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Building strategic European digital cooperation with Africa

By Chloe Teevan

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To become a key digital partner to the African Union and to African countries, the European Union and its member states will need to be both more strategic and more focused in their approach to digital cooperation with Africa. This should include scaling up a unified 'Team Europe' approach beyond the sphere of development cooperation, developing a much stronger understanding of digital ecosystems in African countries, and ensuring that the EU's digital ambitions are reflected in the programming of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - Global Europe (NDICI-Global Europe). This policy brief traces the EU's evolving approach to digital policy in external action and puts forward recommendations about where the EU might add value. It is part of a new strand of work at ECDPM on EU-AU and Europe-Africa digital cooperation.

Digital policy in external action is still a relatively new topic for the EU, but has been growing in relevance – both internally and externally – due to geopolitical concerns. These include the realisation that the EU is falling behind the US and China as a digital industrial actor and the hope of playing a role in shaping what the EU terms a 'human-centric approach' to global digital governance: an approach marked by a strong focus on making technology work for citizens and protecting individual liberties. These concerns strongly influence the EU's approach to digital cooperation with Africa, alongside traditional development concerns. Demand from Africa for digital investment is strong due to the importance of new technologies for economic and human development, but a growing number of African voices are demanding that digital investment should take place on Africa's terms.

Introduction¹

Digital policy in external action is still a relatively new topic for the European Union (EU), including in its cooperation with Africa. The growing political interest in digital policy within the EU – both in internal and external action – is primarily driven by geopolitical concerns, including the sense that Europe has fallen behind as a digital actor and that global digital governance is not necessarily moving towards the human-centric vision that Europe would like to see. COVID-19 has further highlighted the importance of the digital economy.

It is against this backdrop that the EU aims to build stronger digital cooperation with the African Union (AU) and African countries with the hope of building a partnership on digital governance and at the same time offering opportunities for the growth of digital industries in Europe and Africa. In Africa, there is certainly a demand to leverage digital technologies in support of economic and human development, but a growing number of African actors are emphasising the need for this to happen on Africa's terms. The 2019 AU Digital Transformation Strategy (DTS) lays out the AU's vision for Africa's digital development, whilst the e-commerce protocol of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is now being prioritised in this year's negotiations, highlighting the added importance of the digital economy revealed by COVID-19. Many African countries are also developing their national information and communications technology (ICT) strategies and policy frameworks.

The EU institutions, like-minded EU member states and the European financial architecture for development (including EU and member state development banks and financial institutions) are slowly putting in place the institutional frameworks to ensure that digital development is prioritised in their international cooperation, notably with Africa, bilaterally and through a joint 'Team Europe' approach. This is apparent in the creation of the EU's Digital for Development (D4D) Hub, which marks a step forward for a more joined-up and strategic approach to cooperation. Yet, big questions remain about the EU's ability to become a key digital partner for Africa, linked to the EU's relatively limited capacity

in this area and difficulties putting in place a strategic approach.

This policy brief seeks to highlight some of the steps that the EU might begin to take to build a more strategic and focused approach to digital cooperation with Africa. It also hopefully provides some insight for African actors wanting to understand Europe's international priorities and motivations in the digital sphere. The brief starts by looking at how the EU is approaching digital policy in external action globally. It then turns to why EU-Africa digital cooperation is relevant and what the demand is from African partners. Thirdly, it looks at how the EU is approaching digital cooperation with Africa and provides detailed recommendations for EU digital cooperation with Africa moving forward.

The brief is based on 17 interviews with European and African officials, members of civil society and experts, as well as EU and AU policy documents and a range of secondary reading materials. It focuses on the EU's role in cooperation as this is a short study and could not hope to cover all aspects of EU-Africa digital cooperation. ECDPM plans to build out more detailed work on various angles of EU-Africa digital cooperation in the coming months and years.

