experienced, assessed and contested.

3.2 From Donor-Recipient to Partnership: Substance or Discourse?

The rhetorical shift from donor-recipient language to partnership is one of the most significant normative transformations in development policy over the past two decades. Whether it represents a substantive change in how cooperation operates, or primarily a change in how it is described, is a central contested question - one that requires careful analysis at different levels of the system.

At the level of formal institutional architecture, the shift is written in text. EU-AU agreements, the Joint Africa-EU Strategy and successive partnership frameworks have broadened the scope of cooperation beyond aid transfers to encompass trade, investment, climate and security, and have introduced mechanisms for more reciprocal dialogue (European Commission, 2020; African Union, 2022). In earlier years Ganzle (2013) documented how these types of frameworks have opened spaces for more diversified and formally more symmetrical forms of engagement and Brosig (2011) had outlined how these frameworks expanded EU-Africa engagement into broader institutional and security cooperation structures, creating more formalised mechanisms for inter-organisational dialogue and coordination. Farrell (2005), writing at an even earlier moment in this transition, had already argued that the institutionalisation of partnership frameworks reflected a significant transformation in the formal architecture of EU-Africa relations, even as strategic and economic interests continued to shape the relationship.



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At the level of substantive power, however, the evidence is considerably more mixed. Krapohl and Van Huut (2019) argue that the EPA negotiations exposed persistent asymmetries in EU–Africa economic relations, as differentiated trade incentives fragmented African regional bargaining positions and weakened collective regional coordination. Rutazibwa (2010) characterises partnership discourse as performative, generating the appearance of equality without its operational substance. Hurt (2020) reached a similar conclusion in his regional analysis, finding that the language of African agency in AU-EU relations has consistently outpaced actual shifts in agenda-setting power. The ECDPM and DIE (2020) evaluation synthesis adds an important empirical dimension: cooperation has become more flexible and diversified, but also more complex, with newer instruments such as blended finance and trust funds sometimes reducing transparency and partner-country influence rather than enhancing them. This finding is particularly significant because it demonstrates that institutional innovation can work against as well as for the objectives it purports to serve.

The analytical conclusion that this debate supports is that the gap between partnership discourse and partnership practice is not simply an implementation deficit to be corrected through better programme management. It reflects structural features of a cooperation system in which the political value of claiming partnership is not consistently aligned with the practical costs of the power-sharing that genuine partnership implies. Understanding this structural tension, rather than treating it as a series of unfortunate misalignments, is essential for explaining why similar policy language generates very different perceptions depending on context and on who is doing the evaluating.

3.3 How Perceptions Are Formed: The Priority of Narrative

Understanding perceptions of development cooperation requires more than cataloguing what different actors think. It requires a theory of how those perceptions are formed, and the literature provides one that is substantially more complex than the model of direct aid-impact-on-attitudes implicit in much formal evaluation.

Perceptions emerge from the interaction of lived experience with pre-existing interpretive frameworks through which people make sense of the world. Kumar et al. (2025) argue that perceptions of development cooperation are mediated through broader narratives about legitimacy, partnership, security and shared interests rather than through technical programme outcomes alone. Eyben (2014) develops this into a broader theoretical claim: narratives come first and structure interpretation from the outset, rather

than being updated incrementally in response to new project-level information. Cottle and Nolan (2007), analysing media representations of development, similarly show that pre-existing narrative frames about Africa and external actors shape how new information is interpreted even by engaged audiences. This contrasts with the model implicit in much aid effectiveness research, where perceptions are treated as downstream outcomes of programme performance - outcomes that better communication or improved results can shift.

The available evidence is consistent with a narrative-first model in the cases examined, though the review has not tested this against a genuine competing-explanations design (e.g. controlling for visibility, domestic political context, or general attitudes toward external actors), so the narrative-first account should be read as the best-supported working hypothesis rather than an established result. Where cooperation is associated with external control or geopolitical interests, even demonstrably effective programmes are assessed with scepticism (Westerveld, 2021; Africa Europe Foundation, 2025). Conversely, where cooperation is experienced as genuinely responsive to local priorities, it tends to generate legitimacy even in the absence of exceptional technical performance. This asymmetry has potentially significant policy implications: improving results communication may be insufficient on its own when the problem is not that positive results are unknown but that they are interpreted within a narrative frame that assigns them limited weight relative to structural and historical concerns.

The literature also identifies a productive tension between structural and agential accounts of perception formation. Structural accounts emphasise how deeply embedded narratives about colonialism, extraction and global inequality shape interpretation in ways that are resistant to change through project-level intervention. Agential accounts, developed by scholars such as Scott (2012) in his analysis of the ‘weapons of the weak’, recognise that subordinated actors actively reshape and contest dominant narratives rather than simply absorbing them. We take both seriously: structural narratives are powerful and persistent but not immutable, and the conditions under which they are open to revision are themselves objects of analytical inquiry.

3.4 The Three-Layer Perception Model

Building on these conceptual foundations, we apply a three-layer model to organise the analysis of how African perceptions of European and Dutch cooperation are formed. This model constitutes the central analytical architecture of the review and is developed in fuller detail in the accompanying analytical framework in Annex 1.

The first, structural layer captures how cooperation is understood in relation to global economic and political systems. At this layer, narratives about extraction, unequal exchange, debt and financial flows are prominent. The theoretical foundation is drawn from African political economy, particularly the structuralist tradition associated with Samir Amin (1972) and the dependency analysis of Walter Rodney (1972), who demonstrated that Africa's subordinate position in the global economy was produced by extractive relationships established during colonialism and maintained through subsequent trade and financial systems. More recent contributions by Adesina (2006) and Mkandawire (2010) have updated this framework to account for the ways in which contemporary development cooperation can reinforce rather than transform structural dependencies, even under partnership framing. Within this frame, development cooperation may be interpreted as part of a broader system that reproduces rather than reduces structural inequality, regardless of the intentions of individual donors or the merits of individual programmes.

The second, historical layer reflects the role of past collective experience in shaping present-day interpretation. Colonialism, slavery and apartheid are not merely historical events that have been superseded: they function as active reference points through which contemporary European engagement is read and evaluated. Rodney's (1972) analysis of underdevelopment, and more recent scholarship by Quijano (2000) and Rutazibwa (2010) on colonial continuities in development discourse, both demonstrate how historical patterns of domination shape contemporary perceptions of European actors. Biko (1978) and Fanon (1963), whose work continues to circulate widely in African educational and political contexts, provide conceptual vocabularies for articulating how historical subjugation shapes present-day political consciousness. For Dutch cooperation specifically, this includes a documented colonial history in Southern Africa and along the West African coast that appears as an explicit reference point in digital narratives across multiple platforms.

The third, project-level layer focuses on direct experience with specific programmes and interventions: service delivery, technical quality, local relevance and the distribution of benefits. This is the layer most visible in formal evaluation literature, where effectiveness is typically assessed through outputs, outcomes and performance indicators (OECD, 2005; ECDPM and DIE, 2020). It is also the layer that European and Dutch communication strategies prioritise - which contributes directly to the persistent disconnect between positive evaluation findings and sceptical public perceptions.

What is analytically essential about this model is that these layers are presented here as an analytical framework to be tested empirically, not as a hierarchy already established by the evidence reviewed. The material assembled in this review suggests that structural and historical layers frequently provide the interpretive context within which project-level experience is assessed, and that improvements at the project level can improve perceptions locally and sectorally without necessarily displacing broader narrative concerns. Whether, and how consistently, structural and historical layers outweigh project-level experience - and under what conditions project-level experience is able to shift the broader frame - is a central question for the primary empirical study, not a settled conclusion of this review. The model is not pessimistic about change; it is intended to make the conditions for changing perceptions testable rather than to assert in advance that they are primarily relational and political rather than technical.

3.5 Analytical Dimensions Applied in This Review

To operationalise the three-layer model, we apply six analytical dimensions that recur consistently across both written and digital sources. These dimensions enable systematic comparison across countries, sectors and actor groups while ensuring that both technical and political dimensions of cooperation are captured.

Trust and credibility refer to whether actors are seen as reliable, consistent and acting with integrity. As the literature shows, trust is shaped by past experience, perceived intent and the consistency between stated principles and observable practice, not solely by programme performance (Roessler et al., 2021; Aja-Eke, 2024; Putnam, 1995). Ownership and local agency capture the degree to which African actors can genuinely define priorities and lead decision-making rather than responding to externally set agendas, a dimension that is formally endorsed across the aid system but substantively contested in practice (OECD, 2005; Whitfield and Fraser, 2009). Power maps who sets the terms of engagement - who controls agendas, resources and the framing of what constitutes success (Westerveld, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Lukes, 2005). Alignment examines whether cooperation demonstrably supports national and regional priorities rather than exogenous objectives, including alignment with Agenda 2063 and domestically-led development strategies (Africa Europe Foundation, 2025; Mhandara et al., 2013). Perceived effectiveness assesses whether cooperation is experienced as producing tangible and meaningful outcomes, a judgement that depends on visibility, attributability and the distribution of benefits, not only on technical results (ECDPM and DIE, 2020; Eyben, 2014; Easterly, 2007). Financing modalities examine how

different instruments, including grants, loans, blended finance and investment guarantees, are understood in terms of fairness, risk distribution and long-term dependency implications (OECD DAC, 2024; Griffith-Jones and Attridge, 2019).

These dimensions are interconnected in ways that the analysis must capture. Low ownership tends to reduce perceived alignment; perceived power asymmetry tends to erode trust; opaque financing tends to amplify concerns about effectiveness and fairness. The framework is designed to trace these interactions rather than to treat dimensions as analytically independent variables.

A further methodological point follows from this framework: perceptions of cooperation are not necessarily singular or internally consistent. A programme, an organisation or a country's cooperation as a whole can be judged positively on one dimension (for example, technical reliability) and critically on another (for example, ownership or power-sharing) at the same time, without contradiction. The empirical study should therefore ask, for any given respondent and topic, not simply whether their view is positive or negative overall, but positive or negative on which dimension, and on what basis - rather than collapsing multidimensional judgements into a single perception score.



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4. The Evolution of European and Dutch Cooperation in Africa

4.1 Historical Trajectory: Continuity, Transformation or Layering?

Whether contemporary Europe-Africa cooperation represents a genuine rupture from historically unequal relations or their reconfiguration in new institutional forms is not merely a historical question. It shapes directly how contemporary European claims to partnership are evaluated by African partners and publics, and the evidence suggests that African scholars and citizens are highly attentive to the distinction between formal change and substantive continuity.

The structural critique provides the essential starting point. Amin (1972) and Rodney (1972) argued that Africa's subordinate position in the global economy was not a product of insufficient development but of systematic extraction that operated through trade relations, financial systems and institutional arrangements that persisted well beyond formal decolonisation. This thesis has been contested on both empirical and theoretical grounds. Sender and Smith (1986) offered influential critiques of structuralist dependency theory, arguing that it understated the extent of capitalist development in Africa and overstated the determinism of the colonial inheritance. More recently, scholars such as Jerven (2013) have challenged the data on which structural pessimism about African economies rests. Yet the core insight retains analytical power: external engagement does not occur in a structurally neutral field, and its effects depend on the structural position of the parties involved, not only on the intentions of the more powerful actor.

