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**Relational Trust, Structural
Fractures:** African Perceptions
of European and Dutch
Development Cooperation

Relational Trust, Structural Fractures: African Perceptions of European and Dutch Development Cooperation

AU-ECOSOCC Roundtable Expert Consultation

A Closed AU-ECOSOCC and INCLUDE Roundtable (Addis Ababa, 2026)

Drawn from the proceedings of the Closed AU-ECOSOCC and INCLUDE Knowledge Platform Roundtable, “From Aid to Impact: Financing and Partnership Models in Transition,” Addis Ababa, 12 February 2026.

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About the Wider Study

This report is part of a wider perception study. The perception study brings together seven complementary outputs examining African perceptions of European and Dutch development cooperation. It examines how African stakeholders perceive the European Union and the Netherlands as development and strategic partners, with particular attention to trust, alignment, ownership, relevance and the quality of partnerships. It brings together different forms of evidence to identify where cooperation is valued, where structural tensions remain, and what these perceptions reveal about the future of African–Dutch/European partnerships.

Each output contributes a distinct body of evidence to the wider research programme, including the Evidence Synthesis Report, Survey Findings, AU Roundtable Report, Digital Listening Report, five Country Reports, Policy Briefs, and a Comparative Synthesis.¹

About this Report

This report presents the findings from the AU-ECOSOCC and INCLUDE Roundtable on Partnership Perceptions, held in Addis Ababa on the sidelines of the African Union Summit in February 2026. It focuses specifically on the experiences and perspectives shared by senior African civil society and institutional leaders with direct experience of Dutch and European partnership frameworks.



¹ INCLUDE Knowledge Platform. (n.d.). Include Africa Perceptions: How does Africa see European and Dutch development cooperation? <https://include-projects.vercel.app/include-africa-perceptions.html>

Methodology

Purpose and Approach

This report presents insights from a closed-door expert consultation on African experiences and perceptions of the European Union and the Netherlands as development and strategic partners. The consultation formed part of the wider INCLUDE Knowledge Platform research programme conducted in 2026.

The consultation was intended to create a space in which experienced African actors could reflect openly on their engagement with Dutch and EU partnerships, raise concerns, discuss expectations and identify broader questions relating to the nature, quality and future direction of these relationships. The consultation is treated in this report as expert consultation and contextual evidence, rather than as a representative survey or as a formal qualitative research sample.

Consultation Setting and Participants

The roundtable was held in Addis Ababa on 12 February 2026. It brought together senior African civil society and institutional leaders with experience of, or engagement in, development and strategic partnerships involving the Netherlands and the European Union.

The closed-door format was intended to support candid discussion and allow participants to reflect on sensitive or contested aspects of partnership relationships. The perspectives presented in this report therefore reflect the experiences, interpretations and priorities of the participants who took part in the consultation.

The participant group was purposively convened for its experience and relevance to the subject under discussion. It was not selected to be statistically representative of African civil society, public institutions, development practitioners or African populations more broadly.

Nature of the Evidence

The consultation generated contextual and interpretive evidence concerning:

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- » Participants' experiences of Dutch and EU partnerships;
- » Perceptions of trust and mutual respect;
- » The alignment of European cooperation with African priorities;
- » The balance between partnership and external influence;
- » African ownership, agency and autonomy;
- » The strategic relevance of development cooperation;
- » Institutional relationships and implementation experiences; and
- » Expectations for the future of African–European relations.

The consultation provides insight into how participants understand and explain their experiences. It can illuminate issues that may be difficult to capture through a structured survey, including concerns expressed spontaneously, tensions between formal commitments and practical experiences, and the meanings participants attach to concepts such as partnership, trust and autonomy.

Qualitative Evidence



Participants included senior representatives from pan-African civil society foundations, African Renaissance policy institutions, African human rights bodies, and development knowledge platforms. All were explicitly invited to offer candid, unvarnished assessments. Scope: this report analyses the Partnership Perceptions segment only. All quotations are attributed by role rather than name. The roundtable was attended by approximately 150 participants; the number who specifically contributed to the Partnership Perceptions discussion segment analysed in this report is not separately recorded.

Quotations in this report are reproduced from the Outcome Document of the roundtable session. Direct quotations, shown in quotation marks, are distinguished throughout from Outcome Document synthesis (paraphrase) and from the surrounding analytical prose, which reflects the research team's interpretation.

A note on terms: participants in the roundtable generally spoke about “Dutch and EU” partnership practice, or simply “European” institutions, as a single thing, and only occasionally distinguished the Netherlands from the EU specifically. This report reflects that: where the source material names the Netherlands or the EU individually, so does this report; where participants spoke of the two together, this report does too, rather than imposing a separation the discussion itself did not make.

Analytical Approach and Framework

The report identifies and organises the principal themes emerging from the consultation. The analysis focuses on the substance of participants' reflections rather than on measuring the frequency or prevalence of particular views.

Themes are treated as evidence of issues raised within the consultation, not as evidence that those issues are shared by all African stakeholders. The prominence of a theme in the discussion does not, by itself, indicate how widespread the underlying experience or perception may be.

Where individual perspectives or examples are presented, they are used to illustrate the range and character of the discussion.

This report applies the analytical framework developed in the [Evidence Synthesis Report](#), the first output of the wider perception study. The framework provides a common analytical foundation across the study and is used here to interpret the experiences and perspectives shared during the AU-ECOSOCC and INCLUDE Roundtable.

