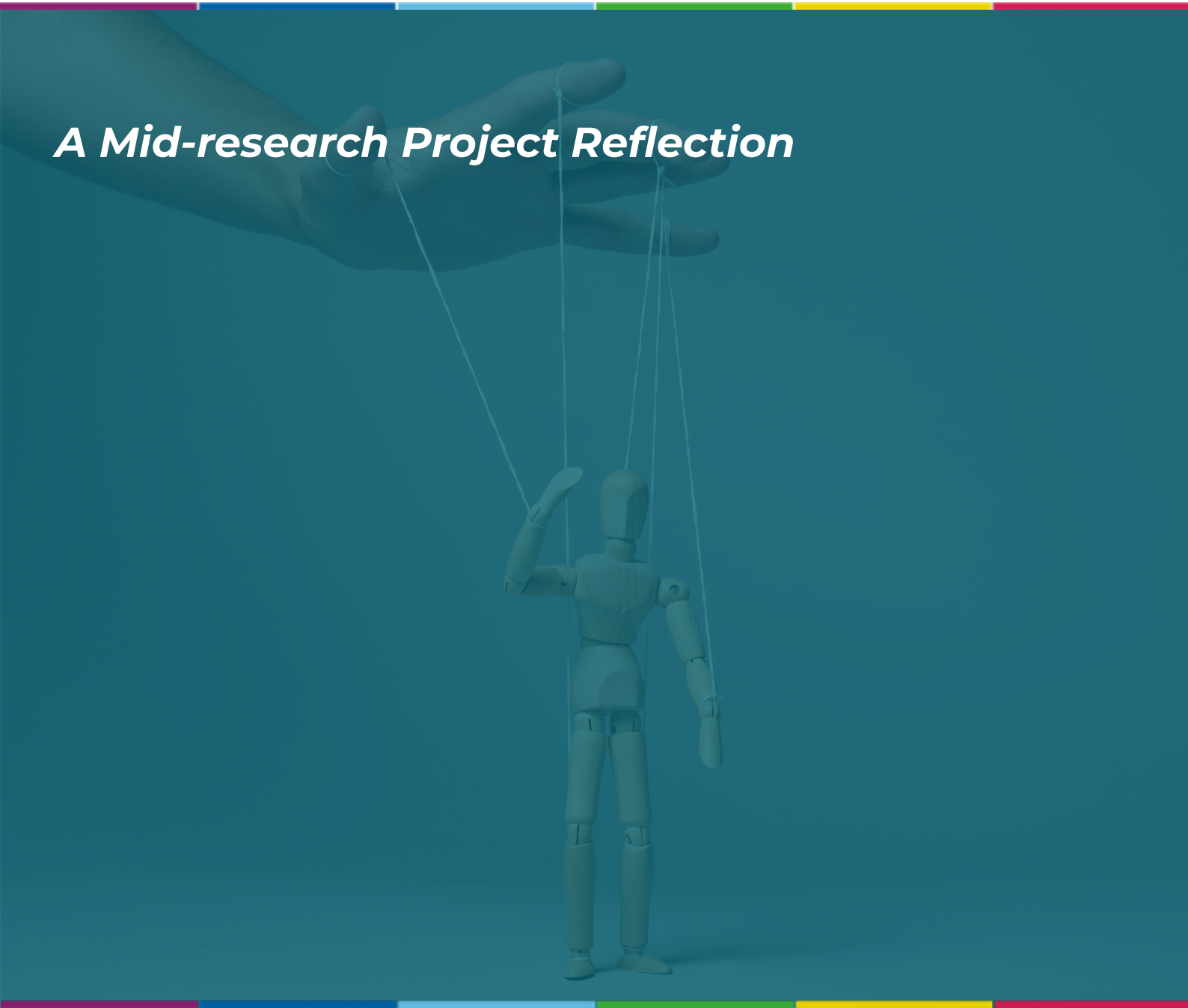


THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON TAKING

*Aid, Extraction and the Case for a Different
Architecture in African-European Partnership*

A Mid-research Project Reflection





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Prologue: A Paradox

The finding that surprised our research team most was not that African publics are critical of European development cooperation. We expected critique. What we did not expect was what appeared in the social media data, and was later confirmed across every other evidence stream we examined: some African commenters were celebrating European aid cuts.

Not reluctantly accepting them. Celebrating them.

The responses were not uniform. But they were frequent enough and specific enough to be analytically significant. One representative sentiment: "*Maybe now we will be forced to build something of our own.*" That sentence culled from one of the social media comments that we analyzed, contains an entire theory of the problem. It says that the aid relationship had become an obstacle, not just insufficient support. It says that dependency had become visible to the people it was designed to "*help*", and that at least some of them had concluded that removing it, even painfully, was preferable to maintaining it.

This reflection is our modest attempt to explain why that sentiment appeared, what our reading of the full body of evidence shows about the relationship it was responding to, and what a genuine alternative architecture would need to look like. It draws on five distinct evidence streams gathered by INCLUDE in 2026: a survey of 1,534 African policy stakeholders (and counting); a closed roundtable of senior African institutional leaders convened through AU ECOSOCC (African Union Economic, Social and Cultural Council); interviews with five sitting and former African leaders; and digital listening across 3,368 public posts reaching 78.3 million people. These are not sources that normally converge. When they do, the finding is harder to dismiss as anecdotal, ideological or unrepresentative.