Digital policy in EU external action

The EU's policies with regard to digital cooperation with Africa are very much framed by the EU's wider concerns about developing the EU's role as an influential digital actor and expanding its focus on digital policy in external action. Since taking office in December 2019, it was clear that Ursula von der Leyen's 'geopolitical' European Commission planned to increase the focus on digital development – both in its domestic and external action, reflecting the idea that the internal and external dimensions of the EU's work should be aligned (EC 2019). Europe is still struggling to find its way as a digital actor and ultimately suffers from a weak digital industry compared with the US and China. At the same time, the EU is taking a strong stance on digital governance and regulation, where it sees itself as a leader.

The highly geopolitical nature of the EU's vision for digital policy in international partnerships is apparent in the Digital Compass, a communication that was released in early 2021 and which was presented as the EU's digital ambitions for the next decade: "As the pandemic has highlighted the extent to which digital policy is never value-neutral, with competing models on offer the EU now has an opportunity to promote its positive and human-centric vision of the digital economy and society." [sic] (EC 2021a) This human-centric vision can broadly be defined as making technology work for citizens, including using technology to fight the challenges our societies face, ensuring digital skills so that all citizens can benefit from technology, harnessing technology to fight climate change, ensuring personal data is protected and human rights are upheld, thereby strengthening democracy, ensuring open and competitive markets, and strengthening public services (Vestager 2020).

The EU hopes to set Europe up as a global leader and a model of values-based regulation in the digital sphere, whilst also beginning to tackle the monopoly power of big tech companies and creating an innovative data economy through the development of a single data market (EC 2020a). Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton, who was nominated by French President Emmanuel Macron and has a background in the private sector, is pushing for a shift from a hands-off approach to industrial policy to one which sees a much more important role for the EU and its member states in shaping Europe's industrial future (Breton 2020). The Digital Compass lays out four core pillars to strengthen the EU as a digital actor, which are also presented as key to strengthening the EU's international partnerships in this area: digital skills, secure and high-quality infrastructure, digital transformation of business, and digital public services (EC 2021a). Yet, there are few clear targets laid out in the Digital Compass and many of the policy recommendations remain somewhat vague.

Member states have been pushing a focus on connectivity in the EU's external action, combined with a strong emphasis on governance, including at multilateral fora and in outreach to like-minded powers such as the US, Japan and India. This came through strongly in the July 2021 European Council Conclusions on connectivity, which stated that "[i]t

considers that strategic implementation of the EU connectivity agenda would boost the EU's competitiveness, contribute to the diversification of value chains, reduce strategic dependencies, including on critical raw materials, and meet the need for a secure, resilient and human-centric digital ecosystem." (CoEU 2021, p. 3). The Council proceeds to call for the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy to develop a communication on an EU global connectivity strategy by Spring 2022.

The EU's February 2021 Joint Communication on multilateralism specified digital policy as a focus area for extending multilateral cooperation, and expressed the EU's interest to "push for more ambitious global standards and regulatory approaches in the digital economy." (EC and EEAS 2021, pp. 5-6). The communication proceeds to outline that the EU will seek to engage "with all international partners" to promote its policy and regulatory approaches at multilateral fora, including on data protection, the free flow of data with trust, net neutrality and ethical artificial intelligence (AI), whilst fighting against disproportionate government access to personal data and seeking to find multilateral solutions on digital taxation (p. 9). Yet, it is unclear to what extent the EU has really begun to develop a strategic and joined-up approach to digital questions at multilateral fora, and some officials interviewed pointed out that there was often a lack of agreement amongst EU member states around technical issues at key fora such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

There is a common interest with the US to counter China's dominance in global digital infrastructure, but there are also tensions given the differing approaches of the US and Europe to regulating the internet, with the former continuing to opt for a hands-off approach, while the EU takes an institutionally-heavy regulatory approach (Komaitis and Sherman 2021). In June 2021, the EU and US agreed to establish a Trade and Technology Council (TTC) with a focus on a values-based digital transition (EC 2021b). While the initial aims of the TTC focus on "nurturing a competitive transatlantic tech space and overcoming divisions on the digital rulebook," some analysts argue that the TTC's remit should be extended to increase joint engagement with the Global South (Arcesati and Stec 2021). Meanwhile, digital connectivity is a central

tenet of new partnerships with Japan (EEAS 2019) and India (EC 2021c), both of which emphasise partnerships based on shared principles of democracy and rule of law, as well as market principles such as a level playing field. A Joint Ministerial Statement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in December 2020 also touched on the potential for a joint connectivity strategy (EC 2020b).

