Circular Economy and the Polycrisis

Leveraging EU-Africa Cooperation in Natural Resource Management

Policy brief no. 5
April 2025

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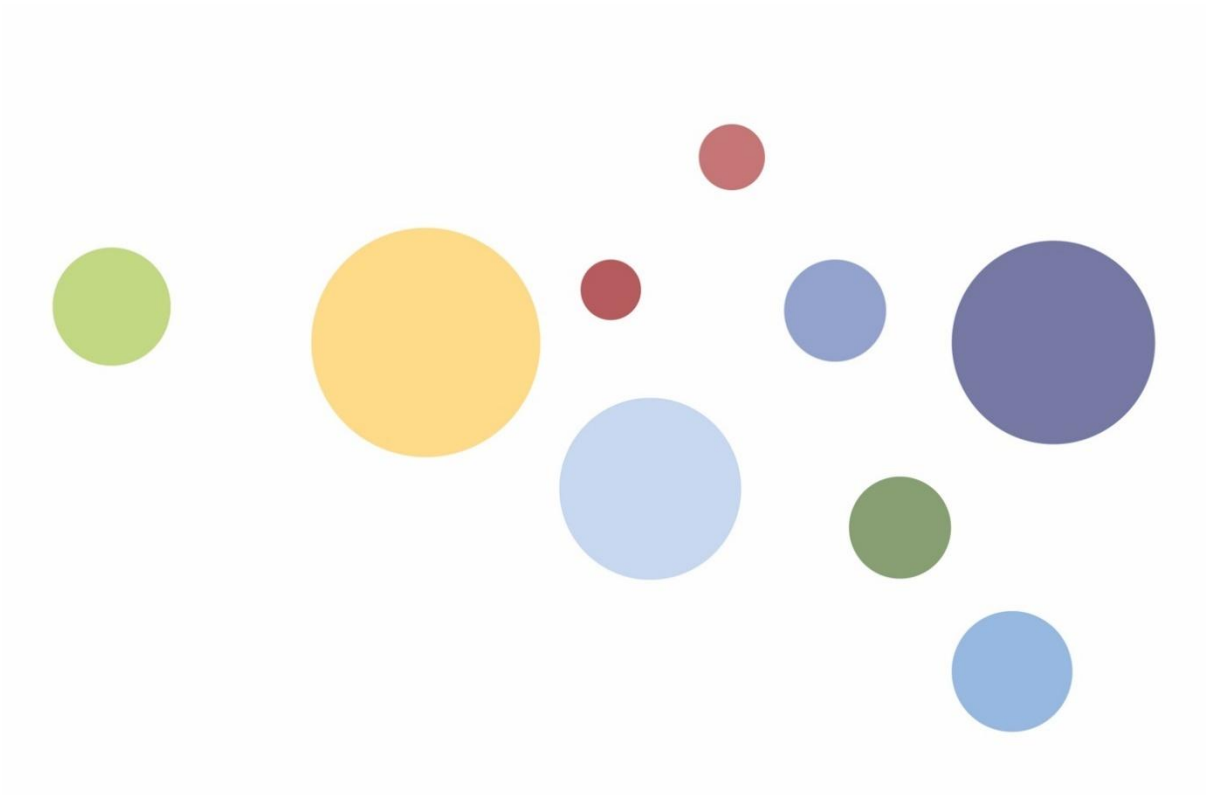

PolyCIVIS
Jean Monnet Network on External Policy: EU-Africa

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Executive Summary

Africa, a region rich in natural resources but characterised by developmental challenges, is disproportionately affected by the international polycrisis. The convergence of climatic, social, economic, and security crises is further exacerbated by international conflicts, vested interests, and the legacies of European post-colonialism, compounded by the increasing geopolitical influence of actors such as China and Russia.

The circular economy presents a pragmatic approach for enhancing the management of natural, energy and productive resources. This approach not only mitigates the adverse effects of the polycrisis but also aligns the interests of diverse stakeholders. Specifically, it addresses the exploitation of natural resources such as mining and hydrocarbons, the exploitation of natural resources (water, waste, fishing and agriculture), and the management of other energies. While the environmental benefits are readily apparent, the circular economy also has significant implications for social challenges (migration, gender inequality), economic development; research, development (R&D) and innovation, and the reduction of security tensions (terrorism, crime). The essential role of Africa's natural and mining resources in the world is also highlighted.