They converge here. The gift, the evidence shows, has kept on taking.

“

“The continent digs things up, grows things, and extracts things, and sends them elsewhere”



Part One: What the Numbers Say

Before presenting what African stakeholders say about European cooperation, it is worth establishing what the economic relationship between Europe and Africa actually looks like in structural terms. The numbers are not disputed. They are simply not often placed in the same sentence.

In 2024, 76.8 percent of Africa's merchandise exports were primary goods: fuels, minerals, agricultural commodities.¹ Yet, the continent still exports much of what the world needs in its least processed forms, including minerals, fuels, agricultural products and other raw materials, while importing a significant share of the machinery, chemicals, manufactured goods and transport equipment needed to produce, process and consume them. In 2024, Africa exported €189.5 billion in goods to the European Union, while the EU exported €165.2 billion to Africa.² The issue, therefore, is not simply who sells more. It is where value is added, who owns the productive assets, and where the higher-value stages of production take place. Africa exports what comes out of the ground. Europe exports what gets built in a factory. The gap between those two activities is not a gap in resources. It is a gap in productive capacity, and it is a gap that six decades of European development cooperation have not closed.

The financial picture is equally stark. Africa loses approximately 88.6 billion dollars annually to illicit financial flows: trade mispricing, profit repatriation, tax evasion by companies operating on the continent.³ In 2023, Africa received 74 billion dollars in Official Development Assistance.⁴ The arithmetic is not ambiguous. Africa loses more through the mechanics of the global financial system than it receives in aid. UNCTAD describes the continent as a net creditor to the world.⁵ The gift travels in one direction in the press release. The money travels in both directions in practice, and more of it leaves than arrives.

¹ UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD). (2025). UNCTAD Handbook of Statistics 2025. Geneva: United Nations; <https://unctad.org/publication/handbook-statistics-2025>

² Council of the European Union. (2026). EU-Africa trade: Facts and figures. European Council/Council of the European Union. Last reviewed 13 February 2026. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/eu-africa-trade-facts-and-figures/>

³ UNCTAD, "Africa could gain \$89 billion annually by curbing illicit financial flows," 28 September 2020. <https://unctad.org/news/africa-could-gain-89-billion-annually-curbing-illicit-financial-flows>

The debt picture completes the frame. Africa's external public debt nearly doubled in a decade, rising from 349 billion dollars in 2014 to 690 billion dollars in 2023.⁶ Debt service now consumes 13.6 percent of government spending across the continent, twice the allocation for health.⁷ Debt service is increasingly crowding out resources for development. UNCTAD reports that every dollar spent on debt servicing is a dollar unavailable for development spending, and that African interest payments increased by 132 percent over the previous decade. Between 2019 and 2021, 25 African countries spent more on interest payments than on health.⁸ Governments are paying out more than they are taking in, servicing debts that in many cases were contracted for investments that never materialised, under terms that placed all risk on the borrower.⁹

This is the structural context in which the perception data was gathered. It matters because it tells us that the problem African respondents are naming is not a communications failure or a branding deficit. It is a structural condition that aid, as currently designed, has not altered and in some cases has reinforced.

⁴ UNCTAD (United Nations Trade and Development). (2025). Aid at a crossroads: Trends in official development assistance. Geneva: United Nations.<https://unctad.org/publication/aid-crossroads-trends-official-development-assistance>

⁵ UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development), Economic Development in Africa Report 2020: Tackling Illicit Financial Flows for Sustainable Development in Africa (Geneva: United Nations, 2020).https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/aldcafrica2020_en.pdf

⁶ Mo Ibrahim Foundation, Financing the Africa We Want, 2025.<https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/sites/default/files/2025-07/2025-forum-report.pdf>

⁷ Mo Ibrahim Foundation, Financing the Africa We Want, 2025.<https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/sites/default/files/2025-07/2025-forum-report.pdf>

⁸ UNCTAD (United Nations Trade and Development), A World of Debt: Regional Stories (2023). <https://unctad.org/publication/world-of-debt/regional-stories?source=email&utm>

⁹ Interview with a former Vice President of an African country-The Cost of Being Underestimated: High-Level African Perspectives on Dutch and European Cooperation, INCLUDE 2026

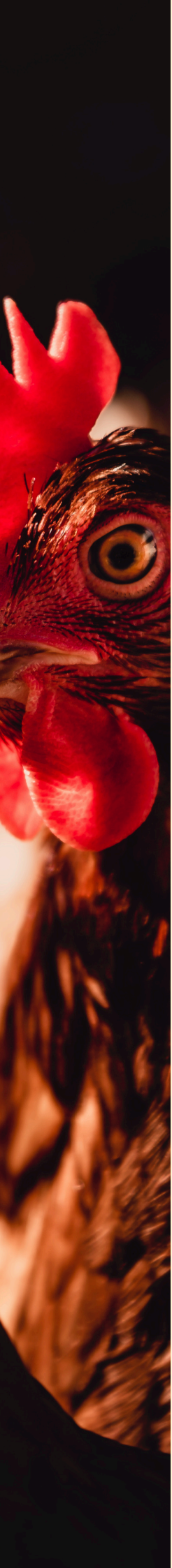
Part Two: The Architecture of a Gift

Aid was not simply designed as a neutral instrument of solidarity. Its architecture has long been shaped by unequal economic relations, donor interests and structures of power that can make it extractive in effect, even where the stated intention is development. Scholars over the years show how colonial extraction, unequal exchange, externally defined development and aid dependency have shaped an architecture that continues to reproduce asymmetrical relationships between Africa and its external partners.¹⁰