As the rest of this brief will explore, the EU has also increased its outreach to Africa and is eager to develop deeper digital cooperation with the African Union and its member states. The new D4D Hub, which was launched in December 2020, has had a strong focus on Africa to date, although there are plans to develop the focus on Latin America and Asia further.

Why does digital policy matter for EU-Africa cooperation?

The need in terms of digital development in Africa is evident, but the topic has primarily risen up the EU's agenda for cooperation with Africa for geopolitical reasons. As a growing number of global and regional powers develop their relations and invest more in Africa, EU countries fear that they are losing influence. EU member states are jointly the biggest overall investor and trade partner for Africa, but this is not the case in the important digital sector, where China eclipses all other partners. COVID-19 has only increased the urgency and interest in the topic – both at the political and developmental level. As Africa works towards building its continental free trade area and a digital single market (DSM), the EU hopes that it will have a clear comparative advantage as a partner with experience of creating a similar regional market and regulatory framework.

Connectivity varies massively between different parts of Africa, and vast regions of the continent remain under-connected, if connected at all. According to the World Bank, broadband connections had risen twenty-fold since 2010 to 400 million in 2018, and even when including both 3G and 4G connections, the regional average broadband penetration was only 25% (World Bank 2019). Yet, one African official interviewed emphasised that Africa could not afford to focus only on basic broadband roll-out, but must simultaneously

invest in data centres, e-services and other key infrastructure which are essential to developing more than just basic connectivity. At the same time, the lack of digital regulation in many countries leaves private data open to exploitation and complicates investment, while much work remains to address challenges of cyber security and harmonise regulations between African countries allowing for the roll-out of an African DSM. The AU, through its Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection that was adopted in 2014, seeks to establish a credible framework on electronic transactions, protection of personal data, promotion of cyber security, e-governance and combating cybercrime among others (AU 2014). However, to date, only 14 out of the 55 AU member states have signed the convention. There are also immense needs in terms of digital skills, ranging from basic digital literacy to high-level programming skills.

The demand in terms of digital cooperation in Africa is clear, but a growing number of actors are drawing attention to the importance of developing such connectivity on Africa's own terms. A number of interviewees highlighted that the convening of the EU-Africa Digital Economy Task Force (DETF) in 2018, made up of qualified Africans and Europeans, was a positive step towards developing a strong joint agenda. European diplomats interviewed tended to highlight the guiding role of the task force's report and the four priority areas highlighted therein – broadly connectivity, skills, regulation and e-services – in moving relations forward (AU-EU 2019). These priorities also largely fit with the priorities of the AU's DTS, although the DTS contains a stronger emphasis on digital industry (AU 2020). Yet, each African country also has its own dynamics in terms of digital development, and in most African countries – as in most other countries around the world – there are multiple different digital constituencies with very different views on digital development and digital governance. Interviewees highlighted that different ministries or government agencies within one country could bring different views to the table, while other stakeholders – including the private sector, civil society and academia – complicate the picture further. Building real digital cooperation with African countries will require an understanding of the different constituencies that exist in different African societies

and of their differing viewpoints.