The collaborative efforts of the EU and major international organisations, including the UN, African Development Bank, OECD, and WEF, demonstrate the efficacy of circular economy principles in addressing these multifaceted challenges.

Key messages

- The circular economy is essential for mitigating the polycrisis in Africa: Africa faces climatic, social, economic, and security crises exacerbated by international conflicts and geopolitical influences. The circular economy offers a pragmatic approach to managing natural, energy, and productive resources, addressing issues such as resource exploitation, social challenges, and security tensions.
- EU-Africa relations are critical for advancing the circular economy: Initiatives like the Circular Economy Action Plan and the Africa-EU Global Gateway Investment Package support shared priorities as outlined in the Comprehensive EU strategy with Africa.
- Africa's natural resources and strategic importance place it at the centre of global geopolitics Africa holds a significant share of the world's mineral reserves, arable land, and fresh water sources. The continent's geopolitical importance is amplified by new military conflicts and competition among global powers

(1) Circular Economy and the Polycrisis

The circular economy is a crucial instrument for mitigating the climate crisis, which is inextricably linked to the broader polycrisis. Integrated with other economic models, it offers solutions to the economic, social, and environmental challenges inherent in achieving ESG-aligned sustainable management. The applicability of circular economy principles to the extraction and reuse of natural resources, energy generation, and industrial production is both well-documented and widely accepted.

The origins of circular economy are found in industrial economics[1],and in industrial ecology[2], which encompass both open and closed-loop production cycles, as well as linear and circular processes, all supported by robust waste management practices. By integrating waste streams back into industrial production as sources of materials and energy, economies are realised, pollution is controlled, and waste is repurposed as valuable raw materials. This closed-loop system minimises resource consumption, thereby achieving enhanced economic performance through natural system efficiencies[3]. Consequently, the evolution from a linear "extract, produce, and waste" model to one that utilises waste for the generation of new raw materials represents a significant advancement[4].

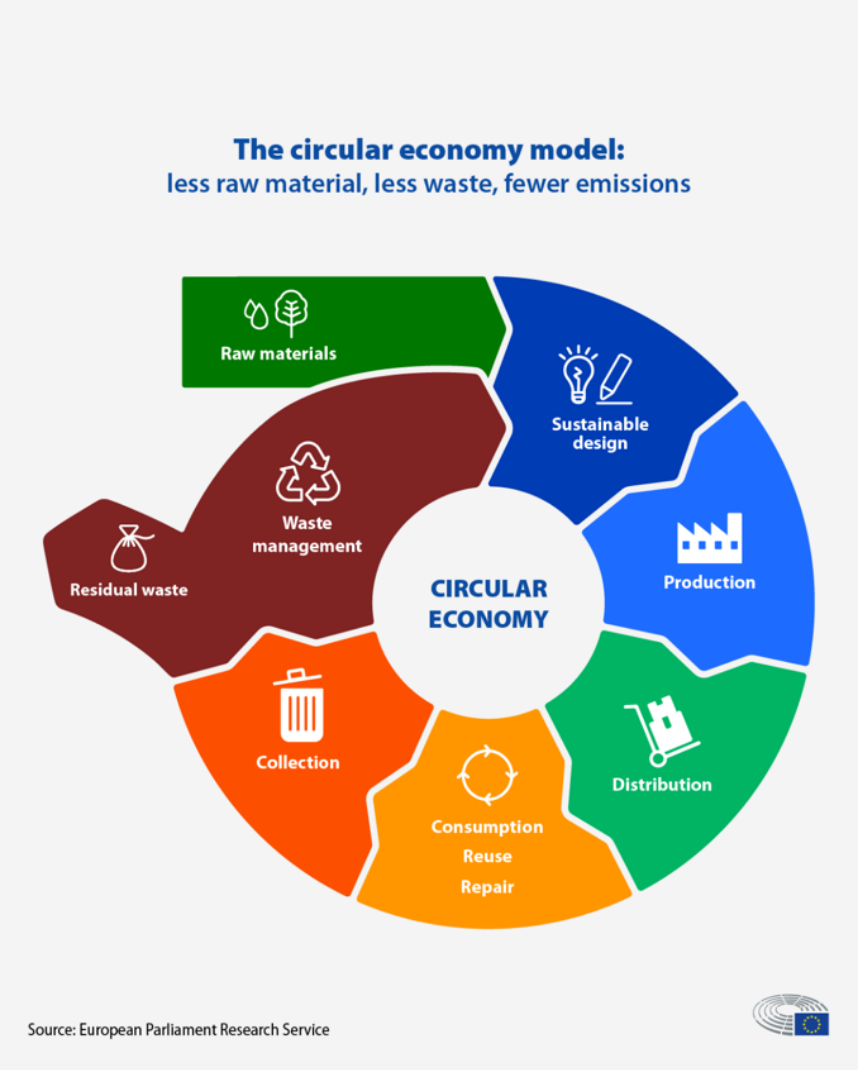
Eco-innovation is essential for the success of the circular economy[5] as new production technologies are needed to minimise waste and achieve reuse in the form of raw materials. Innovation must also extend to processes, organisational structures, policies, and values, all of which are critical for the comprehensive application of circular economy principles.