Subsequent institutional frameworks, including the Yaoundé and Lomé Conventions, the Cotonou Agreement and ultimately the EU-AU partnership architecture, are typically presented in analytical literature as steps towards more rules-based, negotiated and formally symmetrical arrangements (ETTg, 2025). Holland and Doidge (2012), in their comprehensive analysis of EU development policy, document how these frameworks progressively broadened African participation in agenda-

setting while maintaining European financial and agenda-setting primacy. These represent genuine institutional changes that have formalised African participation in some domains. However, Hurt (2003) argues persuasively that the transition from Lomé to Cotonou actually introduced more conditionality rather than less, despite the partnership language that accompanied it—a finding that complicates straightforward narratives of progressive institutionalisation.

The most defensible analytical conclusion is neither full continuity nor full transformation, but what we might call structural layering: new frameworks and instruments are built on top of relationships that retain significant continuity with their historical antecedents. This matters for the perception study because it explains why African actors with no direct experience of colonialism nevertheless draw on colonial history as an active interpretive resource, and why that resource shapes rather than merely contextualises how contemporary cooperation is received.

4.2 Current EU and Dutch Strategies: Mutual Interests or Instrumentalisation?

The most recent generation of European and Dutch cooperation strategies raises a specific and politically charged question: does the explicit integration of development cooperation into broader geopolitical and economic frameworks represent a more honest articulation of mutual interest, or does it represent the incremental subordination of development objectives to European domestic priorities? The evidence does not support a simple answer, but it does support clear analytical distinctions that policymakers need to grapple with seriously.

The EU's Global Gateway and the Netherlands' Africa Strategy 2023-2032 (Government of the Netherlands, 2023) both reflect a deliberate integration of development, trade, security, migration and climate into unified strategic frameworks. Ganzle (2013) anticipated this evolution and argued that aligning development with broader foreign policy could strengthen political commitment to sustained engagement. Gulrajani, N. (2020) similarly suggests that the explicit acknowledgement of shared interests can create a more durable political basis for cooperation than purely altruistic framing, an argument that has particular force in domestic political environments where aid budgets face sustained scrutiny from sceptical publics. Prior to this argument, Furness and Ganzle (2012) provide comparative evidence across EU member states showing that the integration of development into wider foreign policy has been a general trend rather than a Dutch or EU-specific phenomenon.

More recent analytical literature, however, identifies significant risks in this integration that

deserve equal analytical attention. Clingendael (2018) and ECFR (2024) document how migration management and security objectives have become increasingly prominent drivers of cooperation in ways that can distort development programming and undermine African trust. Castillejo (2017) shows how the EU's migration partnerships in West and East Africa have progressively conditioned development finance on cooperation with European border management objectives, effectively subordinating development rationale to migration control. Where development instruments are linked to European border control or to the containment of migration, African governments and publics tend to assess them not as development partnerships but as European domestic policy extended into African territory. This perception is not simply a misunderstanding: it reflects a reasonably accurate reading of how these instruments are designed and deployed.

The analytical upshot is that the debate has shifted from whether European interests are present in cooperation, they manifestly are and have long been, to how explicitly and how asymmetrically they weigh against development objectives, with direct and measurable consequences for African perceptions of credibility and legitimacy.

4.3 African Agency in a Multipolar Context

African policy perspectives on cooperation have undergone significant evolution over the past two decades, and the analytical literature must resist two competing temptations: the older characterisation of Africa as a passive recipient, and a newer tendency to overstate the extent of African agency within structural constraints that remain substantial.

Post-independence African critiques, associated with thinkers such as Tandon (2008) and Nkrumah (1965) before him, emphasised the structural dependency embedded in aid relationships and called for the reclamation of policy autonomy as a precondition for genuine development. More recent continental frameworks, including Agenda 2063 and the AU-EU Joint Vision for 2030, reflect a strategic shift towards structural transformation, regional integration and the assertion of African priorities rather than their negotiation with external donors (African Union, 2022). Lopes (2019) articulates a rigorous version of this position: external cooperation must support industrialisation, value addition and economic diversification if it is to contribute to genuine development rather than to the consolidation of primary commodity dependence. Landsberg (2020) situates this shift within the broader context of South Africa's and the African Union's efforts to develop a coherent African foreign policy posture that asserts African solutions to African problems.



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CODESRIA (2022) and other African analytical institutions simultaneously document how financing structures and conditionalities constrain the policy options available to African governments even within this more assertive rhetorical environment. The growing presence of non-traditional partners, including China, Gulf states, Turkey and Brazil, has materially altered the bargaining context by expanding African governments' strategic options (Africa Europe Foundation, 2025). Recent policy analysis from both IAI (2025) and MEIG (2025) argues that the growing presence of alternative external actors, particularly China, Russia and Gulf states, has contributed to a more competitive and multipolar cooperation environment in which African governments possess greater diplomatic leverage and strategic choice. Both sources further contend that the credibility of European engagement increasingly depends on whether the EU can move beyond paternalistic and Eurocentric approaches towards forms of cooperation that are visibly more equal, African-led and responsive to continental priorities. Alden and Large (2019) and Carmody (2011) analyse how Chinese engagement in particular has disrupted the implicit conditionality framework that Western donors and international financial institutions had previously maintained, giving African governments genuine policy alternatives that have shifted the negotiating baseline.

The productive analytical tension lies in understanding African agency as simultaneously expanding at the geopolitical level and constrained at the programmatic level by structural features of aid architectures that have not changed at the same pace. Contemporary African policy perspectives are best understood as navigating this tension, rather than as expressing either passive acceptance or uniform resistance.

4.4 Shifting Instruments: Innovation or New Forms of Dependency?

The shift in cooperation instruments over the past decade, from grants and project-based aid towards blended finance, guarantees and private-sector mobilisation, has been framed in policy circles as a necessary modernisation of the development cooperation model. The analytical literature is considerably more cautious, and the basis for that caution deserves serious examination.

The case for blended finance and investment instruments rests on the argument that they can mobilize additional resources, crowd in private capital and support structural economic transformation in ways that grant-based aid cannot (European Commission, 2022; OECD DAC, 2025). These claims are not without empirical support: there are documented cases where blended instruments have supported

infrastructure, agricultural value chains and SME development in ways that create locally retained value. Griffith-Jones and Attridge (2019), in their assessment of European development finance institutions, find that blended instruments can be effective when structured around local priorities and using partner-country systems. Tadesse Shiferaw and Di Ciommo (2023) provide the critical counter-evidence, however, identifying a systematic tendency for these instruments to concentrate benefits in commercially attractive contexts and to leave more fragile states and less viable sectors underserved. Fraser and Whitefield in 2009 had earlier identified a related structural risk well before blended finance became dominant: financing conditions can constrain policy autonomy in ways that undermine the very country ownership they are designed to support.

ECFR (2024) and Clingendael (2022) extend this critique to the specific case of migration-linked instruments, where development resources are increasingly conditioned on African cooperation with European border management objectives. This represents a qualitatively different form of conditionality -one that makes access to development finance contingent not on development policy performance but on compliance with European domestic security and migration priorities. The perception consequences are predictable and documented: instruments designed as partnerships are experienced as leverage, and the development justification for them loses credibility accordingly.

The key shift in the literature is from a debate about whether new instruments are more efficient to a more fundamental debate about distribution of control, concentration of benefits and the long-term dependency implications of different financing architectures. This mirrors the broader perceptual shift from project-level assessment to structural and political evaluation that this review documents throughout.

4.5 Key Implication

Across these debates, a single analytically important conclusion recurs: changes in the language, architecture and instruments of cooperation do not automatically translate into changes in how that cooperation is perceived. The structural and historical narratives that shape interpretation appear, in the material reviewed here, to be more durable than policy frameworks, and new initiatives are frequently assessed against these enduring frames. An initiative presented as transformative that does not address the underlying structural concerns generating scepticism will often be received with some of the scepticism those concerns produce, regardless of its technical merits - though the extent to which this holds, and for whom, remains an open empirical question.

5. African Perspectives in the Scholarly Literature

African scholarship on development cooperation represents a distinct and analytically indispensable tradition that is too frequently treated as a source of critical commentary rather than as a body of substantive theoretical and empirical contribution. This section engages seriously with that tradition, examining what African scholars argue, why they argue it and what counter-arguments they acknowledge, rather than simply summarising positions. The aim is to understand the analytical substance of African perspectives, not merely to register that they exist.

A note on terminology used throughout this section: phrases such as “African scholarship”, “African perspectives” and “African publics” are used as a shorthand for a body of work and opinion that is itself internally diverse. Governments, programme implementers, civil society organisations, academics, private-sector actors and general publics do not speak with one voice, and the sections below deliberately surface disagreement, variation by country and sector, and shifts over time within this literature rather than treating it as a single, unified position set against a single European one.

5.1 Partnership or Power? The Structural Critique and Its Limits

A recurring and prominent preoccupation of African scholarly engagement with European cooperation is the relationship between partnership discourse and power reality. The critical tradition, associated above all with Rutazibwa (2014) and Tandon (2008), argues that partnership discourse functions to legitimate structural inequalities rather than to transform them. The claim is not that European actors are cynically insincere but that the structural conditions of the relationship -asymmetric financial power, conditionality, external agenda-setting authority -constrain what partnership can mean in practice regardless of the intentions behind it. Nkrumah (1965) established an earlier version of this argument in the context of neo-colonialism more broadly, arguing that political independence without economic autonomy reproduces the

essential features of subordination under a new institutional form. This is a structural argument, not a motivational one, and it is considerably more difficult to refute through appeals to good intentions or positive evaluation findings than is typically acknowledged in European policy circles.

Against this, some African policy-oriented analyses, from the African Development Bank (2023) and UNECA (2022), identify incremental shifts towards more negotiated forms of cooperation, particularly in multilateral settings where African institutions have developed greater collective voice and institutional capacity. Songwe (2019), drawing on her work leading the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, argues that African institutions have become considerably more effective at shaping the development agenda on issues such as debt sustainability, domestic resource mobilisation and climate finance - a development that represents genuine, if partial, progress on ownership. These analyses do not deny the persistence of power asymmetries but argue that the space for African agency within existing systems has genuinely expanded. The key qualifier, even in these more optimistic assessments, is that partnership remains incomplete and contested rather than fully realised, which represents a significant concession to the critical position whatever the framing.

The synthesis that emerges is that both positions capture real features of the relationship. Partnership frameworks have created genuine spaces for African agency that did not previously exist at the formal level; structural power asymmetries simultaneously constrain what that agency can achieve in practice. The debate is less about whether partnership exists and more about how deeply it has transformed the underlying power relations - and the current weight of evidence suggests the answer is: not as deeply as official discourse implies.

5.2 Trust, Credibility and the Double-Standards Problem

African analyses of trust in European cooperation partners converge on conditions that are considerably more demanding than European policy frameworks tend to acknowledge. Trust is not built through rhetoric or through individual episodes of effective programme delivery: it is accumulated through consistent behaviour over time and is eroded by perceived inconsistency between stated principles and observable practice. Walle (2001), writing about the political economy of African development in an earlier period, noted that external actors’ credibility had been systematically damaged by the frequency with which stated commitments to ownership had been overridden by shifting donor priorities - a dynamic that predates but anticipates the partnership era.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided the most revealing test of European partnership commitments in recent memory. Analyses of European responses to African requests for vaccine equity documented substantial gaps between stated commitments to global solidarity and the actual distribution of doses, which overwhelmingly prioritised European and other high-income populations (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2022). Sidibé (2022), writing from an African public health perspective, argues that these inequalities reinforced wider African concerns about exclusion, dependency and unequal power relations within global health governance, weakening trust in international partnership commitments. For African governments and publics who had been assured that the partnership was characterised by shared commitment to global public goods, this gap was not a logistical failure but a political revelation about the hierarchy of European priorities when they conflicted with partnership obligations. Aja-Eke (2024) situates this episode within a broader pattern: trust depends on whether cooperation demonstrably aligns with local priorities and whether partners behave consistently when self-interest and stated commitments diverge.