Many African countries, in need of investment and infrastructure, have welcomed investment in the digital sector, with a large majority coming from China, including potentially 70% of the continent's 4G networks (Mackinnon 2019). Gagliardone argues that China's strength lies in the fact that it has invested in key infrastructure and facilitated Africa's digital transition, in the process taking advantage of the perceived weaknesses in the Western approach, which is process-driven and includes a strong focus on rights and values (Gagliardone 2019). The EU, conscious of

falling behind as a digital actor and concerned about the direction of digital governance globally, is eager to begin to make up for its slowness, and hopes to find in Africa a partner on governance and a market for future products. Both in Europe and Africa, there is a growing concern for the market dominance of large tech companies and a growing interest in the concept of digital sovereignty (see below box). Yet, while on both continents the term includes a strong focus on reigning in big tech companies, it takes on different meanings for different actors, and there is certainly no consensus about what it signifies.

Box 1: Digital sovereignty

This term is widely used in current debates about digital governance, and yet there is no consensus about what the term actually means. European leaders – notably Emmanuel Macron – have used the term repeatedly, but so too have the Chinese and Russian governments. The term is also increasingly used in Africa by the likes of Senegalese President Macky Sall and Smart Africa Director Lacina Koné.

In Europe, leaders have focused mainly on industrial policy and on the need for the EU to be less dependent on foreign technology, with views varying between the more interventionist approach advocated by France and European Commissioner Thierry Breton and the more free market approach advocated by the Nordics and Commissioner Margrethe Vestager (Macron 2020, Merkel et al. 2021). Yet, the term is also used by some to include a focus on data protection and human rights. Rimbaud argues that there is a need for a more competitive tech space, where companies do not have the kind of undemocratic power that the five biggest US tech companies (Google (Alphabet), Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft), also known as GAFAM, continue to exercise in Europe, but also argues against building European GAFAMs. Instead, a bottom-up approach to sovereignty that allows for the building of a democratic digital space should be prioritised (Rimbaud 2021). What is clear is that for the EU to defend any one vision, EU and member state political leaders should agree on a clear common definition.

China and Russia's vision of digital sovereignty is built in opposition to US big tech and ultimately the US' outsized power over the internet. They defend a clearly state-centric vision of digital sovereignty, which seeks to make the state the arbiter of the data of its citizenry. This is ultimately a simpler vision of digital sovereignty and one that appeals to many African leaders, who have a keen desire to protect and enhance state sovereignty (Handy and Djilo 2021). A number of African countries, and indeed other developing countries around the world, have begun to put in place laws requiring companies to keep data within their borders. For example, in Senegal, Huawei will build a data centre that should hold all state data on Senegalese territory and will also offer a cheap solution to the private sector (Reuters 2021). Yet critics of data localisation policies argue that it is unclear how effective data localisation is if not backed up by strong guidelines on how the data can or cannot be used (Pisa and Polcari 2019).

A number of theorists have also written about digital colonialism in the Global South, and considered how Latin American and African countries should respond to protect their digital sovereignty. Avila Pinto writes: "Never before has a small sector had so much power over the entire World, to monitor the present and predict future behaviours of not just individuals, but entire populations." (Avila Pinto 2018). She contrasts the resources (capital and human resources), the structures (legal and trade architecture) and availability of funding in the US and China, and to a lesser extent Europe, with the growing technological dependence of the developing world. Others have similarly highlighted the dangers of global firms mining Africa for data, making use of algorithms not suited to local environments and of an overdependence on external technologies (Travaly 2020, Birhane 2020, Center for Humane Technology 2020). A recent report by Pollicy, a Ugandan institute, goes even further, highlighting seven different types of 'digital extractivism' that Africa is being subjected to: cheap digital labour, illicit financial flows, data extraction, natural resource mining, infrastructure monopolies, digital lending, funding structures, beta testing and platform governance (Iyer et al. 2021). The authors argue that Africa should work towards digital sovereignty through substantial investments to decentralise the internet and by advocating for free and open source software created by Africans (Travaly 2020).