Analytical Framework for Understanding Perceptions of European and Dutch Cooperation in Africa

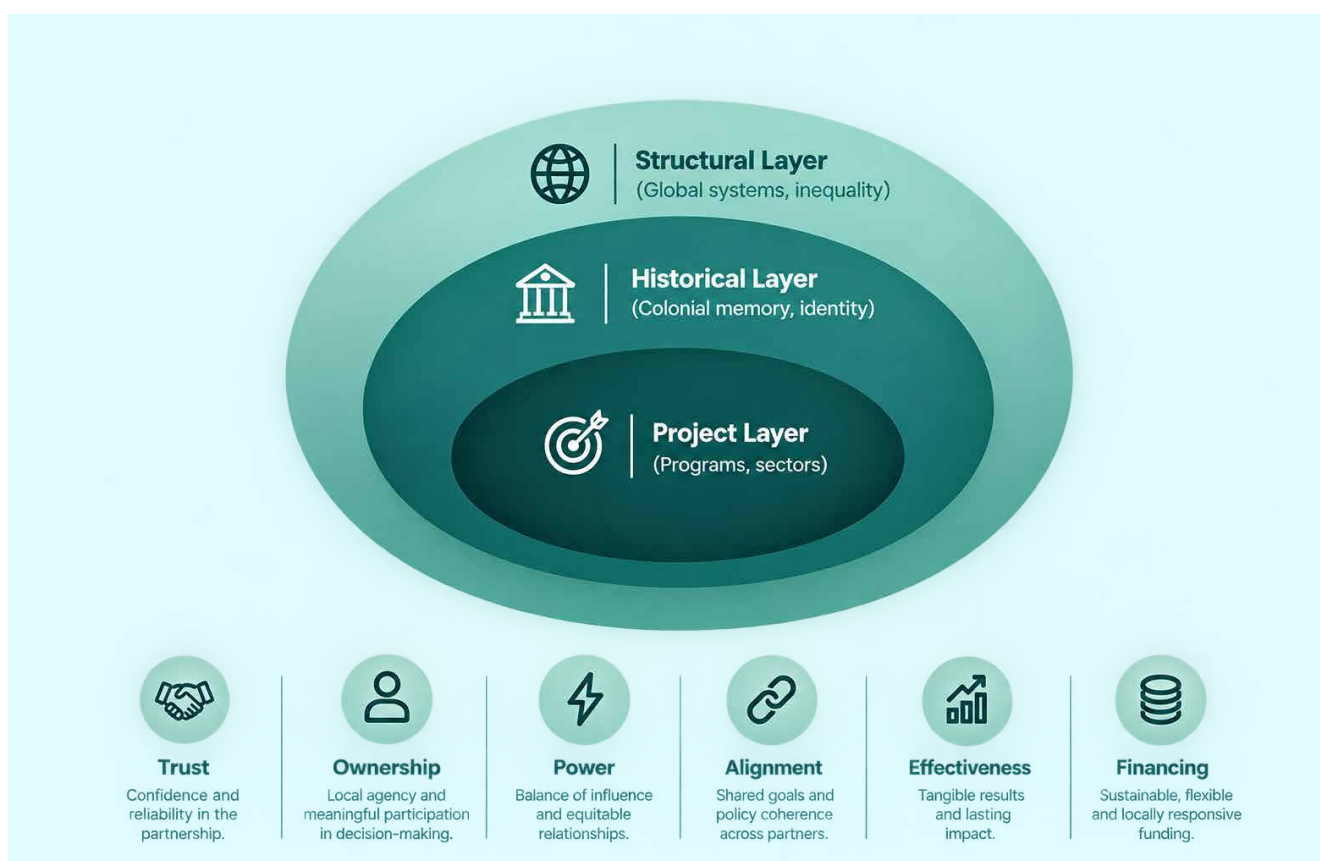


Figure 1: This figure presents the analytical framework guiding the perceptions of European and Dutch Cooperation in Africa

The framework understands perceptions of European and Dutch cooperation as shaped by the interaction of **three interconnected levels: structural, historical and project-level factors**. The structural level considers the wider context in which cooperation takes place, including global economic relations, financing systems and patterns of inequality. The historical level recognises the influence of colonial legacies, collective memory and identity on trust, legitimacy and expectations of external actors. The project level focuses on how concrete programmes, investments and interventions are experienced and evaluated.

Across these three levels, the analysis examines **six dimensions of cooperation**:

1. Trust and credibility
2. Ownership and local agency
3. Power and decision-making asymmetries
4. Alignment with national and regional priorities
5. Perceived effectiveness
6. Financing modalities

These dimensions provide a consistent basis for examining how cooperation is experienced across different contexts and actor groups.

They also allow the analysis to consider both the practical and political dimensions of partnership, recognising that perceptions are shaped not only by what programmes deliver, but also by who defines priorities, who controls resources, how decisions are made and whether relationships are experienced as equitable.

For this report, the framework is applied specifically to the **qualitative evidence generated through the roundtable**. The six dimensions are therefore not treated as variables to be measured or scored. Instead, they serve as analytical lenses through which participants' experiences, concerns and expectations are organised and interpreted.

The framework also recognises that perceptions are not formed at project level alone. Experiences of individual programmes can be reinforced, qualified or contested by broader historical and structural conditions. Applying this framework therefore allows the roundtable evidence to be situated within the wider perception study while preserving the distinctive value of the consultation as contextual and interpretive evidence.

Limitations

The report identifies and organises the principal themes emerging from the consultation. The analysis focuses on the substance of participants' reflections rather than on measuring the frequency or prevalence of particular views.

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Executive Summary

African-Dutch-European development cooperation is taking place in a changing global environment. African actors are increasingly seeking partnerships that recognise African priorities, strengthen local agency and respond to longer-term development and strategic interests. At the same time, European partners, including the Netherlands and the European Union (EU), are adapting their cooperation to a context shaped by geopolitical competition, migration, climate change, economic transformation and changing approaches to development finance².

