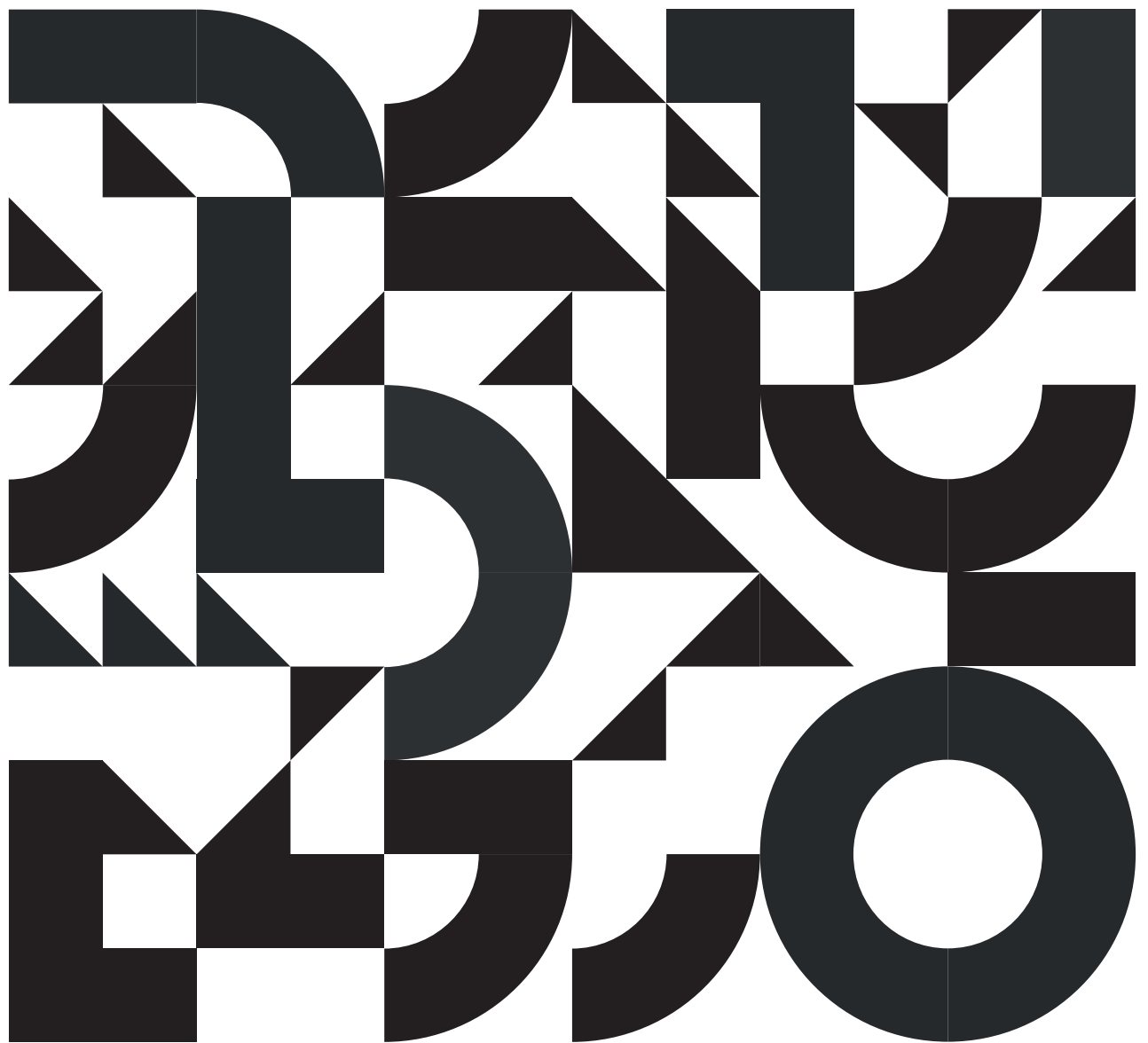


Is a New Deal Between Europe and Africa Possible?

WORKING PAPER - FEBRUARY 2022



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AUTHOR
ACHILLE MBEMBE

45, RUE D'ULM 75005 PARIS
LEGRANDCONTINENT.EU
GEG@ENS.FR

RECOMMENDED CITATION

ACHILLE MBEMBE, IS A NEW DEAL BETWEEN EUROPE AND AFRICA POSSIBLE?, GROUPE D'ÉTUDES GÉOPOLITIQUES, WORKING PAPER, FEBRUARY 2022.

Is a New Deal Between Europe and Africa Possible?

ACHILLE MBEMBE • AUTHOR OF THE REPORT THE NEW AFRICA-FRANCE RELATIONS PREPARED FOR THE NEW AFRICA-FRANCE SUMMIT IN MONTPELLIER (OCTOBER 2021). HIS LATEST PUBLICATION WITH REMY RIOUX IS POUR UN MONDE EN COMMUN. REGARDS CROISES ENTRE L'AFRIQUE ET L'EUROPE (ACTES SUD, 2022).