COVID-19 has demonstrated the importance of digital infrastructure to keep large parts of the global economy going, and marked an increased pace of digitalisation across the world. The pandemic has also highlighted a strong digital divide in human development sectors, particularly education, with significant differences in terms of the access that children have to remote learning. At the same time, Africa saw many innovations in response to COVID-19, including in e-health, e-learning, digital social protection and e-governance (Veron and Sergejeff 2021, pp. 24-5). The pandemic also led to the decision to bring negotiations around the e-commerce protocol of the AfCFTA forward to 2021 (Banga et al. 2021, p. 7). The rhetoric of ‘build back better’ – promoted by the EU and the White House alike – has tended to include an even stronger focus on digital investment alongside green growth as a means to drive economic recovery and future resilience.

The EU approach to digital cooperation with Africa

The EU’s D4D Hub is an effort to build a joined-up ‘Team Europe’ approach with a tangible implementation aspect between the EU institutions, EU member states and the EU financial architecture for development, that also seeks to bring in the views of the private sector and of civil society (Jones and Teevan 2021). The D4D Hub was founded by five member states (Belgium, Estonia, France, Germany and Luxembourg), together with the European Commission, while a further six (Spain, Portugal, Sweden, the Netherlands, Lithuania and Finland) have joined the effort since its founding with the aim of “scaling up investments in the digital transformation of partner countries; promoting a comprehensive values-based rulebook for a digital economy and society worldwide; and promote a stronger and more strategic EU engagement in international digital partnerships.” [sic] (EC 2020c) One of the first D4D flagships launched was the EU-Africa D4D Hub, which aims to match demands from African countries with expertise and support from different European development partners across the

four areas covered by the 2019 DETF Report: connectivity, skills, regulation and e-services (AU-EU 2019). This approach has promising components, but there are also aspects that remain to be clarified and challenges that will have to be tackled head-on for the D4D Hub to fulfil its potential.

EU and member state officials interviewed for this study were by and large positive about the D4D approach and hoped that it would allow the various EU digital actors to act in a more strategic and effective manner, and for Europe to become a more important actor in digital development in Africa. Interviewees from member states spoke about positive synergies between the different member states involved, and noted that there was by and large a shared vision for the EU’s role as a digital actor. Most interviewees noted that the EU’s particular added value lies in its human-centric approach to digital regulation, but there were differences in how different actors felt the EU might best advocate for this approach. Some emphasised the need to focus largely on digital governance and data protection, and others argued that only if the EU greatly increases infrastructure investments can it hope to develop strong buy-in for partnerships around its governance approach.

A number of interviewees also expressed strong doubts about the EU’s potential to get its priorities straight and to build a meaningful position as a digital actor in Africa. These doubts focus on the one hand on the EU’s own weakness as a digital actor and on the other hand on the sense of a lack of a shared strategic approach. The first set of doubts focuses on the EU’s inability to really compete with China and the US due to a variety of factors, including its outclassing in key digital technologies, procurement rules that cannot exclude cheaper or more powerful American and Chinese companies, the difficulty of catching up or even making a mark in comparison with Chinese digital infrastructure investments, and the slow pace of decision-making within the EU institutions. The doubts regarding the EU’s strategic approach relate to the sense that the EU lacks focus and can be held hostage to political concerns that ultimately are not very strategic. One

example raised more than once was the focus on building subsea cables – including to Africa – mentioned in the Data Gateways statement (Portugal 2021, EC 2021d), together with the lack of specific aims in this and the Digital Compass. Several interviewees pointed out that many such cables already exist (Submarine Cable Map n.d.) and others

are being constructed (the 2Africa Cable for example is being built by a consortium including Facebook, but also a number of European partners, and will connect North America, Africa and Europe (Prinsloo 2021)), and suggested that the real issue is about the affordability of the data these cables carry.

Box 2: The D4D Hub and EU programming – How it works

The D4D Hub is very much a work in progress and much remains to be clarified regarding how it works and how it fits together with the programming of funding under the EU’s new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - Global Europe (NDICI-Global Europe).