The double-standards concern compounds this problem significantly. African scholarship and policy analysis document persistent inconsistencies in how principles such as human rights, democratic governance and multilateralism are applied across different partner contexts, particularly between African situations and those involving geopolitically significant non-African actors (CODESRIA, 2022; African Development Bank, 2023; Adebajo, 2010). Where European actors apply democratic conditionalities selectively, imposing them on African partners while maintaining advantageous relationships with authoritarian governments elsewhere, the

credibility of those conditionalities as genuine development principles is fundamentally undermined. The result is a form of conditional trust that is difficult to build incrementally and relatively easy to damage through a single high-profile inconsistency.

5.3 Ownership and Policy Space: The Gap Between Endorsement and Reality

Ownership is perhaps the concept where the gap between formal endorsement and substantive realisation is widest and most analytically consequential. Its installation as the first and foundational principle of the Paris Declaration (OECD, 2005) signalled a genuine normative shift in the international development consensus. The critical question is whether this normative shift has been matched by structural change in how cooperation actually operates.

Lopes (2019) argues that genuine ownership requires strategic control over economic policy, including industrial policy, resource management and investment strategy, in ways that are structurally incompatible with the conditionality regimes that continue to characterise much European and international cooperation. CODESRIA (2022) and Tandon (2008) document how earmarked funding, complex procedural requirements and restricted use of partner-country systems constrain flexibility even when formal ownership language is fully accepted at the policy level. Grindle (2010), synthesising evidence from development programmes across multiple regions, identifies the persistent gap between process ownership -participation in programme design -and substantive ownership, understood as the ability to make and implement genuinely autonomous decisions about development priorities. The OECD literature acknowledges these constraints but persistently frames them as implementation challenges rather than as structural features of the system, a framing that obscures their political character.

A more nuanced picture emerges when contextual variation is examined carefully. Whitfield (2009), in her comparative study of five African countries, finds that ownership is more substantively realised in countries with relatively strong domestic institutions, clear national development strategies and governments able to negotiate effectively with donors, suggesting that it is a negotiated outcome that depends on capacity as well as political will. ECDPM (2020) identifies similar variation at the sector level, with greater ownership in areas where cooperation is closely aligned with domestically-led strategies. This suggests that meaningful ownership is possible but requires conscious and sustained effort by European actors to redistribute agenda-setting authority -effort that the evidence suggests is the exception rather than the norm.

5.4 Power Asymmetries and Neo-Colonial Critique: Taking the Argument Seriously

The explicit framing of contemporary Europe-Africa relations as neo-colonial is not confined to activist politics: it appears consistently in mainstream African scholarly and policy literature, and it requires serious analytical engagement rather than reflex dismissal. The critique rests on the empirical claim that current forms of European engagement, in trade, finance, migration and security, reproduce structural inequalities associated with colonial-era extraction, even in the absence of formal political control.

The theoretical lineage is substantial. It runs from Amin's (1972) analysis of unequal exchange and Rodney's (1972) political economy of underdevelopment through to contemporary African scholarship that applies these frameworks to trade agreements, investment instruments and security cooperation. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) develops the concept of the 'coloniality of power', drawn from Quijano (2000), to analyse how colonial hierarchies of knowledge, economy and governance persist in contemporary development relationships even after formal decolonisation. UNCTAD (2023) and Oloruntoba (2025) argue that Economic Partnership Agreements and analogous trade frameworks constrain African policy options for industrialisation and value addition, perpetuating commodity dependence in ways that have direct distributional consequences. ECFR (2024) documents how migration cooperation has effectively extended European border control into African territory, creating new forms of externally managed governance constraint.

Engaging seriously with this critique requires distinguishing between its different components, because conflating them produces analytical confusion. The structural claim, that global economic arrangements systematically reproduce inequalities, has substantial empirical support. The intentionalist claim, that European actors deliberately pursue neo-colonial objectives, is considerably weaker and should be evaluated separately. The most analytically productive position, implicitly adopted by Lopes (2019) and more explicitly by Mkandawire (2010), is to take the structural critique seriously without reducing it to intentionalism: the relevant question is not whether European actors intend neo-colonial outcomes but whether the structural effects of their policies are consistent with African development priorities. On this question, the evidence gives considerable grounds for concern.

5.5 Alignment with African Priorities: Persistent and Documented Divergence

Alignment between external cooperation and African national and continental priorities is formally endorsed across European and African policy frameworks. The relevant analytical

questions are whether this alignment is achieved in practice, where the most significant divergences occur and what produces them.

Agenda 2063 provides the most authoritative statement of African continental priorities: structural economic transformation, regional integration, industrialisation and progressively reduced dependence on external financing (African Union, 2015). European cooperation frameworks affirm alignment with these objectives with considerable frequency. Yet African think tanks and scholars consistently document mismatches, particularly in areas where European interests are most acute.

Migration management, security cooperation and specific economic reform agendas are the domains most frequently identified as prioritising European interests over African development priorities (CODESRIA, 2022; Castillejo, 2016). Kabandula and Shaw (2018), in their analysis of continental African agency in global governance, find that African governments frequently accept cooperation terms that diverge from their declared continental priorities when facing strong bilateral pressure, indicating that the divergence is not simply a technical mismatch but a reflection of asymmetric bargaining power.

Procedural factors also play an important and often underappreciated role. Short funding cycles, fragmented instruments and complex compliance requirements make it difficult for African governments to integrate external resources into coherent long-term strategies even where substantive policy-level alignment exists (Grindle, 2010; ECDPM, 2020). Wangwe and Rweyemamu (2001), analysing Tanzania's experience with aid coordination, document how donor procedural requirements created parallel management systems that undermined rather than strengthened national planning capacity -a finding that has been replicated in subsequent studies across different country contexts. This gap between formal alignment and practical implementation is not simply a technical problem amenable to better programme design; it reflects the underlying power dynamics of a relationship in which European actors retain substantial influence over the conditions attached to cooperation resources.

5.6 Effectiveness and Unintended Consequences: A More Complex Picture

African assessments of European cooperation effectiveness are considerably more nuanced than either wholesale critique or uncritical endorsement, and this nuance matters for policy because both caricatures distort analytical conclusions. There is genuine recognition in African analytical literature that European and Dutch cooperation has contributed meaningfully

to improvements in health, education, governance and private sector development in specific contexts, and that the EU is frequently valued as a relatively predictable and institutionally capable partner compared to more volatile sources of financing (ECDPM, 2020; OECD, 2023). Radelet (2015), drawing on a broad synthesis of aid effectiveness evidence, makes a carefully qualified case that aid has contributed to African development progress, particularly in health outcomes. These positive assessments are real and should not be obscured by the critical analysis that dominates much of the literature.

Yet the same literature consistently identifies unintended consequences that formal evaluations tend to undercount or miss altogether. Abrahamsen (2020) demonstrates how external interventions can reshape accountability relationships in ways that weaken domestic institutions, creating dependencies on external validation and reporting systems that can reduce rather than strengthen local governance capacity over time. Oloruntoba (2025) and CODESRIA (2022) highlight risks of aid volatility, elite capture and priority distortion that are substantially more visible in qualitative research than in output-level evaluation frameworks. Mosse (2005), in his ethnographic study of a UK aid project in India, shows in granular detail how programmes that are assessed as successful by formal evaluators can simultaneously fail to deliver the intended benefits to target populations, a dynamic he attributes to the way in which project management systems prioritise reportable outputs over substantive change.

Eyben (2014) and Easterly (2007) raise the methodological point that effectiveness is typically measured in terms that systematically underweight long-term structural outcomes and distributional effects, the very dimensions that African analytical perspectives tend to prioritise. This methodological mismatch is itself analytically significant: it means that European and African assessments of the same programme can reach genuinely different conclusions not because they are working from incompatible values but because they are measuring different things. Evaluative frameworks that do not capture distributional and structural dimensions will consistently generate over-optimistic assessments of cooperation effectiveness from an African perspective.

5.7 Representational Gaps in the Literature

A critical limitation of the existing literature requires explicit acknowledgement before drawing overall conclusions: much of what we know about African perspectives on European cooperation has been produced by or through European institutions and scholars, with African voices included as data or as commentary rather than as primary analytical contributors. ECDPM and DIE (2020), Abrahamsen (2020) and CODESRIA (2022) all note this in different registers. Zeleza (2006), in his analysis of African knowledge production, situates this bibliographic imbalance within broader structures of academic publishing that systematically undervalue and underresource African scholarly traditions, creating a self-reinforcing cycle in which African perspectives on Africa are mediated through non-African institutions.

Geographical and linguistic gaps compound this problem. Published academic literature is concentrated in Anglophone and Francophone contexts, with limited coverage of smaller



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or more fragile states, non-Western-educated scholarly communities and the substantial subnational variation in how cooperation is experienced. Evidence on how ordinary citizens perceive cooperation, beyond the geographically uneven and methodologically constrained Afrobarometer surveys, is particularly sparse (Aja-Eke, 2024; Afrobarometer, 2023; Cotula and Jokinen, 2020). The social media analysis included in this study represents a partial response to this gap, but it carries its own selection biases related to platform access, language and digital literacy. These limitations establish important boundaries on how generalisable the conclusions can be, and they underscore the necessity of the primary empirical data collection that this review is designed to inform.

5.8 Key Takeaway: Structure and Agency Over Instruments

The body of African scholarship reviewed in this section converges on a position that stands in productive tension with the framing of European policy: the central problems of development cooperation are structural and political rather than primarily technical or instrumental. African analyses consistently prioritise questions of structural constraint, political agency and power over questions of programme design and implementation modality, and this prioritisation is analytically defensible rather than merely ideological.

On partnership, a consistent finding across the sources reviewed is that declared mutual interests have not translated into observable shifts in agenda-setting power, and that partnership remains primarily a discursive frame coexisting with substantive asymmetries (Rutazibwa, 2014;

Tandon, 2008; African Development Bank, 2023). On trust, credibility is conditional and erodes when commitments are applied inconsistently, illustrated most clearly by COVID-19 vaccine distribution failures, double standards in human rights promotion and the routine prioritisation of migration and security objectives over development principles (Aja-Eke, 2024; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2022). On ownership, policy space remains structurally constrained by conditionalities, earmarking and procurement arrangements despite formal endorsement of country leadership at every level of the aid architecture (Lopes, 2019; Whitfield and Fraser, 2009; Grindle, 2010). On effectiveness, acknowledged contributions in social and technical sectors are consistently qualified by concerns about accountability distortions, elite capture and the limits of narrow output measurement (Abrahamsen, 2019; Mosse, 2005; Easterly, 2007). On the integration of development into geopolitical frameworks, the growing embeddedness of cooperation in migration management, security and investment agendas is assessed as serving European more than African interests in ways that are empirically grounded rather than simply asserted (ECFR, 2024; Castillejo, 2016).

Together, these findings point to partnership as a fundamentally relational challenge -one that cannot be addressed through instrumental adjustment, improved communication or better programme design alone. Part II of this review examines how European and Dutch policy and evaluation narratives engage with this challenge, and what digital and social media evidence adds to the analytical picture.



6. European and Dutch Policy and Evaluation Narratives

In the foregoing parts of this review, we concentrated on African scholarly and institutional perspectives, which represent the primary critical tradition against which European cooperation must be evaluated. This section now turns to how European and Dutch actors frame their own engagement, what evaluation literature reveals about the gap between those frames and practised reality, and what the positioning of the Netherlands within EU frameworks means for how its cooperation is perceived. The purpose is not simply to present a ‘European side’ of a balanced narrative but to analyse the structural features of European self-representation that contribute to the perception gap this study examines.