Supporting democratic innovation and the rule of law is not a strategic goal for the European Union in Africa. And yet, there is a fierce competition between different political models on a global scale. This competition no longer pits communist or socialist regimes against capitalist regimes, or the free market against the command economy. What is now at stake is democracy itself, which is as much threatened by neoliberalism as by the new authoritarianism, whether it be the populist or nationalist version. Needless to say, Africa is one of the principal theaters for this confrontation.

The future of democracy is the new geopolitical question

Numerous international actors have understood that in global politics as much as in geopolitical terms, Africa's share of rare resources and markets will grow in the 21st century. As a consequence, their future cooperation with the African continent will have significant implications for their own political, economic, cultural, and even military position in the world.

In their attempt to design “new global strategies with Africa”, they have put in place investment programs in domains as varied as ports, highways, energy systems, railways, fiber optic cables, telecommunications networks etc... These programs are destined to give them comparative advantage in the New Scramble for a continent whose immense wealth is still relatively untapped. This is the case with China.

This is the case, too, with the European Union. In order to compete with China, Europe wishes to refocus its activities in Africa. To this end, it wants to stimulate investments (especially in the private sector), to contribute to the green transition and the digital transformation, the development of major infrastructure, and – possibly – job creation¹.

In spite of their alleged differences of approach, China and Europe share one thing in common. Financing freedom or supporting democratic innovation and the rule of law is not part of their strategic goal in the continent.

1 — European Commission & European External Action Service, Joint Communication to the European Parliament. Towards a comprehensive strategy with Africa, Brussels, 2020.

Planetary governance

And yet, the drive towards multipolarization notwithstanding, a fierce competition between different models of planetary governance is unfolding. This competition no longer pits communist or socialist regimes against capitalist regimes, or the free market against the command economy. What is now at stake is democracy itself, understood as the ecological life futures of the Earth itself.

Needless to say, Africa is one of the principal theaters for this confrontation. Here, indeed, are tested some of the ultimate limit conditions of the habitability of the planet.

Here, too, is where the old views on so-called *aide publique au développement* (official development assistance) and on sustainability clash the most dramatically with the new ecological imperative, that is, the duty to maintain social metabolism within the confines of our planetary limits.

The Euro-Atlantic model of planetary governance has historically aimed at dismantling state barriers to the movement of capital. It has been premised on the belief that continued economic growth and technological innovation will lead to the expansion of the “free market”, to jobs and prosperity including for the poor.

This model has never truly believed that democracy and capitalism could be synonymous. In fact, it has always aimed at insulating capitalism from the threat of democracy. Indeed, for a long period of our modern history, capitalism reproduced itself by fostering increasing inequalities, by keeping those without property and countless victims of racial, social or gender inequalities out of the political system.

While nowadays contesting China’s vision of the world order, this model seeks not to expand the voice of those without a voice, but to scale up economic governance so that it is no longer subject to revision at the level of the nation state. Its ultimate goal is to shift economic policy outside the realm of democratic accountability, away from the nation state and towards globalized market networks. As such, it favours an endless expansion of neoliberal financial institutions in every single realm of everyday life.

The Chinese model is often presented as an alternative to the planetary governance driven by Western financial and trade regimes. In fact, it too relies on the credo that property is global and should not be trumped by sovereignty. As an ascending superpower, China too believes in the necessity to design institutions that safeguard the rights of property over borders. It seeks to demonstrate that authoritarian rule can be as effective a development model as liberal democracy.

Yet, China’s neo-imperialist policy is ultimately luring poor African nations into unsustainable debt for infrastructure projects. In the process, it locks them into long-term structural dependence while reinforcing governance structures that work globally to ensure capital rights as global.

Democracy and the habitability of the planet

At the basis of the report submitted to President Emmanuel Macron ahead of the New Africa-France Summit, held in Montpellier in October of 2020, was a key hypothesis: the problems we face today are inherently of planetary scale and scope.

The report presented a relatively detailed view of the “state of democracy” in Africa since 1990². The report emphasized the various changes the African continent is undergoing (demographic changes, accelerated urbanization and digitalization, reimagining borders and mobility), as well as the risks and challenges that are related to ecological sustainability). It encouraged France to look into this century’s future and imagine a new relationship with African states rooted in a dynamic balance between self- and mutual interests and the quest for meaning that is driving current generations.

With regard specifically to the democratic project, three of the report’s conclusions are worth summarizing.

Firstly, the demand for democracy in Africa is endogenous. It began during the anti-colonial era, when the quest for autonomy and self-determination went hand in hand with the aspiration for social and racial equality within the framework of the rule of law. At that time, the idea that democracy should be based on equal rights – beginning with the right of people to govern themselves – was commonplace. It was thought that democracy’s resilience would depend on the quality and the strength of institutions – the only bodies able to counter the upsurge of autocratic regimes once decolonization was achieved.