The European Parliament defines the circular economy as a model of production and consumption, which involves sharing, leasing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing and recycling existing materials and products as long as possible[6]. This approach extends the lifecycle of products, enhances competitiveness, stimulates innovation, boosts economic growth, and creates employment opportunities. The European Union aims to establish a circular and climate-neutral economy by 2050, supported by numerous recent initiatives designed to reduce waste and enhance product sustainability.

The circular economy has often been categorized into several cognate terms, the best known of which are the green economy and the blue economy. In contrast, the "red economy" disregards the excessive consumption of energy and raw materials.

[1] Frosch, 1992 ; Pearce and Turner, 1990
[2] Stahel and Clift , 2016
[3] Erkman, 2001 ; . Jacobsen 2006
[4] Kirchherr *et al.,* 2023.
[5] Mossalanejad,2011 ; Jänicke and Jacob,2005 ; Bossle *et al.*, 2016 ; Karakaya, et al., 2014
[6] European Parliament, 2023

Figure 1: Circular Economy Model – EU infographic



(2) International Circular Economy Initiatives

The potential of an economic model that efficiently organises natural resources and transforms waste into raw materials has garnered attention from states, corporations, and international organisations alike.

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation (EMF) characterises the circular economy as restorative and regenerative, aiming to ensure that products, components and raw materials maintain their maximum utility and value at all times, distinguishing between technical and biological cycles[7]. This approach is based on the principles of: (i) Avoiding the creation of waste and pollution, (ii) Saving and preserving energy, labour and materials, including by prolonging their duration or enabling their re-use, and (iii) Protecting and enhancing renewable resources. In this sense, the circular economy manages to solve economic, social and

[7] Ellen Macarthur Foundation

environmental problems. In this context, the circular economy addresses economic, social, and environmental challenges, while also acknowledging the inverse interdependence and interrelation between social and economic problems within the ecosystem.

The inclusion of the circular economy in the SDGs[8], the 2030 Agenda and the ongoing Conferences of the Parties (COPs) is evident. According to the UN and the EMF (2022), the application of circular economy principles has a direct impact on combating climate change, preventing waste, promoting economic development, creating jobs, and improving public health.

The World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Risks report in 2024[9] links the dual major crises of climate change and conflict to economic and technological uncertainty. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) meeting in December 2024 also explored the path towards Africa's sustainable development, highlighting the role of economic growth, connectivity and leveraging its natural resources. AfCFTA provides a unique platform for advancing a circular economy in Africa by integrating sustainability into trade policies, fostering regional cooperation, and supporting green value chains.