This study examines how African stakeholders perceive the Netherlands and the EU as development and strategic partners, and what these perceptions reveal about the changing nature of African-European cooperation. It is a part of seven complementary outputs: an evidence synthesis, an online stakeholder survey, an AU-ECOSOCC expert consultation, social media/ digital listening analysis, five country studies, policy briefs and a comparative synthesis. Each source addresses the question from a different perspective and has distinct methodological strengths and limitations. The findings are therefore not treated as a single dataset or as statistically representative of African opinion. Rather, they are brought together to identify patterns of convergence, complementarity and divergence across different forms of evidence.

The Central Finding

1 The Central Challenge is Structural, Political and Operational

Participants did not reject Dutch or European partnership itself. Many described long-standing relationships, shared objectives and continued willingness to cooperate. Their concern was that the structures governing partnership, including who defines priorities, who controls resources, how accountability operates and how strategic interests shape cooperation, often undermine the principles of equity that partnerships claim to uphold. The central distinction emerging from the roundtable is therefore not between good and bad partnerships, but between valuing cooperation and questioning the political, institutional and operational architecture through which that cooperation is organised.

2 Agenda-setting is Where Power is Experienced Most Clearly

Participants repeatedly returned to one question: Who defines the problem before funding begins? They described funding instruments in which priorities, indicators, activities and measures of success are largely established before African partners meaningfully influence their design. In their experience, consultation often follows decisions rather than shaping them. The distinction that emerges is between participation and influence: being invited into a process is not the same as helping determine its direction.

3 Accountability is Experienced as One-directional

Reporting requirements emerged as one of the most detailed operational concerns raised during the session. Participants described compliance systems that consume organisational capacity, generate demand for external technical support

and, in some cases, redirect resources towards intermediary functions rather than programme delivery. More fundamentally, they questioned why African organisations are extensively accountable to funders while equivalent mechanisms for assessing donor performance remain limited. The issue is not accountability itself, but whether accountability operates as a shared institutional responsibility.

4 Short-term Funding Undermines Long-term Transformation

Participants argued that one-to-three-year funding cycles are poorly matched to the realities of institutional change, community trust and policy reform. Relationships that take years to build can unravel when funding ends, and organisations can lose staff, momentum and local credibility before longer-term outcomes become possible. Across the discussion, multi-year and more flexible financing was presented not as an added benefit but as a basic condition for partnership that aims to support lasting change.

5 Credibility Increasingly Depends on Consistency Between Rhetoric and Practice

Participants expressed growing concern that development cooperation is becoming more visibly intertwined with migration management, security and other strategic interests. Their argument was not that European governments should abandon national interests, but that partnerships lose credibility when solidarity language remains unchanged while decision-making appears increasingly driven by different priorities. For many participants, the future of partnership depends less on new commitments than on greater transparency, shared decision-making and institutional consistency.

Introduction

Senior African civil society and institutional leaders gathered in Addis Ababa on the margins of the AU Summit, and shared their experiences of Dutch and European Union partnership practice. Asked directly whether these partnerships are equitable and effective, the discussion was predominantly critical of the equity of current partnerships. Participants described partnerships that, in their account, were shaped by tokenism, micromanagement, and donor-defined problem framing. They described reporting requirements that they experienced as instruments of control, and which they believed redirected portions of European funding back toward European technical providers (this redirection was not independently quantified in this study). They described funding that they believed served donor strategic interests and, in their account, failed to reach the communities it nominally exists to support. Several characterised the relationship as extractive in

practice, whatever its stated intentions.

African partnership practitioners are not calling for the end of cooperation with Europe. Their demand is structural: a redistribution of agenda-setting power, accountability mechanisms that flow in both directions, long-term flexible funding calibrated to African development timelines, and relationships grounded in genuine trust rather than procedural compliance.

The Netherlands and the EU face a political choice. The evidence of structural misalignment between European partnership rhetoric and African partnership experience has accumulated across decades. Incremental adjustments to programme design will not resolve it. Structural change in how power is distributed within the cooperation relationship is what the evidence points toward.

Core Finding: Senior African practitioners with direct, extensive experience of Dutch and EU partnership frameworks described those frameworks as tokenistic, micromanaged, report-heavy, and oriented toward donor strategic interests. The gap between the mutual partnership language European institutions deploy and the directive, control-oriented reality African partners experience is a central feature of the relationship as described by participants in the Partnership Perceptions session.



A.1 The Session and Its Mandate

The roundtable organisers set a specific mandate for the Partnership Perceptions session. Participants were asked to be, in the facilitators' own words, "thoroughly, painfully honest" and to "dump it all on the paper."

This matters as a methodological point. Research on civil society organisations and public or official funding suggests that financial dependence can create incentives for organisations to moderate or withhold criticism of their funders or public authorities, particularly where organisations perceive criticism as potentially affecting future funding or access. In this context, the closed-door format was intended to create greater space for candid reflection, while recognising that it cannot eliminate selection effects, group dynamics or other forms of bias.

The participants were not peripheral actors. The room included the heads of pan-African civil society foundations with sustained experience in African philanthropy and social justice financing; programme leads from institutions focused on African-led development cooperation and strategic partnerships; directors steering African partnerships and resource mobilisation directorates of various institutions; and a former chair of a continental human rights body who now leads an African policy research institution.

Participants were invited for their seniority and direct experience of Dutch and EU partnership frameworks; the session was analysed from the Outcome Document produced by the roundtable organisers.

A.1.1 The Engagement Gradient

The invitation to speak frankly was readily accepted. Partners shared honest reflections based on years of working with Dutch and EU funding programmes. Their contributions painted a rich picture of partnership in practice, highlighting what works, where tensions arise, and what would need to change to create stronger and more balanced relationships: their requirements, their internal hierarchies, their stated values, and the visible distance between those values and day-to-day conduct.



True partnerships are essential but hard to achieve, especially in Europe-Africa relations.