A second democratic wave began in the 1990s, when most African states were subject to structural adjustment programs and forced to repay debts owed to international financial institutions. In the immediate aftermath of decolonization, the democratic ideal had receded. For most of the second half of the 20th century, one-party systems and military regimes had become the dominant models of continental governance. With the shift to a market economy, social movements began to put emphasis on recalibrating relations between the state and society on the basis of the three key principles of participation, representation, and accountability.

The early 2000s witnessed yet another turning point. Our world is now firmly characterized by financialization, technological escalation and planetary computation. Sovereignty is still linked to territory. But it is also tied to flows of finance, data and information. Democracy as a horizon of common life is now reassessed in reference to the interdependencies of non-human and more-than-human agents and broader economic, political and ecological forces and environments. As a technology of worldwide integration, representative democracy is increasingly seen as an ongoing dynamic process in which humanity is only one actor embedded within complex coproductions of economies and ecologies, in short the living world (le vivant).

Faced with the emergence of various pandemics, the effects of global warming, and loss of biodiversity, many people now recognize the existence of a fundamental continuity between natural environments, ecological zones, and

the human and animal worlds. In short, given the pressure on the living world and in response to increasing vulnerabilities, democracy will increasingly be understood, in the future, in terms of the capacity to design or redesign infrastructures and institutions that align with our new understandings of life futures on Earth.

The future of democracy will be decided in Africa

Africa represents, in this regard, a unique laboratory. Truth be told, the track record of the democratization wave that engulfed the continent since the 1990s is mediocre. Recent political changes in African political regimes are a clear step backwards in the progress made since multi-party politics were introduced.

Since then, social polarization has become more accentuated by the fact that, in many countries, important political and constitutional reforms have simply been abandoned³. Today, the continent is once again plagued by a resurgence of military coups, ethnic and religious strife and low-intensity resource wars. Nearly everywhere, dominant party regimes have captured and privatized chunks of the State. In the process, they have entrenched policies which trap countless local communities in an endless cycle of vulnerability.

Of course, we must take national specificities into account as well as varying contexts. In many countries, however, we have witnessed a sometimes significant erosion of civil and political freedoms. In Central or Northern Africa, gatherings of opposition parties are banned or violently dispersed. Activists are arrested and imprisoned, often without trial. Gender-based violence or violence against “social outcasts” (sexual, religious, or linguistic minorities) has only intensified. Protests over poverty and corruption are routinely and brutally suppressed.

Having objectively contributed to the consolidation of an environment of brutality, a number of states are facing multi-dimensional crises and sometimes bloody conflicts. Far from affirming the legitimacy of regimes in power, elections have become the trigger for unrest. Often rigged, elections sometimes lead to significant loss of human life, and, in many cases, clear a path for constitutional crises, punctuated by military coups and countless insurgencies. At the end of the day, the majority of Africans still do not enjoy any guarantee in terms of social or civil rights (right to assembly, freedom of the press, free speech) or fundamental freedoms. Furthermore, if they had the opportunity, it is entirely possible that many of them would be willing to trade minimum socio-economic rights for political and civic ones. In the ongoing competition between democratic and authoritarian regimes, many wonder whether the latter – such as China – are not more effective at reducing poverty, building functioning health care and education systems, guaranteeing safety and security, and promoting relatively inclusive economic growth than the so-called democratic regimes.

3 — V-Dem, Varieties of Democracy. Global Standards, Local Knowledge, 2019. Voir <https://www.v-dem.net/en/data/data-version-10/>.

In light of the vast societal transition underway on the African continent, bridging the gap between the cultural creativity of societies and communities and the poor quality of public and institutional life is therefore urgent.

The emergence – nearly everywhere – of new forms of organization, expression, and mobilization among the young generations testifies to the vitality of social movements and the vigorous innovations underway in the field of creative activity. Access to digital networks, for example, is contributing to an increase in deliberative capacity. In this context, the future of democracy in the continent will depend on two conditions.

First, it will depend on how well the resources of social creativity and imagination generated through these social and cultural practices are harnessed in order to expand forms of self-organization and pool the efforts needed to rebuild the continent. It will also depend on the quality of the support that international forces will give to the democratic project on the continent.

Financing freedom

In theory, this support is part of the general objectives of the European Union's foreign policy (article 21 of the Treaty of Lisbon). Indeed, a pro-democracy mandate is embodied in Article 1 of institutions such as the EBRD. The French orientation and programming law on development policy and international solidarity of August 4, 2021, explicitly mentions the defense of fundamental freedoms, the promotion of democratic values and rule of law, and support for good governance mechanisms.