The OECD, UN, G7 and G20 also recognise the interconnections between social and climate issues, supporting the SDGs, particularly goals 7, 9, 12, and 13, which address sustainable cities, responsible production and consumption, and climate action. The OECD's policy brief, "Competition in the Circular Economy[10]," examines the interplay between competition, economic growth, and the transition to a circular economy, and analyses how this transition affects policy frameworks. Similar to the EU's analyses and policies, the focus is on creating incentives for the efficient use of resources, promoting innovation, developing circular economy business models, promoting pro-competitive collaboration and synergies, standardisation, and market creation. The UN supports these efforts through the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

Building on the above, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of the UN identifies cross-cutting issues, synergies, and trade-offs, acknowledging critiques of inconsistencies between various goals. For example, SDG 13 on climate action has strong synergies with SDGs 3 (health), 7 (clean energy), 11 (cities and communities), 12 (responsible consumption and production), and 14 (oceans). The inclusion of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) policies adds transnational dimensions to political provisions by requiring comprehensive traceability throughout the supply, production, and recycling chains. The internationalisation of raw material and energy supply chains, coupled with delocalised and disintegrated production, consumption patterns, and even the export of waste, necessitates regulations and policies that extend internationally.

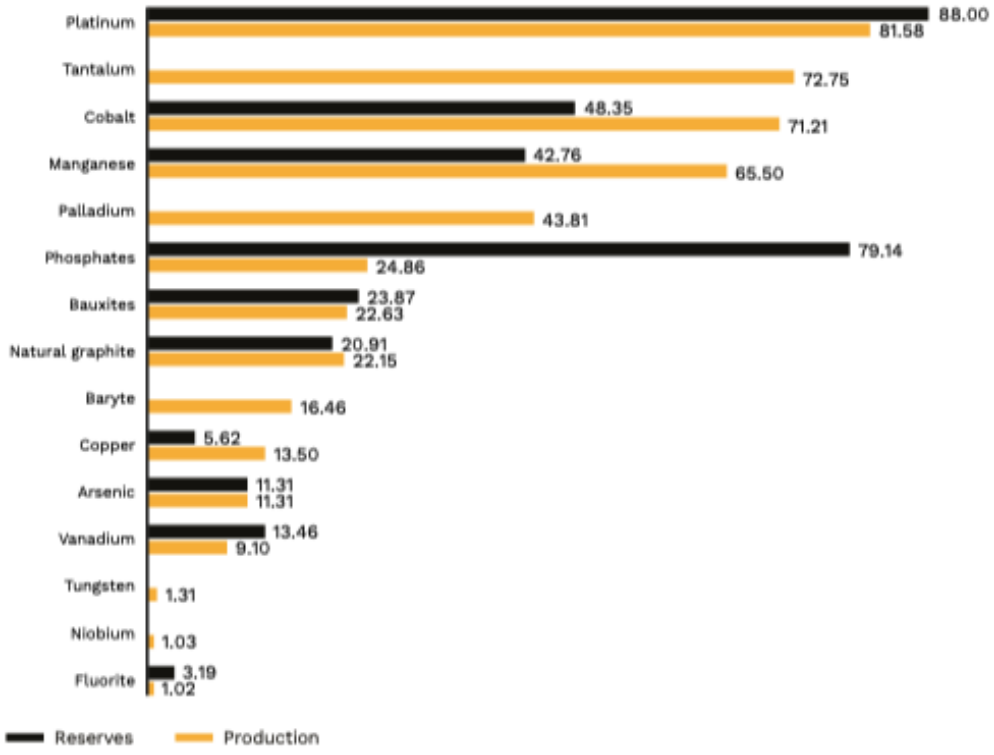
According to the World Economic Forum (WEF), Africa is currently responsible for the production of 30% of global raw materials, a figure that is projected to increase. It is estimated that natural resource consumption will rise by up to 50% by 2050[11]. Current consumption levels already exceed the Earth's regenerative capacity by 60%, suggesting that three to four times the planet's total resources will be needed by 2050. Therefore, the principles of the circular economy are crucial for the sustainability of both economic systems and natural ecosystems. The World Bank projects that the population of Africa will reach 2.5 billion

[8] Schröder and Raes, 2021
[9] World Economic Forum, 2024a
[10] OECD, 2023
[11] WEF, 2024b

by that time, with 350 million people at risk of unemployment.