A number of flagship projects have been launched as part of the D4D Hub, notably the EU-Africa D4D Hub mentioned above, which is coordinated by the Belgian development agency Enabel and appears to have strong buy-in from a number of member states. The EU-Africa data flagship, coordinated by the German development agency GIZ, aims to help build a single market for industrial data in Africa based on strong protection of personal data, and eventually interoperability (the ability of different data standards and sources to work together) with the European data market also under construction. The third flagship, the African-European Digital Innovation Bridge (AEDIB), aims to “strengthen digital innovation networks in Africa,” and to promote exchange between European and African innovators and policymakers. (D4D n.d.) Several working groups have also been set up, including on connectivity, governance and innovation. Interviewees mentioned that further working groups on cybersecurity or digital financial services may follow, which aim to bring together expertise and strategic thinking on these topics, and to act as conduits of expertise and support for the various flagships.

EU leadership is pushing for a strong digital dimension in the overall programming of the NDICI-Global Europe, including the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+), a complex bureaucratic process that sets the parameters for EU development cooperation spending for the period 2021-2027. The envelopes remain to be determined and estimates varied; one official suggested they may amount to €4-5 billion in grants and €10-15 billion in loans and guarantees under the EFSD+, with the hope of leveraging up to €50 billion in investments. Another official mentioned a smaller global figure of about €8 billion in loans and grants.

The initial programming documents of EU delegations across the world do not appear to have a strong digital cooperation dimension, but the new digital unit at the European Commission’s Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) is working with delegations to develop more ideas, both in terms of stand-alone actions and in terms of mainstreaming digital technologies across other areas of action. Two EU delegations – in Kenya and Ethiopia – have developed ‘Team Europe’ Initiatives (TEIs) on digital for development (flagship projects developed jointly with EU member states and European development banks). The regional programme for sub-Saharan Africa will also be an important outlet for programming with a focus on digital for development, including a considerable infrastructure envelope, but this is still in its early stages. One official noted that member states had proposed 60 regional TEIs across different topics, but that the format still needs to be clarified and rationalised so as to make the criteria for selection clearer.

A number of interviewees mentioned that Germany had taken a very strong leadership position, particularly in promoting a specific vision of cooperation around data. Some saw France as an equally important player, and as a leader on connectivity/infrastructure. It was noted by several that the two large states are undoubtedly the motor of the EU’s D4D agenda, along with the European Commission. Belgium’s role in pushing the D4D agenda forward when current Prime Minister

Alexander de Croo was simultaneously Minister for Development Cooperation and the Digital Agenda was noted, together with the continued motivation that Belgium displays with regard to this agenda. It is leading the coordination of the EU-AU D4D Hub. Estonia’s motivation and outsize role on e-governance was also widely commented. Luxembourg was similarly mentioned as having a strong motivation and particular added value on cyber-security.

The way forward: Conclusion and recommendations

Moving forward, it is clear that the EU will need to be more strategic and more focused in how it approaches digital cooperation with Africa. Ultimately, only large-scale domestic investment in Europe's digital industry can truly make the EU into the kind of global actor it aspires to be. Yet, in the short term, the EU should play to its strengths to develop stronger digital cooperation with Africa. The EU should expand its 'Team Europe' approach to digital policy beyond the realm of development cooperation, notably by paying much more attention to developing and advocating for shared positions at multilateral fora. It should adopt a more unified approach to how it defines and promotes key concepts such as 'digital sovereignty', and how it approaches highly technical, but vital, discussions at fora such as the ITU.

Listening, adapting and communicating will be key to developing the EU's role as a digital actor and to building partnerships. Building the type of long-term sustainable partnerships the EU needs in Africa should not be simply about pushing the EU's own agenda. It is essential that the EU continues to engage in open dialogue with partner governments, civil society actors, businesses and experts. This is particularly important in the area of digital governance, where the EU will need to understand the concerns and interests of partners if it hopes to build alliances. This in turn will require a much deeper understanding of underlying dynamics on the ground in partner countries.