The point is not to suggest that the people who built the aid architecture, or those who have worked within it, were acting in absolute bad faith. Many were, and remain, genuinely committed to African development. The problem is structural rather than personal: an instrument designed and governed largely outside the societies it seeks to transform inevitably reflects the priorities, political constraints and institutional incentives of those who finance and administer it. At least, this is what we have gleaned from the evidence so far. Contemporary research on aid architecture reinforces this point: aid allocation is shaped not only by development needs but also by donor-country political and institutional environments. Essentially, contemporary aid systems remain marked by asymmetries in agenda-setting and decision-making.

The mismatch is therefore visible in the outcomes and incentives produced by the system itself. Across decades of intervention, there are cases in which aid has helped sustain the very conditions that it was intended to overcome, including dependency, institutional weakness, distorted markets or externally determined priorities. The question across all the research data points is not whether aid workers cared about Africa. It is whether an architecture built around external financing, external priorities and external accountability can reliably produce African-led transformation.

¹⁰ Walter Rodney's analysis of colonial political economy located African underdevelopment within a system in which African labour and resources were organised for external accumulation. Samir Amin similarly demonstrated how unequal exchange could systematically transfer value from the periphery to the centre. Later, Arturo Escobar showed how the post-war development project transformed the Global South into an object of intervention, expertise and management, while Dambisa Moyo's critique of aid highlighted how prolonged dependence on external assistance can weaken domestic incentives and institutions. More recently, Carlos Lopes has argued that the inherited development-assistance paradigm continues to reproduce asymmetries in the relationship between Africa and its external partners.



The mismatch is visible in four specific cases where decades of aid intervention helped perpetuate the very conditions it claimed to address:

West African Poultry

European poultry exports provide a particularly clear example of the tension between development assistance and trade policy. European poultry exports to West Africa have long been criticised for their effects on local producers. Research by the German Thünen Institute¹¹ found that poultry cuts that are less in demand among European consumers, particularly wings and thighs, are exported to West African markets where they can be sold at relatively low prices. Its research on Ghana and Senegal examined how these imports affect local consumption and production. Ghana provides one of the clearest examples. After trade protection was reduced, Ghana's domestic poultry production declined sharply. By 2003, local production supplied less than half of domestic demand, while imported frozen poultry was reportedly 30 to 40 percent cheaper than locally produced poultry.

Ghana attempted to respond.¹² In April 2003, Parliament passed legislation introducing a 40 percent tariff on poultry imports after pressure from domestic poultry farmers. The measure was repealed within months following international pressure. FAO records that the measure was subsequently abandoned after international protests.¹³

The pressure did not disappear. By 2019, Ghana was the leading importer of poultry from the European Union in West Africa,¹⁴ importing approximately 185,500 tonnes from the EU. The Netherlands and Belgium accounted for more than half of those EU exports to Ghana. At the same time, European development cooperation supported agricultural production and food security in countries facing this import competition. Development finance has also been directed towards agricultural production in West Africa, although OECD analysis shows that relatively little development finance has reached downstream agro-processing and value addition.

¹¹ Thünen Institute, "Europe's poultry and milk exports to West Africa," Thünen Institute of Sea Fisheries and other research institutes, n.d. <https://www.thuenen.de/en/thuenen-topics/world-food-supply-and-global-resources/develop-local-markets-understand-global-trade/europas-gefluegel-und-milchexporte-nach-westafrika>

¹² Zamani, O., Boimah, M., Chibanda, C., Gunarathne, A., & Pelikan, J. (2023). Policy Measures in the Dairy and Poultry Sectors of Ghana and Senegal. Thünen Institute



The contradiction is therefore not simply that Europe provides aid while exporting poultry. It is that different parts of the policy relationship can pull in different directions: development programmes can seek to strengthen agricultural producers while trade patterns simultaneously expose those producers to intense competition from imported products. The gift addressed the symptom. The policy environment helped sustain the condition.