6.1 How Europe and the Netherlands Frame Their Cooperation

European and Dutch policy documents reveal a great deal about how cooperation is understood from the supply side, and the contrast with African analytical perspectives examined in Part I illuminates the structural core of the perception problem. EU policy documents frame Africa as a strategic partner confronting shared global challenges including climate change, economic transformation, migration and security (European Commission, 2020; Africa-EU Partnership, 2024; European External Action Service, 2022). In this framing, development cooperation is no longer presented as a standalone activity but as an instrument within a broader geopolitical relationship in which European and African interests are presented as substantially aligned. This framing is analytically significant not because it is false but because it prioritises the dimensions of the relationship where European interests are most visible, while backgrounding the dimensions where African concerns about asymmetry are most acute.

The Netherlands adopts a parallel framing. Its Africa Strategy 2023-2032 integrates development cooperation, trade, security, migration and human rights within a single framework explicitly linked to Dutch and European interests (Government of the Netherlands, 2023; OECD, 2025). This reflects a broader shift towards whole-of-government and Team Europe approaches in which development is embedded within foreign and economic policy rather than treated as a separable domain with its own logic and accountability. Furness and Ganzle (2012) demonstrate through comparative analysis across EU member states that this integration has been general rather than country-specific; what distinguishes more recent Dutch and EU strategies is the degree to which the integration is stated openly rather than managed quietly. Ganzle (2013) had anticipated this trajectory and argued that it could create more coherent and politically sustainable engagement. What he did not fully anticipate was that transparency about interest alignment, without corresponding accountability for how interests are prioritised, would itself become a source of perceptual damage.

6.2 Partnership and Mutual Interests: Between Genuine Shift and Rhetorical Frame

Policy frameworks from both the EU and the Netherlands deploy partnership, mutual interest and win-win cooperation as organising principles. These concepts serve a double function: they describe how cooperation is intended to work, and they signal a deliberate departure from the paternalism of earlier development paradigms. The analytical question is how much weight they can bear in practice.

Grimm, Gänzle and Makhan (2012) argue that changing global power relations and domestic pressures within Europe have encouraged the EU to frame development cooperation increasingly through ideas of shared interests and differentiated partnerships rather than purely traditional donor-recipient models. There is something in this argument: a cooperation framework that can be defended on multiple grounds -development, economic opportunity, security, climate -may be more politically robust than one that rests solely on altruistic foundations. Carbone (2013), in his analysis of EU development policy coherence, similarly argues that the integration of development into wider foreign policy can strengthen rather than weaken development commitments when interests genuinely align. However, the same analysis shows that when interests diverge, the development rationale consistently loses.

Rutazibwa (2010) identifies the risk that partnership discourse becomes precisely a mechanism for advancing European interests while appearing to transcend them, a risk that Clingendael (2021) and ECFR (2024) document in practice through the analysis of how migration and security objectives have shaped cooperation agendas. Bossuyt (2016), drawing on ECDPM research on EU political dialogue with African partners, finds that even where formal partnership mechanisms exist, African actors frequently report that their concerns are registered but do not substantively alter European programming priorities. The debate has effectively shifted from whether partnership language is normatively appropriate to whether it reflects substantive changes in how cooperation is organised and what it delivers.

6.3 What Evaluations Reveal About Performance and Constraints

Evaluation literature provides the most empirically grounded assessment of how cooperation performs in practice, and its findings are more complex than either advocates or critics typically acknowledge. The ECDPM and DIE (2020) synthesis of EU cooperation in Sub-Saharan Africa finds generally positive results in terms of relevance, and positive contributions to governance, private-sector development and

regional integration. Leiderer (2015) reaches broadly similar conclusions from a public financial management perspective, finding that EU budget support has contributed to strengthening accountability systems in several partner countries, though with significant variation across contexts. These findings provide a basis for moderate confidence in EU cooperation as a development instrument and should not be set aside by critical analysis.

The same evaluation literature identifies consistent structural limitations that the findings above need to be read alongside. Long-term sustainability is identified as a persistent challenge: programme results are often not mainstreamed into domestic systems in ways that survive the end of external funding. Hayman (2011), in her analysis of aid relationships in Rwanda and Mozambique, shows how sustainability failures are frequently produced not by technical weaknesses in programme design but by the way in which the aid relationship itself creates institutions and incentives that are structured around donor rather than domestic requirements. Country ownership is uneven, varying significantly across sectors and country contexts. Coherence between development, trade, migration and security policies is frequently cited as insufficient, with development objectives compromised by the primacy of other EU policy domains. Newer instruments such as trust funds and blended finance are found to increase operational flexibility but also to introduce complexity and, in some cases, reduce transparency and partner-country influence (European Commission, 2019; Bilal ,2016).

6.4 The Gap Between Principles and Practice

The most politically significant finding in European policy and evaluation literature is the persistent gap between the principles that frameworks affirm and the practices they produce. This gap is not incidental: it is structural, rooted in the multiple and sometimes conflicting objectives that European and Dutch cooperation is required to serve simultaneously. Carbone (2013) characterises this as a fundamental coherence problem embedded in the Treaty on European Union itself, which commits the EU to both development objectives and the integration of these objectives with wider foreign policy aims without providing a principled basis for adjudicating between them when they conflict.

The European Parliamentary Research Service (2025) documents how EU engagement continues to prioritise migration management and security in ways that affect the perceived balance of cooperation. Castillejo (2017) provides granular evidence from West African cases, showing how the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa redirected development finance towards border management and migration deterrence with

minimal accountability for development outcomes. ECFR (2024) highlights the risk that development cooperation becomes closely tied to geopolitical objectives in ways that undermine its credibility as a development instrument. These concerns are not generated by external critics alone: they appear within the European evaluative apparatus itself, suggesting that the gap between principles and practice is acknowledged even where it is not resolved. The analytical implication is important: these tensions are inherent to a model of cooperation that simultaneously serves development, strategic and commercial objectives, and managing them requires acknowledging rather than concealing the trade-offs.

6.5 Dutch Positioning Within EU Frameworks

The Netherlands occupies a specific position within European cooperation that shapes how its engagement is perceived, independently of the quality of its bilateral programmes. Dutch development cooperation is deeply embedded within EU joint programming and Team Europe frameworks (Africa-EU Partnership, 2024; OECD, 2025), which enables it to operate at a scale that bilateral resources alone would not support, but which also means that its reputation is substantially shaped by collective European behaviour rather than by its own bilateral record. Dutch policy simultaneously emphasises a distinct bilateral profile, particularly in sectors such as water management, sustainable agriculture, logistics and private-sector development, areas where Dutch technical expertise and institutional networks are genuinely differentiated (Government of the Netherlands, 2023). OECD (2025) confirms that this profile is recognised by African partners in relevant sectors, and evaluations of Dutch bilateral cooperation in, for example, the water sector in Ethiopia and agricultural programmes in Kenya have found substantive technical contributions (IOB, 2017). However, this recognition is predominantly sectoral and institutional rather than public: it shapes perceptions among programme implementers and government counterparts but does not translate into broader public visibility. This creates a dual dynamic: the Netherlands

benefits from EU scale but also inherits EU reputational challenges; it has a defensible distinct identity in specific technical domains but low standalone visibility at the level of public perception, which is precisely the level at which this study operates.

6.6 Key Takeaway: The Instruments-Power Divergence and Its Consequences

European and Dutch policy and evaluation narratives share a characteristic emphasis: they foreground instruments, results, financing volumes and strategic frameworks as the primary objects of analysis. Questions of structural power, historical positioning and African agency in agenda-setting receive systematically less attention. This is not merely a framing choice: it reflects a genuine difference in what is treated as the relevant domain of development policy analysis, and it corresponds directly to the divergence documented throughout this review between how European actors and African scholars assess the same cooperation relationship.

On partnership and mutual interest, European frameworks present the relationship as increasingly balanced through investment, shared security engagement and geopolitical collaboration. Yet the very linkages that make this claim plausible from a European perspective, development tied to migration management, investment conditioned on security cooperation, generate precisely the concerns about European interest-primacy that undermine the claim from an African perspective. On trust, evaluation evidence supports confidence in sector-level results, but trust as African actors experience it depends on consistency across the full range of European policy domains, including trade, conditionality and migration, not only on development programme performance (ECDPM and DIE, 2020). For the Netherlands specifically, its embeddedness in Team Europe means that its credibility is partly a function of collective European behaviour, requiring active Dutch investment in shaping EU-level positions in ways that are consistent with the relational values it espouses bilaterally.

7. Why Social Media Matters: The Case for Digital Evidence



Academic literature can document what people argue... social media captures how they feel about it.

Social media analysis is not a supplement to this study: it is one of its foundational rationales. The decision to invest in systematic digital evidence collection reflects a considered analytical judgment that formal literature and institutional evaluation, however rigorous, capture only a fraction of how development cooperation is actually perceived -and, crucially, miss the forms of perception that are most politically consequential in the medium term. This section makes the full analytical case for why digital evidence belongs at the centre of a perception study, examines the methodological challenges it poses, and establishes the theoretical framework for interpreting what the platforms reveal.

7.1 The Limits of Formal Literature as a Perception Source

Formal academic and policy literature has documented the gap between partnership discourse and partnership practice with considerable rigour, as Part I of this review demonstrates. What it cannot document, by its nature, is how that gap is experienced and expressed by the populations most directly affected by cooperation -their governments' decisions, the development programmes in their communities, the narratives about European and Dutch engagement that circulate in their daily communicative environments. This is not a peripheral limitation. If the study's core claim is that perceptions are politically and operationally consequential, then the sites where perceptions are most actively formed, contested and disseminated must be central to the evidence base.

Social media platforms, including Reddit and TikTok, X and Meta/Facebook in particular, are precisely those sites for a growing proportion of African populations, especially in urban areas and among younger generations. Mutsvairo and Bebawi (2019) demonstrate through systematic analysis of African digital publics that these platforms do not simply reflect pre-existing views: they actively generate, amplify and organise political perspectives in ways that shape subsequent engagement with political and social issues. Wasserman (2011), writing on media and democracy in Africa, had anticipated this dynamic before the current social media era, arguing that popular media had always been a more important site of political consciousness formation in African contexts than formal academic or institutional channels. The current digital moment represents an intensification of this dynamic, not its creation. Loader and Mercea (2011) similarly argue, drawing on comparative evidence, that digital platforms have become constitutive of political participation rather than merely its vehicle, making them analytically essential rather than optional for studies of political perception.

7.2 What Digital Evidence Uniquely Provides

Digital evidence offers at least four things that formal literature cannot provide. First, it captures affective as well as cognitive responses to cooperation. Academic literature can document what people argue about development cooperation; social media captures how they feel about it -the anger, pride, scepticism and solidarity that give political arguments their motivating force. Papacharissi (2015) argues that this affective dimension of political communication is not incidental to its political significance: it is constitutive of the intensity and durability of political positions. A perception study that captures only stated positions and ignores their affective register will systematically underestimate the depth and resistance to change of the perceptions it documents.

Second, social media provides access to voices that are largely

absent from formal literature. As documented in Section 5.7 of Part I, academic and policy literature on African perceptions of European cooperation is dominated by a relatively small number of institutions, scholar communities and geographic contexts. Digital platforms surface the perspectives of youth who have not yet published in peer-reviewed journals, of women in peri-urban areas whose views on agricultural development programmes are rarely captured in evaluations, of diaspora communities navigating complex dual identities, and of informal commentators who bring scepticism, wit and historical knowledge to their analysis of external actors. These are not marginal voices: they are the voices through which the next generation of African publics and eventually policymakers form their political worldviews.