In each of these cases, however, few tools exist that aid the effective implementation of these ideals. In cases where these intentions have been translated into concrete interventions, they often lack clarity, coherence, impact, and, above all, coordination with the most creative local dynamics.

To be sure, a number of Western nations have put in place human rights support mechanisms. These are of varying size, however. In particular, the European Union has instruments to support administrative reforms. All in all, it is estimated that around 10% of public development aid to African countries is dedicated to this. Because these funds are divided among different “buckets”, including the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), the European Development Fund (EDF), and the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), it is not easy to track the funding which is actually dedicated to democracy.

But if the EU can support democratic actors through the EIDHR without the formal agreement of African governments, most of these interventions require the latter's consent. This is the case for capacity building support. Mechanisms such as the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) have substantial resources (nearly €100 million in 2021), though, sticking with an arbitrary, colonial and obsolete geographical reading of the continent, they exclude sub-Saharan Africa from their scope of intervention and their grants are exclusively reserved for Europe's immediate “neighbors”.

The EU has created an External Action Service in 2009. One of its goals was to strengthen systematic political dialogue with African governments on policy

reforms which aim to guarantee inclusive and democratic governance. At best, this has led to a plethora of small, often opaque and incoherent, initiatives with no meaningful impact. The same goes for interventions aiming to improve the management of public finances, supporting decentralization, developing legal services, modernizing the court system, insuring media diversity, the defense of human rights or gender equality.

Other initiatives concern supporting electoral processes and election monitoring missions. Their impact on democratic governance is largely insignificant. In order to be a key element in democratization, election monitoring must be included in long-term, systemic efforts to improve the quality of institutions. Such efforts require direct investments in intermediary organizations such as the media, civic associations or unions, in civic education, and the strengthening of transcontinental and transnational relations between African and European civil societies.

The actions of major regional Funds, such as the European Endowment for Democracy have been limited to neighboring European countries such as those in the Balkans. National Funds, such as the National Endowment for Democracy, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, or the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy have hardly fared better. Of all the countries in the world, Germany is perhaps the one which spends the most on supporting democracy (approximately half a billion euros per year through foundations linked to political parties or unions). Yet, only a tiny fraction of this investment is devoted to Africa.

Sometimes, the activities of these various organizations go hand in hand with, or run parallel to, research that is conducted in specialized centers within Western universities or by think tanks. The United States accounts, by far, for most of the world's knowledge and know-how in this field. They are also at the source of most of the publication networks in this domain. Hardly any African expertise is harnessed in such ventures, most of which almost always end up entrenching epistemological colonialism.

Moving away from an apolitical vision of development

Democratic demand in Africa is not imposed from the outside. It originates from African societies themselves. Moreover, it is enshrined in regional norms and codified as such in a number of key texts from African institutions themselves⁴. It should therefore be part of any political dialogue whether bilateral or multilateral with African regimes and African civil societies.

Support for democracy and the rule of law is a direct means to address the central challenges of the Anthropocene era: to mitigate and adapt to climate change, to protect biodiversity and ecosystems, to reduce inequalities in basic capabilities and to foster gender equality. In the absence of this support, it is difficult to broaden the range of choices available to societies and communities,

4 — African Union, 2012, African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance. See <https://au.int/en/treaties/african-charter-democracy-elections-and-governance>; African Union, 2019, The Africa Governance Report: Promoting African Shared Values.

to increase the human capacity to deal with uncertainty, systemic risks and the challenges related to development and human security in Africa.

Finally, support for democracy is the best way to attend to Europe's long-term political and security interests in Africa. We cannot separate the rise of Islamist violence from the failure to finance freedom in the continent. Extremist «alternatives» flourish amidst democratic disenchantment.

The European Union has not adequately understood that democracy is one of the conditions for the continent's long-term stability. In operating as though the problems of socio-economic development stem primarily from a lack of financial, technical, and administrative capacity and are not caused by power structures and vulnerability, the EU has deprived itself of the ability to have a properly geopolitical view of Africa. It is therefore time to move away from this technical and apolitical approach to so-called "development assistance".

As competition between two global hegemonies, the United States and China, intensifies, a novel contest is pitting apparently different visions of planetary development against each other. At the heart of this contest is the question of democracy, market power and global capitalism. At the same time, new infrastructures and technologies are emerging. They reshape how states, corporations and people engage with each other. It remains to be seen if these infrastructures and technologies will be responsive to planetary pressures or whether they will support greater solidarity between Africa and Europe.

Human security, political stability, and regional peace are compromised whenever an environment of brutality is allowed to take root and flourish, with the inevitable consequence of producing one crisis after another. Instead of contributing to financing freedom in Africa, Europe has erected military interventions and migration containment as the pinnacle of its Africa policy. This has become a major factor in the continent's destabilization. It is not sustainable, In fact, it is inhumane.