Pharmaceutical Dependency

Africa imports more than 70 percent of its medicines.¹⁵ The continent has raw materials, growing technical capacity and a large market that could support stronger pharmaceutical manufacturing.¹⁶ Yet, for decades, much of the global health response has been structured around financing, procuring and delivering medicines, vaccines and disease-specific interventions, while local manufacturing capacity has remained limited.¹⁷ Before COVID-19, Africa manufactured less than one percent of the vaccines it used.¹⁸ When the pandemic arrived, that dependence became impossible to ignore. COVAX deliveries were delayed and uneven, while many donated doses arrived with short shelf lives, making them difficult for countries to use before expiry.¹⁹ Millions of doses subsequently expired across African countries. The experience exposed the limits of an access model that could deliver vaccines without simultaneously creating sufficient regional manufacturing capacity.²⁰ A continent that receives medicine does not necessarily develop the capacity to make it.²¹

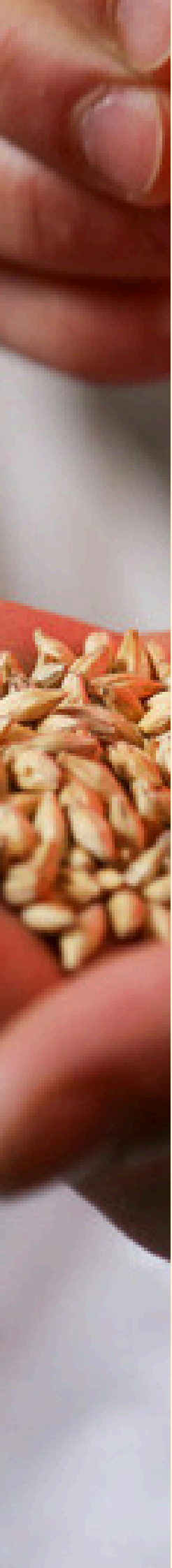
¹³ IMF, IMF Involvement in Trade Policy Issues in Low-Income Countries: Seven Case Studies (2009).<https://ieo.imf.org/-/media/ieo/files/evaluations/completed/06-16-2009-imf-involvement-in-international-trade/06162009trade-bd4-imf-involvement-in-trade-policy-issues-in-low-income-countriessseven-case-studies.pdf?>

¹⁴ Zamani, Chibanda and Pelikan, “Impacts of import restrictions on poultry producers in Ghana,” Q Open 2, no. 1 (2022).<https://academic.oup.com/qopen/article/2/1/qoac007/6547766?>

¹⁵ UNCTAD (United Nations Trade and Development), “Leveraging investment policies to boost medicine production in Africa.”; <https://unctad.org/news/leveraging-investment-policies-boost-medicine-production-africa>

¹⁶ UNCTAD (United Nations Trade and Development), Building the Case for Investment in Local Pharmaceutical Production in Africa: A Comprehensive Framework for Investment Policymakers (Geneva: United Nations, 2025), UNCTAD/DIAE/2024/5. <https://unctad.org/publication/building-case-investment-local-pharmaceutical-production-africa>

¹⁷ WHO, 2025; WHO Regional Office for Africa, 2024<https://www.who.int/news/item/31-07-2025-redefining-the-hiv-response-in-africa-through-local-production-of-medicines-and-diagnostics>



The Seed Dependency Trap

Some aid and agricultural development programmes promoted high-yield hybrid seeds that performed best when farmers had continued access to seed and complementary inputs such as fertilizer.²² Hybrid seed is generally more expensive than open-pollinated varieties, and evidence from Malawi shows that farmers' ability to adopt and sustain hybrid production has been closely linked to access to subsidised seed and fertilizer.²³ Combined in some contexts with food aid that depressed local market prices, farmers could face a structural bind: production systems requiring recurrent input purchases, alongside harvests that could not always be sold at viable prices. Evidence from Ethiopia found that food-aid shipments reduced producer prices, particularly when shipments exceeded 10 percent of domestic production.²⁴ In some settings, agricultural production therefore became increasingly tied to access to external inputs.²⁵ The aid could improve yields in the short term, but higher yields did not necessarily translate into greater resilience or a self-sustaining production system.²⁶

¹⁸ <https://www.unicef.org/media/108161/file/SOWC-2023-full-report-English.pdf?os=w&uthttps://www.unicef.org/media/108161/file/SOWC-2023-full-report-English.pdf?os=w&ut>

¹⁹ WHO, "Joint Statement on Dose Donations of COVID-19 Vaccines to African Countries," 29 November 2021. <https://www.who.int/news/item/29-11-2021-joint-statement-on-dose-donations-of-covid-19-vaccines-to-african-countries?>

²⁰ WHO AFRO, "What is Africa's vaccine production capacity?," 19 March 2021. afro.who.int/news/what-africas-vaccine-production-capacity?

²¹ Linda Geddes, "Why Africa Needs to Manufacture Its Own Vaccines," VaccinesWork, 19 July 2021. <https://www.gavi.org/vaccineswork/why-africa-needs-manufacture-its-own-vaccines>

²² Chirwa and Dorward, Agricultural Input Subsidies: The Recent Malawi Experience (2013). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199683529.001.0001>

²³ Lunduka, Ricker-Gilbert and Fisher, "What are the Farm-Level Impacts of Malawi's Farm Input Subsidy Program?" *Agricultural Economics* 44 (2013): 563–579. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285732305_What_are_the_farm-level_impacts_of_Malawi%27s_Farm_Input_Subsidy_Program

²⁴ Tadesse and Shively, "Food Aid, Food Prices, and Producer Disincentives in Ethiopia," *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 91 (2009): 942–955. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8276.2009.01324.x?>

²⁵ Lunduka, Ricker-Gilbert and Fisher, "What are the Farm-Level Impacts of Malawi's Farm Input Subsidy Program?" *Agricultural Economics* 44 (2013): 563–579. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285732305_What_are_the_farm-level_impacts_of_Malawi%27s_Farm_Input_Subsidy_Program