Third, digital evidence provides real-time and longitudinal insight into how perceptions shift in response to specific events. Formal literature necessarily operates with a significant time lag; peer-reviewed publication timelines mean that even the most current academic sources are typically several years behind rapidly changing political contexts. Social media data can be captured as events unfold, allowing us to observe, for example, how a specific Dutch NGO controversy or an EU migration announcement is processed, amplified and integrated into existing perceptual frameworks within days of the triggering event. This temporal granularity is analytically significant: it allows us to test the claim, central to the three-layer model, that structural and historical frames shape how new information is interpreted rather than being updated by it.

Fourth, and most importantly for the purposes of this study, social media evidence reveals the narrative architecture through which cooperation is interpreted. It shows not simply what people think about Dutch or European aid but the interpretive frameworks, historical references, analytical categories and emotional registers through which those assessments are made. This narrative architecture is the object of primary analytical interest: understanding it is a precondition for designing cooperation that engages seriously with how it will be received, rather than simply optimising for how it is designed.

7.3 Methodological Approach and Its Justifications

Analysing social media data for perceptions of development cooperation involves distinctive methodological challenges that must be acknowledged openly. The most fundamental is that users do not consistently identify specific actors such as the EU or the Netherlands when expressing views on external engagement:

meaning is frequently conveyed through context, shared reference, irony, emoji-use and affective register rather than through explicit naming (Papacharissi, 2015; Boyd, 2014; Bruns, 2019). An initial keyword-based approach that searched only for explicit mentions of 'Dutch aid' or 'EU development cooperation' systematically excluded the large majority of relevant content, producing a dataset dominated by institutional communication rather than by the citizen voices that are analytically most interesting.

To address this, the study adopts a context-based coding approach alongside keyword filtering. Content is included where it appears within threads or comment sections explicitly related to European or Dutch engagement, even where the content itself does not use those terms. This allows the analysis to capture how perceptions are expressed in interaction, including the contextual and implicit forms of meaning-making that are most characteristic of digital communication. Krippendorff (2018) provides the methodological justification for this approach, arguing that content analysis must be sensitive to the pragmatics of communication -to what is meant by what is said in its communicative context -rather than restricted to explicit semantic content. Bruns (2019) similarly argues that the analysis of social media data requires methods that can accommodate the distributed, contextual and often indirect character of digital meaning-making. The study distinguishes systematically between explicit references -direct statements about actors or policies -and implicit ones, including sarcasm, rhetorical questions, historical analogies and generalised evaluative statements that convey a clear stance without naming specific actors. This distinction matters because implicit expression carries substantial meaning in digital spaces and its exclusion would produce a systematically distorted picture of how cooperation is perceived. Highfield and Leaver (2016) demonstrate in their analysis of visual social media that non-verbal and indirect forms of expression are not marginal to digital political communication but are among its most powerful and widely circulated forms. The emoji and the meme are not supplements to digital political argument: they are frequently its most effective vehicles.

The dataset carries significant limitations that must be stated clearly and held in view throughout the analysis. It overrepresents English and French, systematically underrepresenting Hausa, Swahili, Amharic, Portuguese and other languages in which African digital publics are substantial and growing. It is shaped by platform algorithm effects that privilege emotionally engaging content, creating a dataset that may overrepresent strong opinions relative to more moderate or ambivalent views. It reflects the differential digital access and literacy that characterise African social media

participation, which skews towards urban, younger and more formally educated populations. We treat the findings as analytically indicative and interpretively important rather than as statistically representative of African publics as a whole.



Source:<https://www.magnific.com>



8. Digital and Social Media Evidence: Platforms, Patterns and Implications

The digital evidence presented in this section was gathered through systematic analysis of TikTok, X (formerly Twitter) and Meta(formerly Facebook) content relating to African perceptions of European and Dutch development cooperation. Together, these platforms reach distinct but overlapping African publics and, critically, operate with different content logics: TikTok privileges visual, emotionally resonant and algorithmically amplified short-form content; X privileges real-time event-driven commentary from opinion leaders and networked publics; Facebook privileges longer-form community discussion and the accumulation of shared perspectives within social networks. Analysing all three together, rather than selecting one as representative, allows us to capture the breadth and variation of digital perception formation. Murru and Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt (2014) argue that platform-specific analysis is necessary for this reason: each platform functions as a distinct communicative arena with its own norms, content logics and audiences, and cross-platform analysis is essential for understanding the full landscape of digital perception.

8.1 TikTok: Historical Consciousness and Structural Critique in Short Form

TikTok works differently from other platforms. It is built around short video, emotional content and an algorithm that pushes high-engagement material to large audiences quickly. This means it is not a space where people discuss development programmes in detail. It is a space where broader stories about history, identity and power are told, shared and amplified. Those stories matter for this study because they shape the environment in which Dutch and European cooperation is interpreted. The dataset for this section consists of structured exports including handles, captions, engagement metrics and links for videos that reference Africa together with Europe, the EU or the Netherlands, or that address Dutch-African relations more broadly. The material includes political commentary, history explainers, identity and diaspora content, travel and charity clips, and a small number of posts explicitly mentioning EU-Africa partnership or cooperation. Three caveats apply. First, the algorithm favours visually engaging and emotionally charged content, so political and historical videos can travel widely without being representative of all users. Second, most content in the export is in English or major European languages, which means African-language perspectives are underrepresented. Third, Dutch and EU development cooperation are mostly implicit in this content. They are folded into broader narratives about colonial history, sovereignty, migration and identity rather than named directly. These limitations matter and should be held in view. Even so, the material offers genuine insight into how Europe and the Netherlands are framed in popular digital discourse. Ureke (2024) argues that TikTok has emerged as an increasingly important platform for political communication and youth mobilisation in African electoral politics, particularly among younger users.

The most common type of content in the dataset connects contemporary European engagement to historical patterns of extraction and domination. Creators from Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia and African diaspora communities in Europe and North America make this argument regularly. What stands out is how specific and analytically serious the content is. Creators name Walter Rodney, Kwame Nkrumah and Thomas Sankara. They cite concrete historical events. They draw on recognisable political-economic arguments. TikTok has not simplified this intellectual tradition. It has spread it to audiences who may never have encountered it in a classroom. Recent research suggests that TikTok has become an increasingly important platform for political communication and political learning among younger users. Pew Research Center (2024), for example, found that almost half of TikTok users aged 18 to 29 use the platform to keep up with politics and political issues, highlighting its growing role in shaping youth political engagement and awareness. The specific content in the dataset makes this visible. One widely shared video describes Africa as “Europe’s pantry”. Another explains colonial economies as “extractive systems designed to benefit metropolitan industries”. Both attracted high engagement, with comment sections extending the argument into contemporary trade and aid. Videos about EU actions in Niger are another example. Captions including “EU parliament passes a resolution against Niger” and “the European Union is preparing to act in Niger” were framed by creators as evidence of interference, not partnership. Users drew direct parallels to colonial governance. In almost all of this content, individual European countries are not distinguished. The Netherlands is not named separately. It is absorbed into “Europe” or “the West”. This means Dutch cooperation is read through the same frame of external, asymmetrical authority that defines the wider European critique.

When the Netherlands does appear on TikTok, it appears through history. This is one of the clearest patterns in the dataset. The Dutch East India Company features repeatedly. Videos recount how it established a settlement at the Cape, how land was taken from the Khoikhoi, and how Dutch settlers shaped what became Afrikaner identity and ultimately apartheid. Specific towns come up by name. Stellenbosch and Graaff-Reinet appear in multiple clips. The development of Afrikaans is discussed as part of this colonial history. These are not vague references. Creators cite specific events, places and dates. This is active historical knowledge, not generalised resentment. Dutch involvement in the transatlantic slave trade is another recurring theme. Several videos focus on Elmina Castle in Ghana, describing its role as a processing point for enslaved Africans and connecting it directly to Dutch commercial

interests. Clips recount how enslaved people were taken from communities across West Africa to serve colonial economies. Comment sections extend this into the present, drawing connections to contemporary resource extraction and unequal economic relationships. Van Slooten (2023) argues that sites such as Elmina and Cape Coast remain politically contested spaces of colonial memory and diasporic identity formation in contemporary debates about slavery and postcolonial recognition. Their visibility on TikTok is historically grounded and consequential for how the Netherlands and its development cooperation architecture is perceived today.

This history does not automatically determine how Dutch development cooperation is judged. But it sets the frame within which any Dutch activity is read. Its salience does not appear constant, however: it seems to be most active where a contemporary issue touches land, extraction, sovereignty or inequality directly (for example, South African land debates), and less active where content is more transactional or technical in framing. When Dutch aid does appear on TikTok, and it appears rarely, it is rarely assessed on its technical merits alone in the material reviewed. A Dutch agricultural programme in Kenya, for example, does not appear as an intervention by a development agency. It appears as one more episode in a long relationship between the Netherlands and African countries. That relationship is understood through the colonial history described above. This has a direct practical implication. More information about Dutch programmes does not straightforwardly improve how those programmes are perceived. The problem is not a lack of information. The problem is the frame within which information is received. Dutch development communicators who do not engage with this frame will continue to find that better data and better visibility do not produce better perceptions.

Alongside the critique, a second large body of content runs through the dataset. This is Afro-optimist and African agency content. It emphasises African potential, calls for African solutions to African problems and asserts dignity and self-determination. Hashtags including #AfricaRising, #UnitedAfrica, #AfricaToTheWorld and #AfricanExcellence organise this content across the platform. The specific examples are telling. Videos featuring African economists argue that African savings should fund African development rather than relying on foreign aid. Others stress the need for domestic industrialisation, value addition and African control over resources. One phrase appears across multiple clips: “Africa has never been poor.” This is a direct challenge to narratives of dependency. It reframes what development cooperation is for and what it should look like. Importantly, this



The Door of No Return at Elmina Castle in Ghana

content does not simply reject cooperation with European or Dutch actors. It sets conditions. Cooperation that strengthens African agency, supports local value creation and respects African-defined priorities can be legitimate within this frame. Cooperation that reinforces dependence, extracts value or prioritises European interests is rejected regardless of its technical quality. Critique and assertion of agency appear together in the same content regularly. This is a more nuanced position than simple anti-Western sentiment. It is a set of demands. Willems (2016) captures this well, arguing that Afro-optimist narratives function as both cultural assertion and political demand, setting expectations of respect and reciprocity that external actors must meet to maintain credibility.

A third genre in the dataset is diaspora and everyday life content. This is different in tone from everything described above. It is warmer and more personal. Examples include videos of Dutch individuals living in East Africa, African creators learning Dutch, and content about intercultural relationships and family life between Dutch and African partners. Some posts show Dutch-led projects in Senegal or The Gambia in a positive light, presenting small-scale humanitarian or travel-related initiatives as genuine and relational. This content matters analytically. It shows that the dominant critical framing is not the only frame available. Africans with direct, positive experience of Dutch people and institutions do create and share content that presents a more nuanced picture. But there is a limit to what this content does. It stays within the space of personal and cultural interaction. It does not extend to Dutch development cooperation as an institutional relationship. That boundary is consistent across the dataset. Specific Dutch aid programmes, NGOs and investment instruments are rarely discussed directly. When they are mentioned, they appear inside broader narratives about Europe or external actors rather than being assessed on their own terms. This is the clearest summary finding from the TikTok analysis. The Netherlands is visible on TikTok but through its colonial and cultural history, not through its development programming. Strong expressions of African agency and self-reliance sit alongside this historical critique. Together they indicate that African TikTok publics do not simply reject European engagement. They assess it against standards of ownership, dignity and reciprocity that structural and historical experience has shaped. Project-level information about Dutch cooperation is present in very small quantities and carries very limited weight.