-Executive Director, leading development knowledge platform

A.2 The Equity Verdict

The session opened with a direct question: are current partnerships with the Dutch Government and the European Union equitable? The discussion was predominantly critical of the equity of current partnerships. These respondents are not critics operating from outside the system. They have

worked within Dutch and EU funding relationships. They have sat at partnership tables, negotiated frameworks, and signed agreements. Their verdict is grounded in experience, and participants expressed these assessments directly and critically during the closed session.

A.2.1 What Equity Requires

In the roundtable's terms, equitable partnership requires equal standing in defining what problem is being addressed; genuine African participation in setting priorities, designing interventions, and allocating resources; accountability obligations that run in both directions; respect for African practitioners' contextual knowledge and professional judgement; and structural arrangements that do not systematically advantage one party over the other. By each of these measures, participants judged current Dutch and EU partnerships to fall short.

³ Arvidson, M., Johansson, H., & Scaramuzzino, R. (2018). Advocacy compromised: How financial, organizational and institutional factors shape advocacy strategies of civil society organizations. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 29, 844–856.

A.2.2 The Tokenism Finding

Participants described current partnership practice as “tokenistic.” African organisations are consulted without being heard; included in processes whose outcomes have already been shaped elsewhere; listed as partners in agreements where the fundamental terms were set by the funder. Participants described engagement mechanisms as formally present but substantively limited in their influence.

Tokenistic partnership consumes African organisational resources: staff time, institutional credibility, and management attention. It delivers the appearance of collaboration while leaving the power architecture intact. Practitioners described the cumulative experience not with anger but with exhaustion, the exhaustion of institutions that have spent years participating in processes that were not designed to respond to their input.

“Many partnerships with the Dutch Government and the European Union are very tokenistic, operating as a tick-box sort of approach, lacking genuine collaboration and cooperation.

-Participant, Partnership Perceptions session

A.2.3 The Micromanagement Finding

Multiple participants described extensive micromanagement of implementation: funder-imposed specification of programme design, activity sequencing, indicators, and outcome definitions that leaves African organisations minimal space to exercise contextual judgement. The term used was a “complete lack of trust.” Participants viewed extensive prescription of implementation methods as inconsistent with the trust-based partnership model they expected. Pervasive micromanagement and trust-based partnership cannot coexist.

The practical effect is to convert African implementing organisations into contractors. African practitioner expertise, contextual knowledge, and community relationships, the very assets that make local organisations valuable partners, are structurally subordinated to donor-designed frameworks.

A.2.4 The Trust Paradox

European funders routinely describe their programmes as trust-based. African partners in those same programmes describe pervasive micromanagement and a complete absence of trust. This is not necessarily a matter of one side being wrong; it may reflect two groups applying the same word, “trust,” to different things, or genuinely different experiences of the same funding relationship at different points in its life cycle. What the roundtable evidence shows, in the research team’s reading, is a gap between how European institutions describe their funding modalities and how those modalities are experienced by the African organisations operating within them. Participants’ own term for this gap was that trust-based funding had become a label applied to arrangements that bear little structural resemblance to trust.

A.3 Who Defines the Problem

The most consequential dimension of the power asymmetry participants described in European partnership practice concerns agenda-setting: who defines what problem the cooperation is meant to address. Roundtable participants were unambiguous in their own accounts: participants

described funders as defining the problem, and African partners as responding to that definition. This is reported here as participants’ experience rather than as an independently verified description of how European and Dutch funding architecture works in every case.



Funders frequently shape the intended outcome, the indicators, the activities, the moonshots and everything else, effectively determining what the problem is.

-Participant, Partnership Perceptions session

Agenda-setting power is the foundational form of authority in any development relationship. It determines what receives attention and resources, what goes unaddressed, what success looks like, and therefore what counts as evidence of impact. When African practitioners and communities have little or no generative role in defining the agenda, participants questioned whether the relationship could be considered a meaningful partnership.

A.3.1 How the Architecture Works

Participants described the architecture as working as follows, based on their institutional experience; this is reported as their account rather than as independently verified documentary evidence about funding-instrument design. European institutions identify investment priorities, drawing on their own policy frameworks and strategic interests. They design funding instruments that operationalise those priorities. African organisations apply within the pre-defined framework, demonstrating how their work maps onto funder-determined problem definitions. Those who secure funding are then managed against indicators that reflect the funder's framing. African knowledge enters the process as supporting evidence for an analysis conducted elsewhere.

When African priorities diverge from European frameworks, there is no systematic pathway to funding. Participants experienced the architecture as prioritising compliance over responsiveness.

A.3.2 The Misdiagnosis Cost

In participants' account and the research team's interpretation, external problem definition carries a real development cost: funders who define problems through their own institutional frameworks risk misreading the causes, dynamics, and appropriate responses to challenges in contexts they observe from a distance, and technically competent programmes built on inaccurate diagnoses often generate activity without generating change. This study did not evaluate programme outcomes directly, so the broader claim that Dutch or EU cooperation is, in general, "technically active and transformationally inert" is offered as the participants' interpretation, not as a measured finding. Further research should be done to establish the state of this measure.

A.3.3 The Indicator Architecture

When indicators are set by funders before implementation begins, they embed the funder's problem definition into the accountability framework. On participants' accounts, African implementing organisations are often expected to orient their activity toward what those indicators measure, even when their own professional judgement and community feedback point toward different approaches. This is a mechanism participants described and the research team finds plausible; though it was not independently tested against programme-level data, the evidence synthesis served as a triangulation node. On this account, African practitioner expertise is not formally prohibited from exercising itself, but it is made harder to exercise, in financial terms, within the terms of the funding relationship.

A.4 Reporting as Control

Reporting requirements emerged as one of the most sustained and operationally specific critiques in the roundtable. Participants described current Dutch and EU accountability frameworks

as technically burdensome, structured around European institutional norms, and experienced less as tools of mutual learning than as mechanisms of control.