²⁶ Chirwa and Dorward, Agricultural Input Subsidies: The Recent Malawi Experience (2013). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199683529.001.0001>



Critical Minerals and Energy

Africa supplies minerals increasingly essential to Europe's energy transition, including lithium, cobalt, copper and manganese.²⁷ European countries and companies are increasingly seeking these resources through investment, trade and strategic partnerships, while Europe simultaneously presents aid and investment as part of its contribution to African development.²⁸ The scale of the development-finance relationship is significant. The EU pledged more than €15.1 billion through the Scaling Up Renewables in Africa campaign, which mobilised €15.5 billion overall for renewable energy and electricity access across the continent.²⁹ More than €10 billion of the EU contribution was pledged on behalf of Team Europe.³⁰

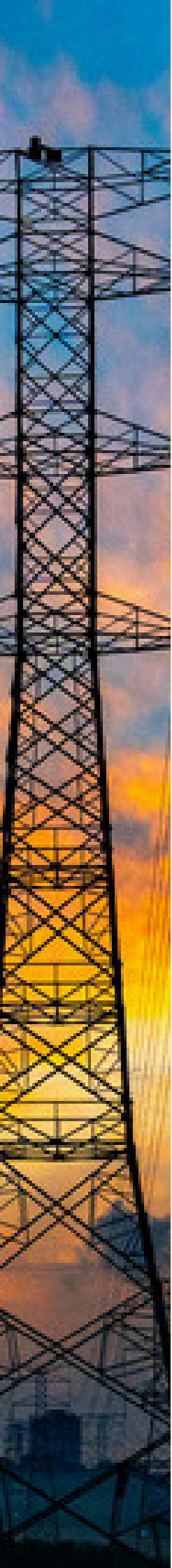
Yet these figures sit alongside the much larger economic value associated with Africa's natural resources and the global demand for them. UNCTAD notes that Africa holds substantial shares of global reserves of critical minerals, including cobalt, manganese, copper and lithium, but that many African countries continue to export these resources with limited local processing and value addition.³¹ The development challenge is therefore not simply the extraction of minerals, but who captures the value generated along the supply chain. Processing and refining can command substantially higher prices than raw minerals, while countries that remain concentrated in extraction capture less of the potential manufacturing, employment and industrial gains.

²⁷ UNCTAD (United Nations Trade and Development), "Critical minerals: Africa holds key to sustainable energy future," 5 June 2024.<https://unctad.org/news/critical-minerals-africa-holds-key-sustainable-energy-future>

²⁸ European Commission, "A Stronger Europe in the World," 11 October 2024.https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/story-von-der-leyen-commission/stronger-europe-world_en; UNCTAD (United Nations Trade and Development), "Critical Minerals," UNCTAD.<https://unctad.org/topic/commodities/critical-minerals>

²⁹ European Commission, "Energy for Africa," Global Gateway.https://commission.europa.eu/topics/international-partnerships/global-gateway/energy-africa_en

³⁰ European Commission, "Europe leads pledging effort in campaign mobilising €15.5 billion for clean energy in Africa," 21 November 2025.https://north-africa-middle-east-gulf.ec.europa.eu/news/europe-leads-pledging-effort-campaign-mobilising-eu155-billion-clean-energy-africa-2025-11-21_en



The contradiction is stark: the same relationship in which Africa receives development finance is also one in which African natural resources are increasingly important to external economic and energy strategies. UNCTAD warns that, without domestic value addition and diversification, the critical-minerals boom risks reinforcing commodity dependence rather than generating structural transformation.³² Africa supplies minerals essential to the green transition, yet many resource-rich countries continue to face energy-access deficits and limited industrial capacity. The EU's own renewable-energy campaign acknowledges that 17.5 million households across Africa currently lack reliable access to electricity.³³

The question is therefore not simply how much aid Africa receives, but how much value leaves Africa in the first place. The critical issue is whether mineral extraction generates domestic processing, jobs, productive capacity and industrial development, or whether the higher-value stages of the chain remain elsewhere. The resource leaves. The value is captured elsewhere. The development challenge remains at home.

These are not necessarily isolated failures. They illustrate a broader pattern: aid designed around delivery rather than capacity, immediate outputs rather than structural transformation, and donor constituencies rather than recipient priorities can reproduce some of the conditions of dependency it was intended to address. When one of the senior statesmen we interviewed described aid as a category error applied to the wrong problem, he was not speaking theoretically. He was describing a mechanism he had watched operate for decades from the level of government.

³¹ UNCTAD (United Nations Trade and Development), "UN Trade and Development and Japan partner to add value to Africa's critical minerals sector," 16 May 2025; <https://unctad.org/news/un-trade-and-development-and-japan-partner-add-value-africas-critical-minerals-sector>

³² UNCTAD (United Nations Trade and Development), "Critical Minerals," UNCTAD.; <https://unctad.org/topic/commodities/critical-minerals>

³³ European Commission, "Energy for Africa," Global Gateway. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/international-partnerships/global-gateway/energy-africa_en

Part Three: Five Audiences, One Pattern

The study used five distinct methods, and the methodological diversity made for a rich assemblage of varied perspectives. Any single method can be challenged. A survey of 1,534 respondents is not a census of 1.4 billion people. A closed roundtable of institutional leaders does not represent civil society. Social media data captures the vocal and connected, not everyone. The choice was to gather evidence through multiple lenses and then ask whether the lenses agreed. They did.