8.2 X (formerly Twitter): Event-Driven Contestation and Structural Reading

X works differently from TikTok. Where TikTok builds ambient narrative environments through video and algorithm, X produces focused, event-

driven debates. Specific episodes involving Dutch or European actors become the starting point. From there, broader political arguments quickly organise around them. The dataset for this section is comparatively small. It draws on a structured scrape of posts by African users, African diaspora accounts and Africa-focused accounts between 2020 and early 2026. Searches combined Dutch-related keywords such as “Dutch aid”, “Netherlands”, “SNV”, “FMO” and “Dutch NGO” with Africa-focused terms including “aid”, “development”, “EU”, “dependency” and “spying”. Around 75 to 80 clearly relevant posts were identified over the full period. That is a small number. But the patterns within them are analytically rich precisely because of their specificity. As with TikTok, the silence itself is data. Dutch development cooperation almost never trends on X. It does not generate the volume of discussion that France, China or even the EU as a whole does. Dutch-specific posts rarely exceed a few hundred in total across the period examined. There are very few large or viral threads dedicated exclusively to Dutch aid.

When Dutch cooperation does appear, the tone is uneven. Approximately 20 to 30 percent of posts are positive. These consist largely of official or semi-official communication about projects. The remaining content splits roughly evenly between neutral or low-engagement posts and critical perspectives, each accounting for around 35 to 40 percent. A significant share of the critical content clusters around specific events. This points to the central pattern in the dataset. Specific incidents involving Dutch or European actors are rapidly amplified within existing structural narrative frames. The conclusions drawn extend far beyond the original incident. We call this the event-amplification-generalisation dynamic.

The clearest example is the 2025 arrest of eight staff from the Netherlands-based International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) in Burkina Faso. The arrests involved accusations of intelligence gathering by NGO staff. The response on X was immediate and wide-ranging. Posts included claims such as “aid meets the old craft of espionage” and “Western NGOs spying again, Dutch one this time”. These comments did not stay with the specific case. They connected it to a broader and well-established suspicion of Western civil society organisations as vehicles for surveillance, political influence and regime destabilisation. Igoe and Kelsall (2005) document this tradition in their analysis of African state-civil society relations. As Astrid Erll (2011) argues, collective memory operates through mediated cultural frameworks that shape how contemporary events are interpreted and emotionally understood. In the case of Elmina, TikTok visibility does not emerge in a historical vacuum but is interpreted through longer narratives of slavery, colonialism and European involvement in West



Source: <https://www.magnific.com>

Africa, giving such representations wider reputational significance for the Netherlands. What matters analytically is not whether the suspicion in this case was warranted. What matters is that the episode was immediately read through these pre-existing structural frames rather than assessed on its own merits.

Country cases reveal how the same structural frames operate differently depending on context. In Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia, Dutch cooperation appears primarily through institutional content. Official accounts promote programmes in agriculture, water and SME finance. Posts reference memoranda of understanding, investment programmes and development partnerships. Dutch-supported initiatives are described as contributing to “renewable energy”, “regenerative agriculture” and SME growth. In Uganda, a USD 20 million facility linked to Dutch financing is presented as “a major step forward for SME growth”. In Ethiopia, programme actors describe “transformative results achieved through the Netherlands’ multi-year support”. But user responses tell a different story. In Kenya, one widely cited comment states: “Kenya does not benefit in any way from this State visit, it’s the people in the Netherlands who get to loot from us.” This is a precise example of the structural reading. Project-level cooperation is reinterpreted through concerns about unequal benefit and external interest. The technical content of the programme disappears. What remains is the question of who gains.

Zimbabwe shows a different dimension of the same dynamic. Reactions to Dutch aid cuts generated dozens of replies. Many welcomed the cuts. Comments included “there is no one who ever prospered by begging and handouts” and “the poor never benefitted much”. Others questioned the tangible impact of aid directly: “Which hospital or clinic was built by this so-called AID?” Some linked Dutch support to contested issues such as LGBTQ-related funding or broader Western sanctions, showing how development cooperation becomes entangled with value-based debates. Dorman (2016), in her analysis of Zimbabwe’s relationship with Western donors, argues that international assistance became closely tied to governance conditionality and political contestation, shaping divergent public and elite perceptions of foreign aid. Scepticism towards foreign aid here is a politically differentiated position, not simply cynicism. In South Africa, Dutch aid is rarely discussed directly. But the Netherlands appears frequently in historical and identity debates. References to “Dutch colonial settlers” come up in discussions of land, inequality and apartheid legacies. These posts are not about development cooperation. But they shape the context in which any Dutch engagement is interpreted.

The Shell-Nigeria connection in the dataset reveals something important about how African publics perceive the Netherlands as a whole. Multiple posts connect Royal Dutch Shell’s operations in the Niger Delta, including oil extraction, environmental damage, community displacement and decades of litigation, to the Netherlands as a national actor. In these discussions, the distinction between Dutch foreign investment and Dutch development cooperation simply does not operate. The Netherlands is seen as a single systemic actor. Its commercial and developmental activities are assessed together, as part of one unified engagement

with Africa. One comment captures this directly: “Dutch Aid = Philips medical equipment. No free lunches.” Pan-African threads reinforce this further. Posts describing “the Western aid myth” argue that European actors “put their own interests first”. Others list examples of resource extraction, financial control and geopolitical influence across Africa. The Netherlands is not always named explicitly in these threads. But it is implicitly included as an EU member state and part of a broader European system. Frynas (2005), in his analysis of corporate social responsibility in the Nigerian oil sector, documents how Shell’s attempts to present its operations as developmental were consistently rejected by local communities who assessed the company in structural rather than programmatic terms. The same evaluative logic appears throughout the X dataset.

This pattern is best read as a distinct and policy-relevant finding in its own right - a reputational spillover effect, in which perceptions of Dutch-linked corporate activity (in this case Shell) appear to affect perceptions of the Netherlands as a national actor, independently of whether that activity is institutionally distinct from Dutch government development cooperation. It raises a specific question for the primary empirical study: under what conditions do respondents distinguish between the Dutch state, Dutch companies, Dutch NGOs, the EU and “the West” -and when, and why, do they collapse these into a single category?

Several core themes run across all of this material. Trust and credibility are consistently contested. Official posts present Dutch cooperation as effective and aligned with local priorities. User-generated content raises concerns about hidden motives, particularly around NGOs and security. Ownership and agency are central. Zimbabwean responses reject aid as “begging” and emphasise self-reliance. Other posts question donor influence over priorities, procurement and policy direction. Perceived effectiveness varies by level. Project-level successes are acknowledged in some contexts. But broader discussions question whether aid reaches intended beneficiaries or produces visible, long-term results. Financing structures are a persistent point of critique. The comment “Dutch Aid = Philips medical equipment, no free lunches” captures a widely held view that financial instruments are designed to benefit European actors rather than African communities.

The overall picture from X is consistent with TikTok but more specific. Dutch development cooperation has limited standalone visibility. When it does appear, it is interpreted through structural, historical and political lenses rather than on its own terms. Even where Dutch projects are recognised as technically valuable, they are reassessed in light of wider concerns about power, ownership and fairness. The Shell connection reinforces the perception that development cooperation is embedded within larger economic systems that the Netherlands benefits from. African digital publics on X are not uniformly hostile. They are discriminating. They distinguish between types of engagement, registers of communication and levels of the relationship. The problem is not that they reject European cooperation in principle. It is that the terms on which European cooperation presents itself are consistently at odds with the terms on which they evaluate it.



Source: <https://www.magnific.com>

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Meta works differently from TikTok and X. It enables longer, more detailed discussion... Perspectives accumulate within established social networks.

8.3 Meta: Community Debate, Political Consciousness and Elite Critique

Meta works differently from TikTok and X. It enables longer, more detailed discussion. People build arguments across comment threads. They respond to each other. Perspectives accumulate within established social networks. This makes Facebook the richest source in the dataset for understanding how African publics reason about European and Dutch cooperation. The material here is drawn from highly engaged comment threads under posts about aid, extraction and Africa’s economic relationships with external actors. It includes discussions that explicitly reference European countries, EU engagement and Dutch-linked organisations operating in Africa.

One analytical note matters before the content. References to “the West” in the dataset are treated as a broad and fluid category rather than a precise label. In practice, commenters move frequently between “the West” and more specific references to Europe, the EU and individual member states such as the Netherlands. This movement is itself analytically significant. It suggests that users understand European actors, including the Netherlands, as part of a shared system of engagement rather than as distinct bilateral partners. Dutch and EU cooperation is therefore analysed as sitting within this broader frame throughout.

The anchor for much of the Facebook discussion is a widely circulated post by the Newsline page. It states: “How the West drains billions from Africa and hands back a fraction in so-called ‘aid’. This researcher explains how foreign firms extract raw materials and sell back value-added products. Why should Africa grow crops and buy them back at higher prices? It is exploitation.” This post sets the overall interpretive frame. Aid, including that provided by the EU and bilateral donors such as the Netherlands, is not seen as generosity. It is seen as a partial rebate on much larger losses through unequal trade, profit repatriation and illicit financial flows. Most commenters in these threads endorse this diagnosis or build on it. Very few defend external actors. The baseline assumption is that Africa is structurally disadvantaged in global value chains and that aid disguises this reality rather than correcting it. Oxfam (2014) and Global Financial Integrity (2015) have produced widely cited estimates showing that financial outflows from Africa substantially exceed inflows including aid, giving this frame empirical grounding that users draw on directly. Boateng et al (2020), in his analysis of Ghanaian political Facebook, describes this as the vernacularisation of development economics: complex arguments about structural inequality have been translated into accessible forms and are now widely available as political resources for citizens without specialist training.

The specific comments in the dataset make this concrete. On the question of who actually benefits from cooperation, commenters are direct. One writes: “They will turn round and pretend to be giving us aid, in real fact we Africans aid the westerners to survive all this time.” Another states: “We are subsidising the western world with our everything.” These are not isolated views. They appear across threads from Nigerian, Ghanaian, Kenyan and South African communities and from diaspora-connected accounts. References to assassinated African leaders, IMF financial colonialism, French control over African currency reserves and long-term profit extraction reinforce the same point repeatedly. European economies, including the Netherlands, are seen as depending on African resources while returning only a fraction through aid. Within this frame, EU and Dutch development cooperation is cosmetic. It provides limited compensation without addressing the underlying structural inequalities that produce the need for aid in the first place.

This framing is reinforced in discussions that reference Dutch engagement more directly. In posts about the arrest of staff linked to a Netherlands-based NGO in Burkina Faso, commenters interpret the presence of such organisations as evidence that European actors operate within broader systems of influence and intelligence gathering. Remarks in these threads suggest that aid activities are perceived as overlapping with political interests. This reinforces the view that assistance is embedded within wider strategic relations rather than being genuinely developmental. What is analytically significant here is not whether these interpretations are accurate. It is that specific Dutch-linked events are immediately absorbed into a pre-existing structural frame, in exactly the same way documented in the TikTok and X sections above.