A.4.1 The Technical Complexity Trap

Participants described European reporting frameworks as requiring detailed financial reports, narrative progress reports, results-framework updates, risk-management documentation, safeguarding compliance records and, in some cases, value-for-money analyses. Meeting these requirements, participants said, demands specialised financial, compliance, and monitoring expertise that many organisations struggle to maintain in-house due to resource constraints. Participants described organisations as frequently procuring external technical support as a result, including auditors, consultants, grant managers, and monitoring and evaluation specialists, and described situations in which these requirements led to the use of European firms and consultants, particularly within EU-funded programmes. Participants argued that these requirements have resulted in a portion of development funding being absorbed by compliance and reporting functions rather than programme delivery; this study did not quantify this effect.⁴

A.4.2 The Circular Flow Concern (Mechanism Described by Participants)

Reporting, compliance, and programme management requirements calibrated to European institutional norms were described by participants as often necessitating the maintenance of parallel support structures in both Europe and Africa. Participants described implementation as carried out by African organisations and communities while, in their account, significant portions of project budgets are absorbed by European-based programme management, compliance, financial oversight, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting functions, which they said in many cases duplicate capacities that already exist within African partner organisations or within Africa itself.

Participants described this as producing a circular flow of resources, in which development funding intended for African communities is, in their account, partially recycled through European institutions, duplicate staff time, consultancies, and intermediary structures before reaching the point of implementation. On participants' account, this means the effective transfer of resources to African actors is lower than headline funding figures suggest; participants attributed this not to individual organisational choices but to a funding architecture that privileges European oversight and control mechanisms, often at the expense of efficiency, local ownership, and value for money. This study did not independently trace fund flows to put a figure on the scale of this effect. That is a gap in what we measured, not a doubt about what participants reported. This study does not quantify the share of funding associated with these functions. **This is treated here as a qualitative finding describing participants' reported experience and analytical hypothesis, requiring further empirical verification (e.g. tracing actual fund flows) before it is presented as a measured or quantified structural feature.**

A.4.3 Accountability Without Mutuality

In the partnership frameworks participants described, accountability flows mainly in one direction: African partners report to European funders on programme delivery, while European funders are not, in participants' account, systematically accountable to African partners for the quality of their support, the appropriateness of their requirements, or the wider impact of their policy decisions on the communities those partnerships nominally serve. In the research team's reading, a system in which only one party renders account to the other is a system in which only one party holds power; this is our interpretation of what participants described, not an independently audited feature of Dutch or EU accountability systems generally.

A.4.4 The Knowledge Extraction Problem

In participants' account, knowledge generated by African practitioners flows upward into reporting formats designed for donor accountability and rarely surfaces as learning that changes funder behaviour: it is captured by European accountability systems but, they said, does not return to African organisations and communities in usable form, and does not systematically influence how European funders design or adjust their frameworks. This study did not trace the underlying reporting and learning processes directly. Further research should be done on it.

⁴ European Commission – Assessment of administrative costs and administrative burden in the management of the CPR Funds 2021–2027. https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/studies/administrative_cost_en.pdf

A.5 Whose Interests the Funding Serves

Participants argued, on the basis of their operational experience, that Dutch and EU funding is designed in part to serve donor strategic interests rather than African development priorities.

A.5.1 The Migration-Security-Aid Nexus

Participants described observing development cooperation conditioned on non-development objectives, and drew a conclusion from that: that development is treated as a secondary consideration, with stated priorities, such as poverty reduction, rights protection, and sustainable development, functioning, in their view, as cover for Dutch and EU strategic objectives. This is participants' interpretation of a pattern they described, not a claim this study independently verified against policy documents or funding decisions. However, the evidence synthesis served as a source for triangulating the finding. The Participants were clear, that in their view, announcing new commitments to poverty reduction, human rights, or sustainable development would not by itself restore credibility already spent; they said Europe and Netherlands would need to demonstrate, through policy and conduct, that development is the primary objective.

A.5.2 Short-Term Cycles and Long-Term Damage

In participants' assessment, Dutch and EU project cycles of one to three years are poorly matched to the kinds of change development cooperation aims to produce: community trust accumulates over years, institutional capacity requires sustained investment, and advocacy for policy change demands a long-term organisational presence. Participants argued that packaging this work into shorter delivery cycles, governed by European and Dutch institutional accountability rhythms, is a design choice with real costs for transformative outcomes. This study did not measure programme outcomes directly against cycle length.

The damage extends beyond inefficiency. Participants argued that organisations which recruit staff, build community relationships, and begin to generate traction under a funded project, only to face funding termination at the end of a short cycle, can be left in a weaker institutional position than before the funding arrived.



Support was described as temporary and short-term, lacking sustained grassroots impact and undermining long-term transformation.

-Outcome Document Synthesis, Roundtable

A.5.3 Who Does Not Benefit

Participants said that, in their experience, rural communities, marginalised populations, and people living in contexts of chronic instability or deep poverty are underrepresented in the beneficiary profile of European and Dutch -funded cooperation. This study did not analyse programme beneficiary data directly, so this is reported as participants' characterisation rather than a measured finding. On participants' account, an architecture that selects for well-positioned intermediaries also selects against the populations whose development is the stated justification for the funding. A participant described these groups as :



Those who don't have the chance to come here today and speak about their situation.

-Participant, on who development funding fails to reach

A.6 Political Contradictions and the Credibility Cost

Beyond specific critiques of funding practice, participants raised concerns about the internal coherence of European partnership commitments. The central issue is consistency: between stated values and observable conduct.

A.6.1 The Democracy and Human Rights Gap

Participants pointed to instances of European actors professing commitments to democracy and human rights as organising principles of partnership while, in their account, accommodating or supporting undemocratic governance arrangements in specific African contexts. In participants' reading, this signals that stated values are conditional: deployable in low-cost situations, set aside when competing interests are at stake.