The survey³⁴ found that the demand for investment rather than aid was the single most consistent positive theme across all respondent groups and all regions. It found that trust in European partners is evaluated relationally rather than transactionally: not on programme results alone but on consistency of behaviour across trade, migration, conditionality and development simultaneously. It found that the gap between formal commitments to ownership and their actual implementation is the most frequently cited theme in this set of African assessments of the cooperation relationship.

The AU ECOSOCC-INCLUDE roundtable of senior African institutional leaders on the record confirmed these findings at the institutional level. Participants described the agenda-setting problem with precision: the problem is not that European partners behave badly within cooperation programmes. The problem is that the agenda for those programmes is set before African partners arrive at the table. Ownership language is endorsed after the fact. The consultation box is ticked. The priorities stay fixed.³⁵

³⁴ INCLUDE Knowledge Platform. (2026). Terms of Partnership: African Perceptions of European and Dutch Development Cooperation..<https://include-projects.vercel.app/include-africa-perceptions.html>

³⁵ INCLUDE Knowledge Platform. (2026). Relational Trust, Structural Fractures: African Perceptions of European and Dutch Development Cooperation..<https://include-projects.vercel.app/include-africa-perceptions.html>



The digital listening covered 3,368 public posts reaching 78.3 million people across TikTok, X and Facebook. The criticism was specific, historical and often detailed. Young Africans referred to places and events such as the Dutch East India Company (VOC), Elmina Castle, the Cape settlement and the transatlantic slave trade, often citing specific dates and locations. These references show that many young Africans understand today's relationship with European partners through a strong awareness of history. Current cooperation is therefore judged against the history of the relationship. People are asking whether today's partnership represents a genuine change in the relationship or whether it continues patterns of extraction and unequal power.

The five statesman interviews, analysed separately and in detail elsewhere, showed the same direction from the highest level of political experience: every interviewee favoured investment over aid, every interviewee placed part of the responsibility on African governments, and every interviewee argued that the architecture of the relationship, not just its implementation, needed to change.

Different methods. Different audiences. One recurring pattern. When that happens, the pattern is the finding.

Part Four: The Trust That Was Never Relational

Both sides in this donor-recipient relationship use the word trust. They do not mean the same thing, and that difference explains more than any other finding why programmes can score well on European metrics while the overall perception of the relationship continues to decline.

European partners understand trust as credibility of delivery. Did the programme do what it said it would do? Were outputs delivered on time and on budget? Did the results framework show positive change? This is a reasonable definition within the boundaries of a single cooperation programme. The problem is that it is the wrong unit of analysis for the question African respondents are asking.

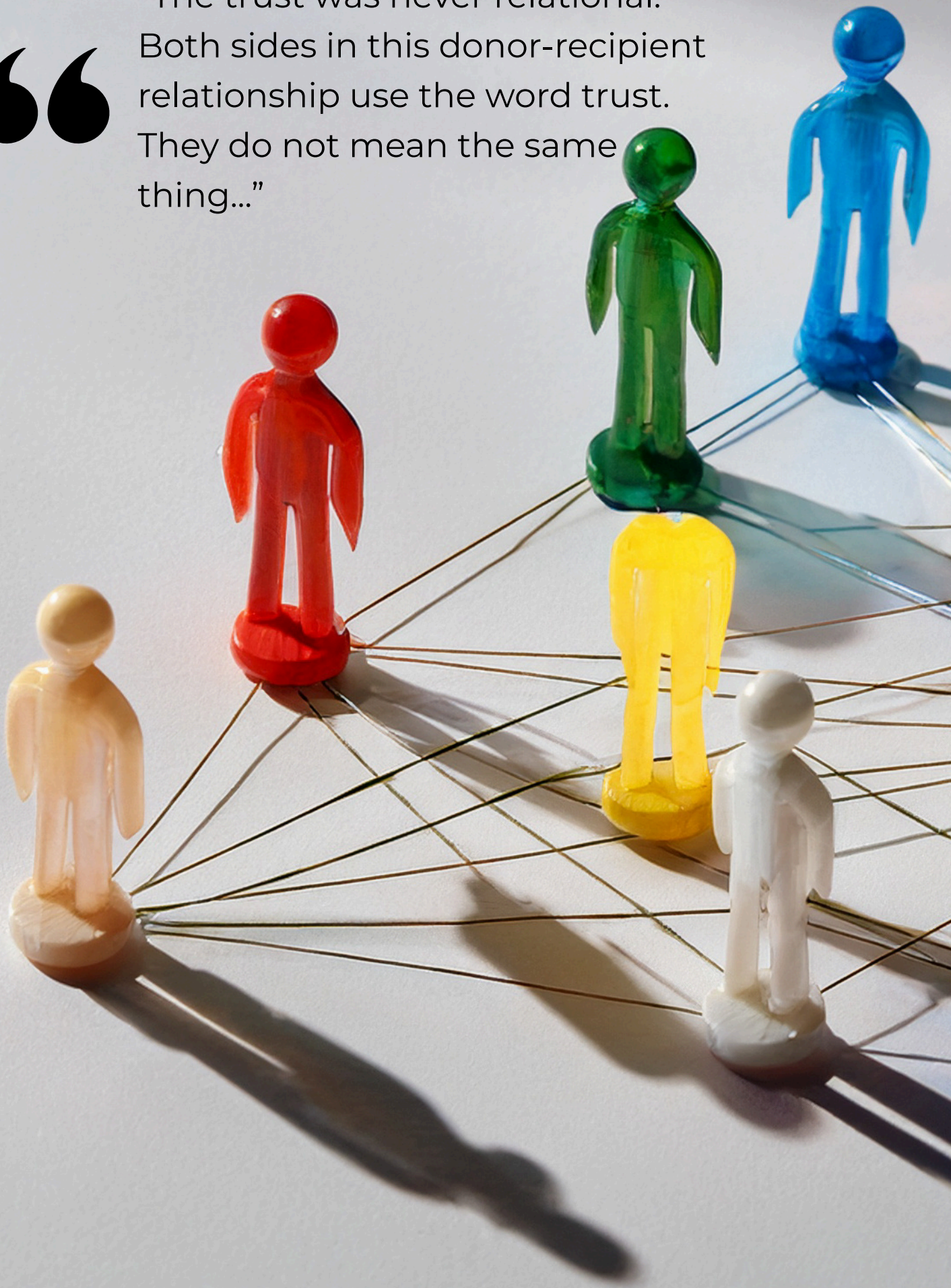
African respondents understand trust as the consistency of a relationship. Does this partner's behaviour across all policy domains, including trade, migration, conditionality and development, reflect its stated values? Is the whole relationship coherent? Under this definition, a successful development programme cannot compensate for an extractive trade relationship in the same bilateral context. And it does not. The survey data is unambiguous: trust is evaluated holistically. European partners are being assessed on the total of what they do, not on what they do in the development sector alone.