Alongside the critique of external actors, a substantial body of content is directed inward. Many commenters insist that the solution must come from within Africa. The quotes here are worth reading in full. One commenter writes: “Africans should wake up and think like human beings to avoid being subjugated. We should invest in education and infrastructures. We have the capacity to mine our resources.” Another says: “Maybe Africa should start making chocolate, fuel and jewelry.” A third states: “Let the continent of Africa manufacture their own products and trade on the international market on their own terms.” These arguments contrast implicitly with existing cooperation models. EU and Dutch aid programmes are acknowledged but assessed as having failed to alter Africa’s position in global value chains. The perception is clear: current models of cooperation do not sufficiently support industrialisation and structural transformation.

A related sub-theme is internal critique of African leadership. Commenters are equally direct here. One writes: “Our leaders are serving west interest not common Africa.” Another states: “It’s been a total waste of talents, brain power, leadership and personal integrity, since independence.” A third adds: “This topic has been exhausted; what’s needed now is action. The most valuable natural resource is the brain.” In several discussions this critique is explicitly linked to European actors. Commenters suggest that African elites collaborate with EU institutions and individual member states, including the Netherlands, in ways that reinforce existing inequalities rather than challenging them. Bayart (1993), in his analysis of the politics of the belly in African political systems, theorised this elite-mediation dynamic early. Its persistence in contemporary Facebook debate suggests it captures something real about how cooperation outcomes are shaped in practice. This makes the Facebook material analytically richer than a simple external critique. The problem, as users understand it, is not only European behaviour. It is the interaction between European structural interests and domestic governance dynamics that together produce the outcomes people object to.

The language of neo-colonialism and financial colonialism runs throughout the dataset. Users cite and paraphrase Walter Rodney, Kwame Nkrumah and Ali Mazrui to argue that current forms of global economic engagement represent a continuation of earlier systems of domination. They reference France’s monetary control over its former colonies, trade and investment arrangements that benefit external actors and historical and ongoing forms of European control in Africa. Within this framework, EU institutions and individual member states including the Netherlands are positioned as part of a broader system of continued external influence, even when their engagement is framed as development cooperation.

The emotional register of this content is intense. Anger and frustration are prominent throughout. One commenter writes: “It’s theft.” Another asks: “The West is always taking from Africa. When will Africa stop being exploited?” A third says simply: “Different year same game 100% TRUTH.” Mouffe (2005), in her theory of agonistic democracy, argues that strong affective investment in political positions is a precondition of democratic engagement rather than its enemy. The anger in these comments should not be read as analytically disqualifying. It reflects the same structural analysis present in the academic literature, expressed with a directness that academic publishing discourages. A perception study that dismissed the affective dimension of this content would miss the depth and intensity of what it is studying.

At the same time, pride and assertion run alongside the critique. One commenter states: “Africa is not poor, our leaders don’t want to create African trade.” Another writes: “Africa will unite and be in control of its resources.” A third declares: “Africa don’t need the world, the world needs Africa.” The overall tone is one of political consciousness and mobilisation. Critique of external actors and calls for African self-reliance appear together, consistently, across communities and countries.

The summary finding from Facebook is clear. European and Dutch development cooperation is interpreted through a structural lens centred on extraction, unequal exchange and global power relations. Aid is not assessed on its own merits. It is assessed as part of a wider system in which Africa loses more value than it gains. The Netherlands is rarely discussed as a distinct actor within this frame. It is grouped with Europe and the West. But when Dutch-linked events do appear, they are absorbed immediately into the same structural reading. Perceptions on Facebook are shaped less by specific programmes and more by the broader narratives within which those programmes are embedded.

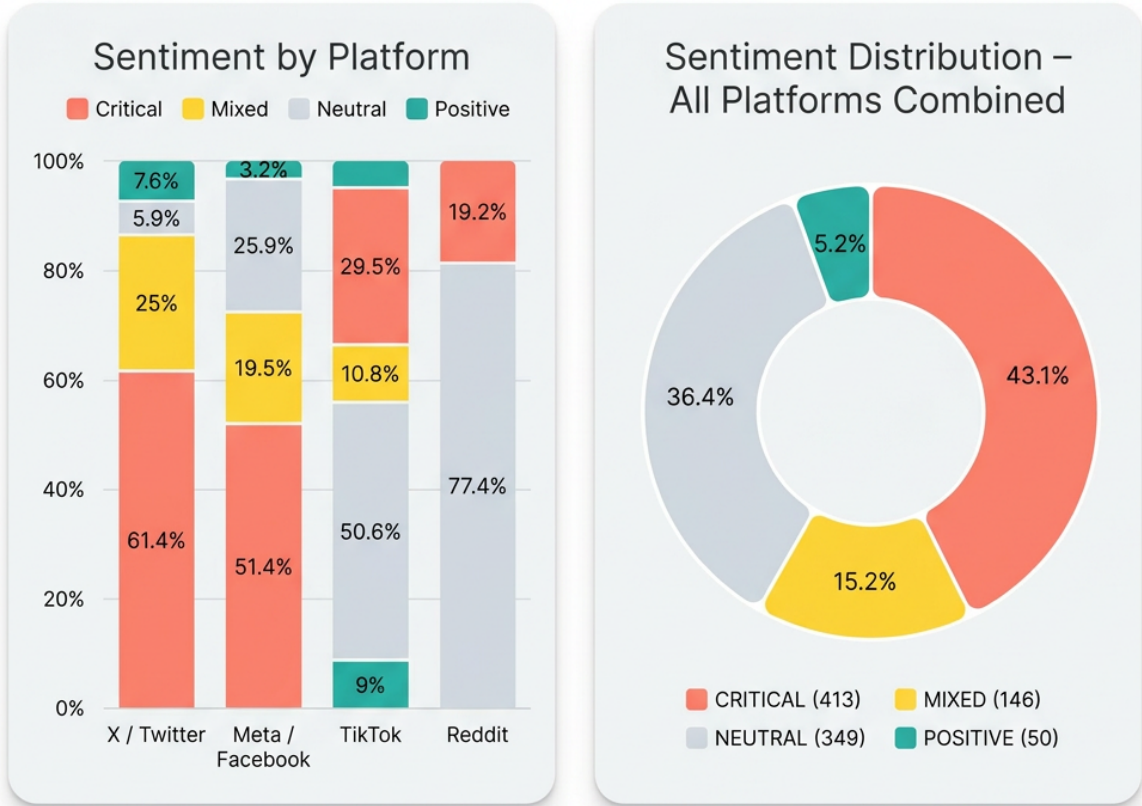
8.4 Cross-Platform Synthesis: The Architecture of Digital Perception

Across all three platforms, a coherent architecture of digital perception formation emerges that the three-layer analytical model captures well. The structural layer recurs across all three platforms and is a strong pattern in the dataset examined: on TikTok, X and Facebook alike, cooperation is frequently interpreted through narratives of extraction, unequal exchange, dependency and global economic imbalance. These narratives do not appear as opinions that can be changed by better information about programme results alone: they appear, in the sources examined, as frameworks of analysis that shape how information about programme results is interpreted. The historical layer reinforces the structural layer by providing specific, emotionally charged and culturally resonant examples of the structural dynamic in action. Colonial history is not evoked as an excuse for present scepticism: it is evoked as evidence that the structural dynamic has a long track record that makes current expressions of good intent insufficient as a basis for trust. The project layer operates within both, generating evidence that qualifies, confirms or occasionally complicates structural and historical assessments without displacing them as the primary basis for evaluation.

The divergence between official and citizen voices is among the most analytically important findings in the digital evidence. Official and institutional content, which constitutes a significant share of explicitly Dutch-related content on X in particular,

presents cooperation in project-layer terms: results achieved, funds committed, partnerships formed. Citizen content responds to these claims, when it does so at all, by translating them into structural terms: who actually benefits, whose priorities are served, what this transaction looks like in the context of the broader relationship. This is not simply a difference of opinion: it is a difference in the analytical framework being applied, a difference that better communication from the Dutch or European side cannot bridge because the framework difference operates at a more fundamental level than the specific claims in dispute.

Figure 1. Cross-Platform Sentiment Distribution of Scraped Perceptions on European and Dutch Cooperation in Africa (Data up to 17 May 2026)



Source: Authors’ social media scraping and analysis visualised through the AEDC Dashboard.

The dashboard presents a cross-platform sentiment analysis of X/Twitter, Meta/Facebook, TikTok and Reddit based on data scraped up until 17 June 2026. As scraping continues on a rolling basis, these figures may evolve over time as new discussions emerge across platforms. Overall sentiment is dominated by critical perceptions (43.1%), followed by neutral (36.4%), mixed (15.2%) and positive sentiment (5.2%). X/Twitter and Meta/Facebook display the highest levels of criticism, reflecting more politicised and emotionally charged discourse, while Reddit remains largely neutral and discussion-oriented. TikTok occupies an intermediate position, combining structural critique with narratives of identity and African agency. The figure highlights one of the study’s central findings: perceptions of European and Dutch cooperation are shaped less by individual projects and more by broader structural and historical narratives related to power, inequality and external influence.

The Netherlands’ low standalone visibility across all three platforms is itself an analytically important finding rather than simply an absence. It means that Dutch cooperation is often encountered and interpreted within broader European or Western frames, which may limit the extent to which Dutch bilateral performance is evaluated independently. This dataset demonstrates low standalone recognition more directly than it demonstrates the transfer of attitudes from Europe/the West onto the Netherlands specifically; the latter is a plausible and evidence-consistent reading, but one the primary study should test rather than assume. This has important implications for Dutch communication and policy strategy. Investments in making Dutch cooperation more visible, by highlighting results, promoting the Dutch brand and distinguishing Dutch from EU-level engagement, are likely to have limited effect as long as the broader narrative environment within which Dutch activities are perceived remains dominated by structural and historical concerns about European engagement in Africa. Visibility strategies that do not simultaneously engage the structural and historical dimensions of the relationship will increase the surface area of Dutch cooperation that is visible to structural critique without improving the underlying terms on which that critique is made.

9. Cross-Cutting Synthesis: Convergences, Divergences and What Explains Them



Focusing on programme results addresses a secondary rather than a primary driver of perception.

9.1 Convergences Across Evidence Types

The most striking methodological feature of this review is the recurrence of structural and historical themes across sources that are methodologically very different from one another. Academic literature, policy evaluation and digital social media analysis all identify structural and historical concerns as significant. This recurrence of theme strengthens confidence that these concerns are real and widely held; it is a different and weaker claim than saying the sources converge on a single finding about the relative causal weight of structural versus project-level factors. These sources are, in an important sense, not answering the same question: academic and African institutional sources often ask whether cooperation reproduces structural dependency; European evaluation literature typically asks whether stated programme objectives were achieved; social media captures affective and narrative reaction, often concentrated around specific high-salience events. Convergence of theme across these sources is a meaningful and useful finding in its own right. The fact that structural critique appears in peer-reviewed African political economy, in community discussion on Facebook, in TikTok video essays and in formal OECD evaluation literature -albeit framed very differently in each case -indicates that it is capturing something real about how cooperation is experienced rather than being solely an artefact of any one evidence type - though it does not, by itself, establish how this concern is weighted against project-level experience in overall perception formation.

The mechanism is the same across all sources: specific programme experiences are not evaluated on their own terms but are interpreted within pre-existing frameworks about global economic inequality, historical injustice and external-actor motivations. Positive results can improve perceptions locally or sectorally, but they do not appear, in the material reviewed, to consistently redefine broader assessments of whether cooperation is genuinely equitable and genuinely development-oriented. This pattern is consistent enough across the evidence reviewed to sustain a provisional policy conclusion, to be tested rather than treated as settled: communication strategies that focus on making programme results more visible are addressing a secondary rather than a primary driver of perception formation, and their effects will be correspondingly limited.