A.6.2 From Solidarity to National Interest

Participants observed a visible shift in European cooperation, from frameworks grounded in development solidarity toward frameworks driven by national interest calculations. The concern was not that European actors pursue national interests. The concern was that European institutions continue to deploy solidarity and mutual partnership language while the actual drivers of cooperation decisions have moved elsewhere.

“Participants questioned whether partnership frameworks have honestly adapted to the shift from solidarity to national interest, or whether European institutions continue using solidarity language while acting on a different logic.

-Outcome Document Synthesis, Partnership Perceptions Session

A.6.3 The Credibility Cost

Credibility in international cooperation is built through consistency between stated commitments and observable conduct over time. European and Dutch institutions that participants described as having repeatedly demonstrated a gap between partnership language and partnership practice were, in participants' account, incurring a credibility cost that compounds with each iteration of the pattern. African organisations were described as calibrating their engagement with European and Dutch funders to the actual terms of the relationship, not the stated ones. They characterized certain arrangements as instructive, micromanaged, and reflective of a “complete lack of trust.” Several groups observed that funders frequently “shape the intended outcome, the indicators, the activities, the moonshots and everything else,” effectively determining not only implementation modalities but also defining “what the problem is.” In participants' assessment, the benefit of the doubt has been substantially exhausted.



A.7 What Equitable Partnership Requires

Across the roundtable session, participants gave a consistent account of what genuine partnership would require. The demands are structural. They concern power, not procedure.

A.7.1 Trust Demonstrated Through Structure

Trust-based funding, as a practice rather than a label, requires reporting requirements calibrated to African organisational capacity rather than European administrative norms; flexibility for implementing partners to adjust activities without stringent prior donor approval; funding that supports organisations and systems rather than only funder-specified outputs; and acceptance by European and Dutch funders of the risk that trusted partners will make decisions differently from how the funder would have made them. Participants described the current accountability architecture as transferring risk to African partners and communities. On this account, genuine trust would require a different distribution of risk.

A.7.2 Co-Creation as a Structural Requirement

African partners must be generative participants in defining problems and designing responses. Consultation after priorities have been set is not co-creation. European and Dutch funding instruments must be built with sufficient flexibility to accommodate African-identified priorities rather than requiring African organisations to demonstrate fit with pre-determined frameworks. This is a structural redesign of how funding instruments are conceptualised and constructed.

A.7.3 Long-Term Commitment as the Baseline

Multi-year flexible funding, with the ability to shift resources within agreed parameters in response to experience and changing circumstances, is described by participants as the baseline requirement for cooperation that can plausibly claim to support transformative development; the companion survey⁵ report finds a corresponding strong respondent preference for multi-year commitments (72.3%), which is treated as analytical triangulation rather than confirmation of this normative claim. European and Dutch funders who continue to structure cooperation around short cycles are choosing a model whose limitations are described in prior literature and by participants in this session. In the research team's interpretation, this choice carries foreseeable consequences for institutional continuity and community trust, as documented above.

A.7.4 Mutual Accountability

If African organisations are accountable to Dutch and European funders for programme delivery, Dutch and European funders must be accountable to African partners for the quality of their support, the calibration of their requirements, and the coherence of their stated values with their actual conduct. Developing formal mechanisms through which African organisations can assess European funder performance is a concrete and achievable institutional change. Participants would regard Dutch and European institutions that deploy partnership language without accepting accountability obligations as inconsistent with good-faith partnership.

A.7.5 Reaching Communities

Participants stated that development cooperation must ultimately be assessed by whether its benefits reach the populations whose development it nominally supports. That requires funding mechanisms accessible to community-level organisations, administrative requirements proportionate to the size and capacity of the organisations involved, and genuine investment in building the capacity of smaller community organisations rather than concentrating resources in well-positioned institutional intermediaries.

⁵ European Commission – Assessment of administrative costs and administrative burden in the management of the CPR Funds 2021–2027. https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/studies/administrative_cost_en.pdf

A.8 Analytical Synthesis

A.8.1 The Two-Layer Interpretation Is Also Reflected in the Roundtable

The companion survey report identifies a two-layer perception structure: a technical layer in which African policy actors express genuine trust in Dutch engagement, and a structural and relational layer in which those same actors identify the cooperation architecture as fundamentally flawed. The roundtable provides a qualitatively different account that is consistent with this interpretation, at its most senior institutional register. Participants are not hostile to the Netherlands as a partner. They are clear-eyed about the terms of the current partnership. Both positions coexist and neither cancels the other.