The EU should also ensure that its digital ambitions are reflected in the programming of the NDICI-Global Europe. Now is the time to integrate these ambitions at the level of overall objectives for multiannual indicative programmes at the country level, as well as in the regional indicative programme for sub-Saharan Africa. It will be important that sufficient funds are available so that EU delegations across Africa can respond to local demand in partner countries, and co-fund innovative and useful digital interventions with EU member states through the

EU-AU D4D Hub throughout the programming cycle. This should be foreseen in the ongoing programming process so that the D4D Hub has sufficient flexibility and resources to be an effective actor in the digital space in Africa. Member states should also show a willingness to invest their own funds in the 'Team Europe' approach of the D4D Hub and to label their own initiatives as D4D initiatives.

The following are some specific recommendations for how the EU can work around its limited capacity and begin to build a more focused approach to digital cooperation with Africa. It is by no means exhaustive, and ECDPM hopes to do much more work in the future on several of these topics.

a. A human-centric approach to governance

This is a clear area of EU added value and one that ultimately began to spread even without the EU taking a leading role in pushing it forward. With the elaboration of its digital governance model, the EU hopes to provide global leadership in the digital governance realm. This already began to happen with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which has become a model for other countries around the world that have adopted regulation on personal data protection that relies either in part or heavily on GDPR (Bradford 2020, Petrova 2019, Woollacott 2020). Yet the success to date of GDPR as a model for data protection cannot be taken for granted. The regulation may currently be the best available model, but as with everything in the digital sector, events are fast moving. **The EU will need to be agile and forward-looking if it wants to ensure that GDPR remains the best available model in town, and that the EU can mirror its success with other key technologies, notably ethical AI.**

Moving forward, AI governance as laid out in the EU AI Strategy (EC 2021e) is clearly the next frontier in terms of the EU's human-centric approach, and yet the slow pace of roll-out within the EU means that there is no ready-made model. Further, the EU is currently far behind in terms of the development of AI, which means that for the time being few are looking to Europe for leadership on AI. If the EU and

its member states truly want to be future leaders on ethical AI, it will be necessary to go beyond regulation and to prioritise much more extensive investments in the development of ethical AI. **A truly human-centric approach that respects African digital sovereignty should include joint research and investments together with African institutes and private sector actors to ensure AI that is adapted to African needs and markets, rather than simply seeking to export AI developed in Europe to African markets.**

b. Supporting an African digital single market

The EU has a strong interest in supporting the development of an African DSM, including in encouraging the adoption of human-centric regulation, but also in ensuring interoperability with the European DSM, thereby giving European industry a competitive edge on the continent vis-à-vis other international actors, notably Chinese and American industry. The EU undoubtedly has important experiences to share with the AU and its members based on the ongoing development of the EU DSM, making it a potentially very valuable partner to the AU as it rolls out its own DTS. Yet, given the EU's own struggle to develop its industrial capacities in the ICT sector and the many gaps in the EU's quest for digital sovereignty, the EU should be humble about what it can offer as part of a digital partnership with Africa. **Dialogue with African Union members should not aim at promoting duplicates of the European model, but rather supporting efforts to develop a localised African model for digital regulation so that what is adopted can be effectively implemented.**

The approach of the joint EU-AU-ITU Policy and Regulation Initiative for Digital Africa (PRIDA) has been interesting in this regard, seeking to base interventions on solid research and developing tools that are adapted to the local context. The project initially had a twofold approach: spectrum harmonisation across Africa and harmonisation of measurable ICT/telecommunications policy, legal and regulatory frameworks. As the AU's focus has moved on and with the publication of the Digital Transformation Strategy, PRIDA is also evolving to

support the needs of the AU, notably e-health, e-education and e-agriculture.