This means that when Europe's migration policy instrumentalises development funds for border management, African respondents notice. When European agricultural subsidies destroy the same farming sector that development programmes are simultaneously supporting, African respondents notice. When 10 percent of the EU's central development finance instrument is mandated for migration-related spending,³⁶ African respondents notice. They are not evaluating programmes in isolation. They are reading a whole relationship and drawing a conclusion about whether the stated values are the operating values.

³⁶ European Commission, "Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe: Performance," European Commission.
https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/neighbourhood-development-and-international-cooperation-instrument-global-europe-performance_en

“

“The trust was never relational.
Both sides in this donor-recipient
relationship use the word trust.
They do not mean the same
thing...”



Understanding why that assessment is so negative requires the three-layer analytical framework that emerged from the data. Perceptions of European cooperation are not primarily shaped at the programme level: the direct experience of service delivery, technical quality and local relevance. They are shaped at two deeper levels that European communication strategies rarely address. At the historical level, colonial legacies, specific historical episodes (the VOC, Cape settlement, Elmina Castle, the transatlantic slave trade) function as active interpretive resources rather than distant memories. They appear in the data with specificity and dates, and they frame how every current act of cooperation is read by African publics. At the structural level, global economic relations, trade asymmetry, and extractive patterns set the default interpretation through which project-level experience is processed. Even successful projects are evaluated through a lens of structural scepticism. Programme evidence can nuance the interpretation. It does not override it.

The structural fractures that our roundtable participants identified help explain why. Short funding cycles of three to five years cannot address structural problems that operate over twenty to fifty year timescales. No programme can build what the cycle prevents. Accountability flows upward to donor legislatures rather than downward to the communities the programme serves. Accountability follows money, not people. African partners are invited to consultation processes where they comment but do not decide. The agenda was set before they arrived. And security, migration management, and trade objectives have been progressively written into development frameworks, which participants identified as the most significant shift in the relationship in the past decade.

The effect of these structural features is that the relationship systematically reproduces the condition of dependency it claims to address. Not because of sustained bad faith. Because the architecture produces that result regardless of intent.

Part Five: What the Leaders Said

The five African leaders and senior statesmen we interviewed bring this argument to its most concrete level. They have managed the relationship from the state side, at the level where cooperation with Europe is negotiated, financed and governed. Their account is therefore experiential.

One of the most clarifying moments in the interview series came when one interviewee used Germany as the reference point. Germany's recovery after the Second World War, they observed, was possible because its partners invested in German industrial capacity. The Marshall Plan funded factories, rebuilt trade networks, and restored productive infrastructure. Germany became Europe's largest economy within twenty years. When African countries needed development finance after independence, they were offered aid for consumption: medicine to take, not factories to manufacture medicine; food to eat, not systems to grow food. *"We received what our partners believed we were capable of becoming. Not what we told them we could do."* That sentence is not rhetoric. It is a structural diagnosis.