A.8.2 The Structural Critique Has Been Documented for Decades

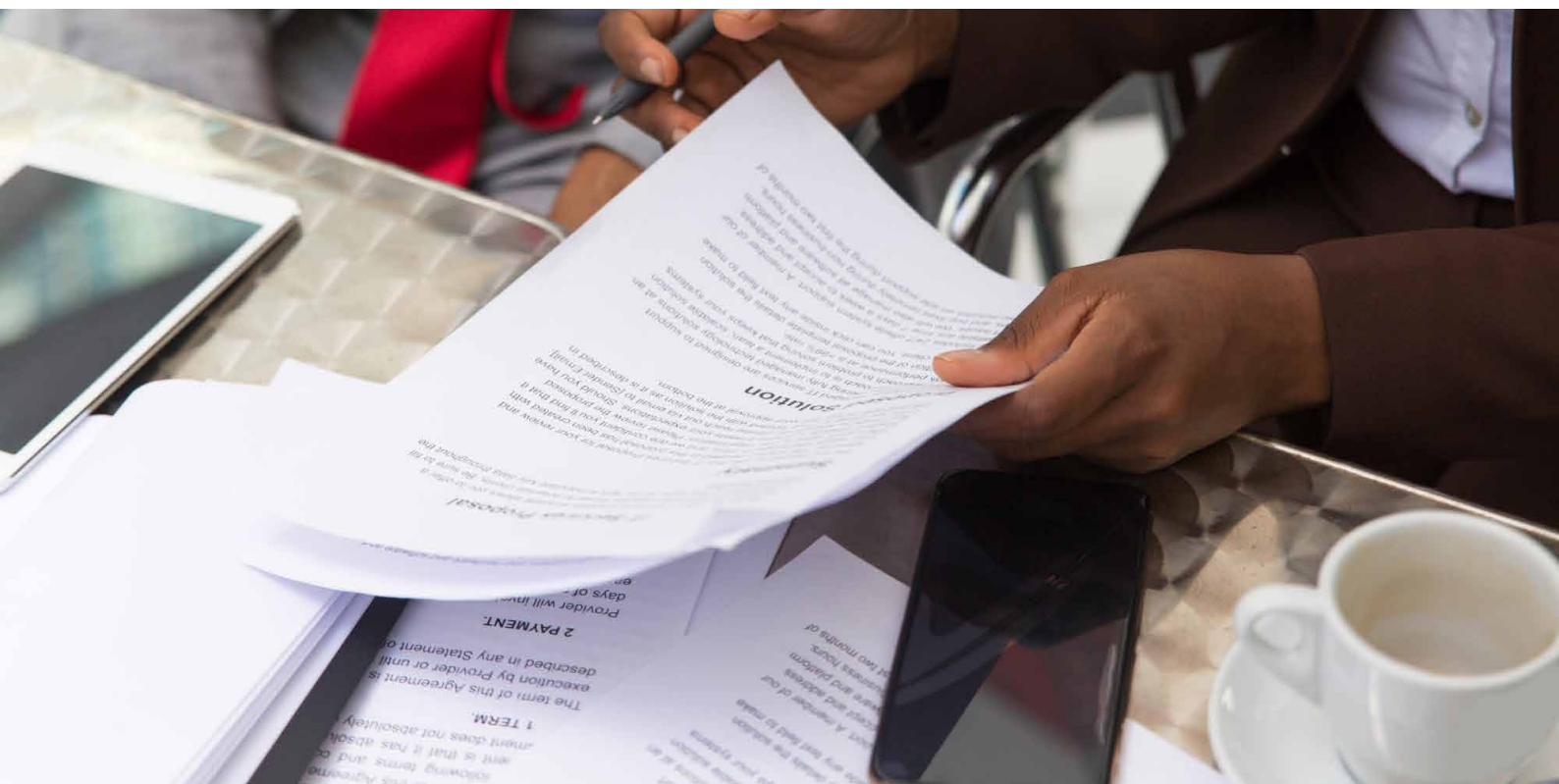
The core critiques articulated at the roundtable; power asymmetry in problem definition, one-directional accountability, short-term funding incompatible with transformative change, strategic conditionality masking national interest calculations, have been documented in the academic record across decades of scholarship. The recurrence of these critiques in 2026, alongside their presence in prior scholarship, suggests that the underlying concerns have proved persistent rather than episodic. The recurrence of these critiques suggests that participants perceive the underlying structural concerns as insufficiently addressed.

A.8.3 The Remaining Opening

Participants did not close the door. The roundtable produced a detailed account of what would need to change for partnership to become what Dutch and European institutions describe it as being. The capacity to make those changes exists within Dutch and European governance systems. Whether these changes are prioritised is ultimately a political and institutional question beyond the scope of this study.

This discussion did not reject partnership itself; rather, it called for structural rebalancing, partnerships grounded in trust, shared power, co-creation, flexibility, and long-term sustainability, with Africans shaping priorities and driving impact on their own terms..

-Participant, Roundtable



Analytical Conclusion: Applying the Framework

The analytical framework developed in the Evidence Synthesis Report provides a way of understanding how the concerns raised in the roundtable relate to one another. Rather than treating trust, agency, power, alignment, effectiveness and financing as separate issues, the roundtable evidence shows how these dimensions interact across the **structural, historical and project levels** of cooperation.

At the **project level**, participants' experiences centred on the practical conditions under which cooperation is delivered: funding cycles, reporting requirements, indicators, implementation rules and the degree of flexibility available to African organisations. These experiences shaped perceptions of trust, agency and effectiveness. Where participants experienced extensive prescription, short funding cycles or burdensome reporting, they described reduced space for contextual judgement and greater dependence on donor-defined processes.

At the **structural level**, these project experiences were connected to broader questions about who controls resources; who defines priorities and whose interests shape cooperation. Participants' concerns about agenda-setting, accountability, resource flows and the intersection of development with migration, security and other strategic interests suggest that perceptions of partnership are influenced by the wider architecture within which individual programmes operate.

The **historical level** provides a further context for interpreting these concerns. The framework recognises that contemporary perceptions of European cooperation are shaped partly by longer histories of unequal relationships, externally defined development agendas and contested questions of knowledge, authority and ownership. The roundtable did not independently measure the influence of these historical factors, but several of the concerns raised by participants, particularly around agency, problem definition and decision-making power, speak to these longer-standing questions.

Across all three levels, **trust emerges as technical, relational and structural rather than purely procedural**. Participants did not describe trust simply in terms of institutional reliability or compliance. They associated trust with whether African organisations are given meaningful space to make decisions, whether their knowledge is valued, whether risks are shared and whether accountability operates in both directions. In this sense, the roundtable suggests that trust is closely connected to power, ownership, financing and the practical experience of partnership.

The **framework also helps explain why positive relationships and structural criticism can coexist**. A partnership may be valued for its resources, expertise, relationships or opportunities while still being experienced as unequal in the way priorities are defined or decisions are made. The wider perception study's distinction between technical, relational trust and structural concern is therefore useful for interpreting the roundtable evidence. The participants' criticisms do not necessarily indicate rejection of European cooperation. Rather, they point to concerns about the terms on which cooperation is organised.