9.2 The European-African Narrative Divergence and What Produces It

The most analytically significant divergence in the evidence is between European and African assessments of the same cooperation relationship. European policy frameworks and evaluation literature focus on instruments, funding volumes, sectoral results and partnership architecture. African academic, institutional and digital sources focus on power relations, historical positioning, ownership constraints and the distribution of costs and benefits. These are not disagreements about facts in the ordinary sense: they are differences in what is treated as the most relevant dimension of cooperation quality.

This divergence is not random or arbitrary: it is produced by the different structural positions of European and African actors within the cooperation relationship, and by the different frameworks for evaluating cooperation that those positions generate. European actors have strong institutional incentives to evaluate cooperation in terms that justify continued engagement and demonstrate value for money to domestic constituencies. African actors have equally strong reasons to evaluate cooperation in terms of whether it advances or undermines their capacity for autonomous development. These are genuinely different criteria, and they will generate genuinely different assessments of the same interventions without either side being analytically mistaken. Elbow (1973), in his foundational work on writing and inquiry, distinguished between the 'doubting game' and the 'believing game' as complementary epistemic strategies; the divergence between European and African assessment of development cooperation reflects something similar-different epistemic entry points that produce different but not simply incompatible conclusions.

Bridging this divergence requires changing not only what cooperation delivers but how its purposes, trade-offs and constraints are conceptualised, communicated and held accountable. European actors who want African partners to assess their cooperation more positively cannot achieve this by presenting more evidence of positive outputs. They must engage with the frameworks within which that evidence is evaluated -frameworks shaped by historical experience, structural analysis and reasonable scepticism about the consistency between stated principles and observed practice.

9.3 The Role of Alternative Partners and Changing Baselines

The growing presence of alternative partners has materially altered the context in which European and Dutch cooperation is assessed, in ways that compound the challenges identified above. African governments that have genuine strategic

alternatives can afford to be more exacting about European conditionalities, more willing to push back on financing terms and more insistent on meaningful ownership. The comparison baseline has shifted: European cooperation is now evaluated not only against European claims about what it delivers but against what alternative partners are perceived to offer. Alden and Large (2019) and Carmody (2011) show that this comparison is not always favourable to non-European actors, but it is a comparison that is being made, and it changes the strategic context in ways that European actors cannot ignore.

This shift also affects digital perception dynamics. Pan-African commentary that once framed the choice as between accepting Western cooperation or going without is increasingly framed as a choice between different external partners, each with different terms, different track records and different implications for African agency. This reframing has potentially positive implications for European cooperation: if African governments genuinely have alternatives, then European cooperation that is demonstrably more equitable, more genuinely owned and more structurally supportive of African development priorities has a basis for competitive differentiation. The question is whether European and Dutch actors are prepared to make the changes in how cooperation is structured -in conditionality, in financing terms, in agenda-setting arrangements -that genuine competitive differentiation on relational grounds would require.

9.4 Financing Modalities as a Perception-Critical Arena

Financing modalities emerge consistently across all evidence types as a critical arena in which perceptions of fairness are formed. Grants, loans, blended finance and investment instruments are assessed not as technically neutral choices but as arrangements that distribute risks and benefits in ways that carry political significance. Tied aid, procurement conditions favouring European suppliers and investment structures that concentrate returns in European firms are cited repeatedly across academic literature, evaluation sources and digital evidence as evidence that cooperation primarily benefits the donor economy rather than the recipient. This perception is not simply a misunderstanding about how aid works: it reflects a coherent analysis of the political economy of different financing instruments and their distributional implications.

The digital evidence adds a dimension that formal literature understates: the role of named corporate actors in shaping perceptions of government development cooperation. The Shell-Nigeria connection on X, the Dutch-linked NGO controversy in Burkina Faso and the 'Dutch Aid equals Philips medical equipment' commentary

documented in the X dataset all reflect a common analytical move in which the boundary between Dutch government and Dutch corporate activity is dissolved in the assessment of Dutch engagement with Africa. This perception challenge cannot be addressed by development communications alone: it requires engagement with the actual relationships between Dutch development finance institutions, Dutch corporate actors and the communities in which they operate in Africa.

9.5 Sectoral Variation Within a Consistent Structural Frame

Perceptions vary across sectors in ways that provide granular guidance for cooperation design, though they do so within a structural framework that applies frequently, though not uniformly. In social sectors -health, education, water and sanitation -cooperation is more readily associated with visible and locally attributable benefits, generating more positive perceptions even when

structural concerns persist. In economic sectors -trade, private sector development, investment -concerns about who benefits from contracts, who retains value and who controls production are more acute and more readily activated. In migration and security, cooperation is frequently and consistently assessed in the sources reviewed as serving European domestic interests over African development priorities - one of the more strongly and repeatedly evidenced sectoral patterns in this review, though it draws primarily on qualitative and case-based sources rather than systematic population-level data. These sectoral differences indicate that the structural framework does not prevent positive perceptions from forming at the sector level: it appears to condition what conditions must be met for them to form. Cooperation that creates visible, locally attributed, equitably distributed benefits in socially salient sectors can accumulate positive perceptions even in a generally sceptical interpretive environment.



10. Conclusions and Policy Implications

The evidence across this review is consistent and demanding. It is consistent because African scholarship, European evaluation literature and digital social media analysis recurrently identify structural and historical concerns as significant, even though these sources are frequently answering different underlying questions (see Section 9.1). It is demanding because the findings do not support incremental adjustments to communication or programme design alone. They point to the structural features of the cooperation relationship itself as an important part of the problem, alongside project-level and relational factors whose relative weight the primary empirical study should establish. Perceptions of European and Dutch cooperation appear, from the evidence reviewed, to be formed through the interaction between project-level experience and deeper structural and historical narratives that shape how that experience is read. The three-layer model is offered as a framework for capturing this interaction and testing it empirically, rather than as a hierarchy this review has already established. For the Netherlands specifically, Dutch cooperation cannot easily be assessed independently of European engagement as a whole. Its low standalone visibility means it is often encountered as part of a broader European and Western presence in Africa, which may carry with it some of the structural and historical associations that attach to that presence.

A direct consequence of this finding is that strategies focused on improving visibility and communicating results are unlikely, on their own, to be sufficient. This is not because communication is unimportant. It is because the problem is not only a lack of information. African publics sceptical of European partnership claims are not, on the evidence reviewed here, primarily sceptical because they lack information about Dutch or EU programmes. Where scepticism appears in the sources examined, it appears to arise because the structural and historical frameworks within which they evaluate that information often produce grounds for scepticism that additional programme information alone does not appear to resolve - a pattern this review documents but cannot, on its own, establish as universal across all African publics, most of whom are not directly represented in the digital or scholarly sources reviewed. Natsios (2010) makes a related point: accountability and communication requirements have systematically displaced the harder work of addressing structural problems. Hearn (2007) reaches the same conclusion about the limits of technical and communicative fixes.

Addressing perceptual scepticism therefore requires engaging with its actual sources. On the structural dimension, this means taking seriously African concerns about the terms of the economic relationship, not only the development relationship. The “aid as rebate” frame visible across Facebook cannot be refuted by programme communication. It can only be challenged by

demonstrable changes to trade, investment and financing relationships. On the historical dimension, the Netherlands needs to engage directly with its colonial history, including the Dutch East India Company's role in Southern Africa and Dutch involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. The digital material contains examples of African users demonstrating detailed knowledge of this history and using it as an interpretive resource. Dutch actors who present their cooperation as if it occurs in a historical vacuum will consistently fail the credibility test, not because the historical critique is unanswerable but because the failure to engage it reads as evasion.

Beyond engaging structural and historical concerns, the quality of the cooperation relationship itself should be treated as a policy objective in its own right, not just a means to development outcomes. Power-sharing, ownership, alignment and consistency between stated principles and practice emerge as important conditions for lasting legitimacy, although their relative weight remains an empirical question.

The Netherlands faces a specific version of this challenge. Its reputation is substantially shaped by collective EU behaviour, which it can influence at the margins but does not control. This is, however, also an opportunity. As a medium-sized member state with a credible development tradition, the Netherlands has the standing to advocate within Team Europe, EU Council working groups and the OECD Development Assistance Committee for more ownership-centred and less conditionality-heavy cooperation. It means naming the coherence problem when development objectives conflict with migration or security priorities rather than managing the tension quietly. Orbie et al. (2016) identifies this advocacy role as a genuine comparative advantage of smaller EU member states with strong development traditions.

Running alongside all of this is the question of dialogue. African publics are conducting substantive political analysis of European and

Dutch cooperation on TikTok, X and Facebook in spaces that European actors rarely monitor and never participate in. Structured dialogue, understood as genuine political exchange rather than consultation formality, is an underused instrument for bridging this gap. Dialogue that gives African voices genuine influence over cooperation design would provide better information about how cooperation is received, demonstrate ownership in practice, and build relationships of mutual accountability more durable than programme cycles. Gaventa (2010) argues that the quality of participatory processes depends not on the formal inclusion of diverse voices but on whether those voices have genuine influence over outcomes.

Finally, these conclusions have direct implications for the empirical study that follows. The study must be designed to capture all three layers of perception formation, and, in particular, to test the relative weight of structural, historical and project-level factors empirically rather than assume it - including testing genuine alternative explanations for scepticism (low visibility, domestic political context, general attitudes toward external powers, contemporary geopolitical events) alongside the structural/historical account this review has developed. Interview and focus group guides must move between levels, drawing out the structural and historical frames within which programme experience is contextualised. The study must include a diverse range of actor types, since government officials and programme implementers tend to operate at the project layer while civil society, academic and citizen-level respondents tend to operate at the structural and historical layers. It must also include digital literacy probing to understand how respondents engage with social media narratives and how those narratives interact with direct experience of cooperation. Perceptions are not peripheral to how cooperation works. They are constitutive of its legitimacy, and the empirical work ahead will test that claim against evidence from the ground.

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The study must capture all three layers of perception formation, not only the project level.



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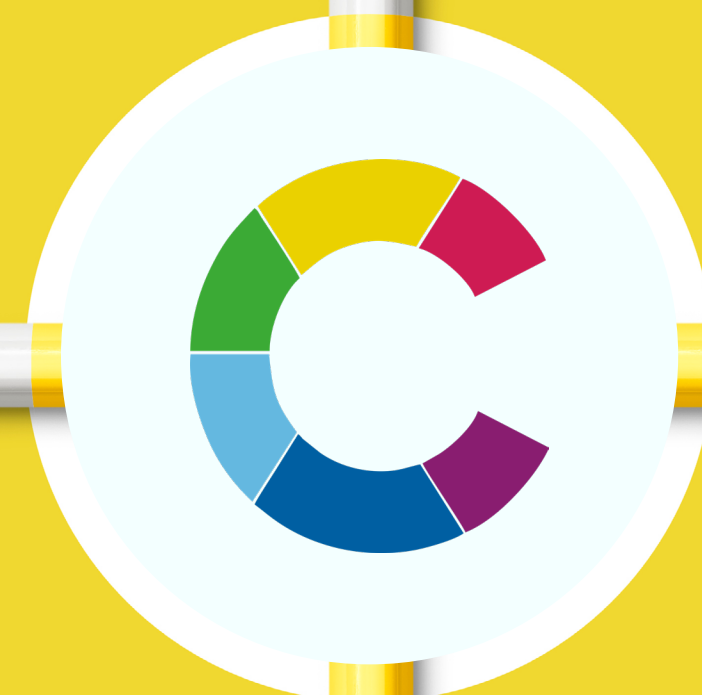
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