The debt testimony from the interviews is equally precise. One interviewee recounted a European loan of approximately ten million dollars to a sub-national government to establish a manufacturing plant. The money was fully drawn down. No site was cleared. A commissioning ceremony took place. The loan agreement had placed full responsibility for the use of funds on the borrower from the moment it was signed. The lender bore no responsibility for the outcome. The debt was carried nationally. Another interviewee described the broader pattern: many African countries now spend more on debt service than on health and education combined. The creditor base has shifted toward private and commercial lenders who are repaid faster and first. Sitting leaders who raise debt relief publicly risk damaging their country's credit ratings. The architecture of lending, like the architecture of aid, disciplines the borrower and leaves the lender unaccountable.



All five interviewees called for investment over aid. None rejected aid entirely: they saw a continuing role for it in acute humanitarian response, in research with no commercial return, and in areas where structural inequities make market solutions inadequate. But they were clear that investment must replace aid as the primary instrument. One interviewee pointed to Nigeria LNG as the model: a joint venture structured so that government holds 49 percent and private partners 51 percent, creating governance discipline that has survived multiple administrations because no government can capture it. Another called for ecosystem support rather than single projects: not a cement plant, but the full chain of materials, processing, logistics and capital that makes a cement industry possible. A third argued that African countries need financing instruments that do not add to their debt, and that when partners object that this means more risk, "that's exactly the point." Shared risk is what shared partnership means.

“

“Three conditions must be attached to any investment, regardless of sector or source, for it to represent a genuine departure from the architecture this evidence describes: ownership over agenda, consistency across all policy domains, value addition rather than extraction”



Part Six: A Different Architecture

The case for a different architecture is not that aid should disappear. It is that aid should occupy a much smaller and more precisely defined space than it currently does, and that the space it vacates should be filled by investment designed to build African productive capacity rather than to meet African consumption needs or serve European strategic interests.

The distinction matters in practice. Investment works:

- Where it creates returns that compound,
- Where it builds capacity that outlasts the funding cycle
- Where its conditions are set by African priorities rather than by donor instrument

The sectors where investment could do this work are specific: infrastructure including ports, energy, roads and digital connectivity; manufacturing and value addition, to close the gap between raw material export and finished product; agricultural systems including processing, storage, market access and finance rather than food delivery; healthcare manufacturing including pharmaceutical production and diagnostic capacity; education systems meaning curriculum, teacher training and ministry capacity rather than individual school buildings; and climate transition including renewable energy infrastructure and green industrialisation. In each case the distinction is between building the system and filling the immediate gap, and in each case six decades of aid have predominantly done the latter.

Grants still serve a genuine purpose in four specific situations:

- **Acute Humanitarian Response:** The things that cannot wait for investment returns and where no market mechanism responds in time.
- **Research With no Commercial Return:** Including neglected diseases, climate adaptation knowledge in low-income settings, and public health surveillance.
- **Democratic Institution Support:** Including electoral observation, constitutional processes and civic society infrastructure, where the governance conditions for investment to work need to be built.
- **Early-stage Social Innovation:** That cannot yet attract capital but could, if de-risked by grants designed to exit rather than to perpetuate.

Closing: The Question That Remains

This study does not claim that African publics uniformly reject European cooperation. It claims something we consider to be more precise, more uncomfortable but significantly productive for what development cooperation should look like moving forward.

It claims that 43 percent of the digital sentiment we analysed was critical, and that this criticism was historically grounded and structurally argued rather than imprecise grievance. It claims that 36 percent of that sentiment was neutral, and this is the number that matters most for what comes next. That 36 percent is not indifference. It is a persuadable constituency that has not yet reached a verdict. It is made up of people who are not ideologically opposed to European partnership but who have not seen evidence that it operates on terms they find equitable or effective. That is where the relationship can move, if there is genuine structural change to point to.

The most specific contradiction the evidence documents is the one that most directly tests whether European governments are willing to make that change. Education ODA is projected to fall by 3.2 billion dollars, a 24 percent drop from 2023 levels, with three donor governments accounting for nearly 80 percent of the cuts. In West and Central Africa, 1.9 million children face losing access to schooling. Education's share of total aid has fallen to 7.5 percent in 2024, the lowest level since 2010. At the same time, the EU has committed 1.5 billion euros to conflict prevention and security in Sub-Saharan Africa for 2021 to 2027. Ten percent of the EU's 79.5 billion euro central development finance instrument is mandated for migration-related spending. EUTM Mali, the EU's military training mission, has cost 133.7 million euros. One of the statesmen we interviewed identified the link between educational absence and the insurgency in the Sahel tri-border region with complete clarity: where there are no schools, there are no institutional connections to the state, and extremist recruiters are the only organised presence offering young men structure and income. The same governments cutting education budgets are funding the security responses to the consequences of those cuts. That is not incoherence by accident. It is a set of political choices, made in the same budget cycle and it reveals the operating priorities beneath the partnership rhetoric.

One statesman said of any reset of the European-African relationship: "when we talk of a reset, these are the things that really need to be reset." The data agrees. A reset that improves communications, refines results frameworks, adds ownership language to partnership agreements, or rebrands aid as investment without changing what is funded and on whose terms, is not a reset. It is a renovation of the existing architecture.

The gift that keeps on taking will keep on taking until the architecture changes. The 36 percent neutral constituency is watching to see whether it does. The evidence gathered here gives them, and the policymakers who read it, a precise account of what change would need to look like.

INCLUDE

KNOWLEDGE PLATFORM ON INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