Together, the framework shows that the issues raised in the roundtable are interconnected rather than isolated. **Financing affects power; power affects agency; agency shapes trust; trust influences perceptions of effectiveness; and all of these are interpreted within broader historical and structural contexts**. The value of the framework is therefore not simply to categorise what participants said, but to show how different aspects of the partnership relationship combine to shape its perceived legitimacy and credibility.

The roundtable evidence consequently reinforces the wider study's central proposition: perceptions of European and Dutch cooperation cannot be understood from programme performance alone. They are also shaped by **how partnerships are structured, who has influence within them, whose priorities are recognised, how resources and risks are distributed, and whether the relationship is experienced as genuinely reciprocal**.

What the Evidence Says About the Future of Partnership

The study does not point to a simple rejection of Dutch or European cooperation. Instead, stakeholders articulate expectations for a different model of partnership.

Across the evidence, these expectations centre on:

- **Greater African agency** in defining priorities and problems;
- **Co-creation** rather than consultation after priorities have already been established;
- **Longer-term and more flexible financing;**
- **Proportionate accountability requirements** that recognise differences in organisational capacity;
- **Mutual accountability**, rather than accountability flowing predominantly from African partners to European funders;
- **Stronger investment in African institutions and locally generated knowledge;**
- **Greater transparency about strategic interests and conditionalities;** and
- **Partnership arrangements that connect development cooperation more explicitly to African priorities and trajectories.**

These expectations suggest that the debate is moving beyond the question of whether development cooperation is useful towards a deeper question of what constitutes an equitable and strategically relevant partnership.

The evidence presents a relationship that is neither simply positive nor simply negative.

African stakeholders can recognise the value of Dutch and European partnerships while questioning the structures through which those partnerships operate. Trust exists, but it is unevenly distributed. Cooperation remains relevant, but its legitimacy increasingly depends on how power, resources, accountability and strategic interests are negotiated.

The central challenge identified by the study is therefore not communication alone. It is the relationship between **partnership rhetoric and partnership practice**: whether African actors have meaningful influence over priorities, whether funding structures support rather than constrain local agency, whether accountability operates in both directions, and whether European strategic interests are negotiated transparently alongside African development priorities.

The findings provide a basis for further dialogue and empirical investigation. They do not prescribe a single model for future cooperation. Rather, they identify the dimensions on which African stakeholders are assessing the quality and credibility of European partnership and highlight the questions that future Dutch–African and EU–African cooperation will need to address.



Recommendations Synthesized by the Research Team

These recommendations follow from the institutional experiences shared by participants during the AU-ECOSOC and INCLUDE Roundtable. They respond to the mechanisms participants identified as shaping partnership quality, while recognising that the consultation provides qualitative evidence rather than a representative assessment of all African stakeholders.

For the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and EU Development Institutions

- 1** Make co-creation a funding requirement. Require major funding instruments to demonstrate that African partners participated in defining priorities, success measures and implementation approaches before programme frameworks are finalised.
- 2** Institutionalise reciprocal accountability. Introduce formal mechanisms through which African partners can evaluate donor responsiveness, flexibility and partnership quality, with findings informing future funding decisions.
- 3** Simplify compliance without weakening oversight. Remove reporting and procurement requirements that duplicate existing institutional capacity while maintaining proportionate financial accountability.
- 4** Increase African leadership in programme governance. Expand the number of programmes in which African organisations exercise decision-making authority over governance, implementation and strategic direction rather than implementation alone.

For Dutch Diplomatic Missions in Africa

- 1** Broaden engagement beyond funded partners. Create regular dialogue platforms that include organisations not currently receiving Dutch funding, particularly community organisations, researchers and youth-led institutions.
- 2** Use embassies as conveners of institutional dialogue. Strengthen collaboration between national governments, civil society, academia and regional institutions around shared development priorities before new programmes are designed.
- 3** Close the consultation feedback loop. Publicly communicate how stakeholder input has influenced programme decisions, including where recommendations could not be adopted.
- 4** Strengthen regional engagement. Work more systematically with African Union institutions and Regional Economic Communities so that bilateral cooperation is informed by regional policy processes.



For African Institutions and Civil Society Organisations

- 1** Develop common African partnership standards. Use continental and regional platforms to articulate shared principles on ownership, accountability, financing and co-creation across engagements with international partners.
- 2** Strengthen evidence for institutional reform. Systematically document implementation experiences, administrative burdens and examples of effective partnership practice to strengthen African-led evidence in future negotiations.
- 3** Coordinate negotiating positions. Increase collaboration across governments, civil society, research institutions and regional organisations before major donor engagements to present more coherent institutional positions.
- 4** Expand community representation. Create stronger pathways for grassroots organisations and marginalised communities to shape partnership discussions, responding to the participation gap identified by participants themselves.

For Future African-European Partnerships

- 1** Treat trust as an institutional design principle. Build partnership models in which decision-making authority, risk and accountability are shared more equitably rather than relying on trust as a rhetorical commitment.
- 2** Match financing to the pace of transformation. Align funding arrangements with the timeframes required for institutional reform, community trust and policy change rather than short administrative cycles.
- 3** Be transparent about competing priorities. Communicate openly when development objectives intersect with migration, security or geopolitical interests to strengthen partnership credibility.
- 4** Embed continuous joint learning. Establish regular review processes through which African and European partners jointly assess implementation challenges and adapt cooperation before structural problems become entrenched.

About INCLUDE

INCLUDE is a knowledge platform based in the Netherlands that connects researchers, policymakers, civil society, and practitioners to generate evidence for more inclusive and effective development cooperation. Working with partners across Africa and Europe, INCLUDE translates research into policy dialogue and practical action on issues such as governance, economic development, social inclusion, and international partnerships.





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