The proposed EU-AU data flagship also aims to work with the AU to build a framework to govern industrial data within Africa, allowing for business-to-business sharing of data, whilst also securing personal data protection. Based on the EU's own Data Governance Strategy (EC 2020d), this would ensure interoperability with the European market with potential benefits for European and African private sector actors. **While the value of a single data market for Africa is evident, it will be important to ensure that solutions are based on solid research and continuous dialogue with African counterparts through a truly inclusive process.**

Overall, there does not appear to be one clear strategy for how to support the AU in building an African DSM, and it will be important to follow the AU's lead. The AU has a strong focus on digital trade in the AfCFTA, and a lot of work is being done to develop the necessary frameworks and systems (for instance on the African payments systems with Afrexim bank and the Sokokuu platform to boost intra-African trade). **The EU has considerable experience in developing digital trade solutions and digital financial services (DFS), and could play a more important role in electronic trade facilitation and building regional DFS solutions.**

Further, it seems that different parts of the EU and 'Team Europe' are still speaking to the AU separately and not necessarily forming one common front. The D4D Hub appears to be trying to harmonise the approach of the EU and its member states, and to bring other important actors such as the Smart Africa Alliance to the table, but **moving forward it will be essential to speak with one voice and to build a clear channel of communication with African counterparts.**

c. Infrastructure

The EU also needs to be realistic and strategic about the role it can play in helping to finance digital infrastructure across Africa. It is unclear how quickly the EU will be able to roll out loans and guarantees under the EFSD+ to leverage investments in the

digital sector, and how effective such incentives will be. At the same time, it is clear that the EU will not be able to replace the role played by Chinese and US tech giants in rolling out tech infrastructure in Africa, and this should not be the goal. Nor should the EU focus its funds on flagship projects which are more about publicity than impact. **EU rhetoric should move towards a realistic strategy focused on strategic investments based on clear demand and solid analysis of the needs in partner countries and regions. Developing greater agility will be essential to allowing the EU to become an actor in the field of digital infrastructure, but there should also be a focus on investing in areas of specific added value.**

More research will be necessary to assess where the EU might have the greatest impact as a digital infrastructure actor, but there are a few areas where the EU should perhaps focus its resources. Firstly, basic human development should continue to play an essential role in guiding European policy vis-à-vis Africa, including in the digital sector, and thus **any focus on connectivity should focus on connecting those regions that are currently unconnected.** Secondly, as already discussed, the EU has an interest in helping to build an African DSM, and thus **a strong focus should be on building cross-border and cross-regional infrastructure that facilitates regional harmonisation, alongside a focus on cross-regional regulation.** In doing so, it might link with ongoing efforts by the Smart Africa Alliance, as well as AU initiatives such as the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA). Finally, if the EU is serious about promoting a human-centric approach and working with Africa to protect its

digital sovereignty, then **investing in data centres on the African continent is key.** This is a core concern for African governments, and will be essential to creating an African data market.

d. Human development

Digital development is ultimately meaningless unless it brings about real improvements in the lives of citizens. As underlined by the European Parliament, the digital transformation represents a tremendous development lever for access to education, training, employment and health. Technology can indeed be leveraged for the delivery of more robust and inclusive social services that leave no one behind (European Parliament 2021). The AU's Digital Transformation Strategy, in line with the AU's 2063 Agenda, lays out a clear vision with regard to the role that digital technologies can play in human development in Africa, and **the EU should continue to ensure that human development goals are at the heart of its digital cooperation with Africa.**

The 'Team Europe' Initiatives and the NDICI-Global Europe programming for 2021-2027 could help build further the linkages between digital policy and the human development sector. The EU should also support technological innovations that have resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic in e-healthcare, e-learning or digital social protection in Africa, as a lot can be learned from these. Relevant experiences from member states' development cooperation (telemedicine for Portugal or digital education for Spain for instance) could be shared for mutual learning.

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Endnote

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HEAD OFFICE
SIÈGE

Onze Lieve Vrouweplein 21
6211 HE Maastricht
The Netherlands *Pays Bas*
Tel +31 (0)43 350 29 00
Fax +31 (0)43 350 29 02

BRUSSELS OFFICE
BUREAU DE BRUXELLES

Rue Archimède 5
1000 Brussels *Bruxelles*
Belgium *Belgique*
Tel +32 (0)2 237 43 10
Fax +32 (0)2 237 43 19

info@ecdpm.org
www.ecdpm.org
KvK 41077447