UNEP data[12] indicates that Africa holds 30% of the world's mineral reserves, 8% of its natural gas, and 12% of its oil reserves. The continent possesses 40% of the world's gold and up to 90% of its chromium and platinum. The largest global reserves of cobalt, diamonds, platinum, and uranium are located in Africa. It also contains 65% of the world's arable land and ten percent of the planet's internal renewable fresh water sources. In many African countries, natural capital constitutes between 30% and 50% of total wealth, although illegal exploitation results in estimated losses of USD 195 billion annually.

Chart 2: Selected critical raw materials in Africa. Share of global reserves and production



Source: USGS data. PEI.

The EU and China play pivotal roles in advancing the circular economy. Evidence from Asia includes the World Circular Economy Forum held in Japan in 2018, the Circular Economy Asia Incorporated (CEA), and the Asia Plastics & Packaging Agreement. Initiatives such as #CircularOctober, which has served as a platform for debating ideas and experiences since 2017, the Zhuzhou District in Shanghai for copper management and reuse, and measures implemented in China since 2008 to address environmental problems demanded by the middle class, demonstrate progress. The EU has promoted initiatives such as the EU-ASEAN regional collaboration workshop of 2019 and the SWITCH-Asia Programme I and II, which integrates 19 Asian countries seeking the development of a green economy with sustainable consumption and production.

[12] UNEP

Since 2016, the Center for Innovation and Circular Economy (CIEC)[13] in Latin America has facilitated business opportunities with companies, governments, international organisations, and professionals, along with the Circular Economy Foundation in Latin America. Forums, events, and observatories, such as the Latin American Circular Economy Forum and the Latin American Circular Economy Observatory, as well as initiatives like the more than 30 projects carried out by the Inclusive Recycling Initiative (IRR) and the National Circular Economy Strategy of Colombia, exemplify regional efforts.

Overall, a multitude of projects, forums, policies, events, and regulations are being utilised to develop an economy that mitigates the environmental crisis. Although the EU and China are leading the advancement of the circular economy, there is a consensus among researchers, international organisations, and states regarding the suitability of the circular economy for developing a sustainable economy and reducing global risks and the polycrisis. The interrelationship between the polycrises affecting the environment, politics, economy, health, and society is acknowledged by a majority of stakeholders involved in policy development.

(3) The Circular Economy in EU-Africa relations

The circular economy has evolved into a global phenomenon, with the EU as a primary advocate. Its policies and regulations shape the relationship between member countries and relations with third parties. The objectives and actions are set out in the Circular Economy Action Plan of 2015, with 54 actions already under implementation as of 2024. Initiatives such as the Circular Economy Support Platform for the implementation of projects, financing from the European Fund for Strategic Investments, the Structural Funds, the Horizon 2020 Programme further support these efforts.

In the EU's proposal towards a comprehensive EU strategy with Africa, outlined by the European Commission in 2020, five priorities were identified: (i) the green transition and access to energy in accordance with the Paris Agreement; (ii) digital transformation; (iii) sustainable growth and job creation; (iv) peace and governance, and (v) a balanced, coherent and comprehensive approach to migration and mobility[14]. The health aspects of Covid-19 were subsequently added, as well as a commitment of €150 billion through the Africa-EU Global Gateway Investment Package Between 2021 and 2027. Additionally, the EU utilizes Circular Economy Policy and Business Missions, which have been undertaken initiatives mainly in Latin America and Asia since 2016. These missions aim to promote sustainable policies for the efficient use of resources, through the exchange of knowledge and experiences. Indeed, the Circular Economy Action Plan is contingent on the inclusion of countries that supply and produce goods within the highly interdependent EU economy.

In Africa, initiatives have been primarily implemented in South Africa in collaboration with the African Union, the African Circular Economy Alliance, the United Nations Environment Programme, and the World Economic Forum (WEF). The African Circular Economy Network (ACEN) represents countries from across Africa, hosting events and cooperating in the development of the circular economy on the continent, serving as a forum for exchanging knowledge and experiences. The SWITCH Africa Green programme, funded by the EU, also contributes to these efforts.

In 2013, the African Union presented Agenda 2063, which outlines actions and objectives to eliminate poverty on the continent within 50

[13] *Centro de Innovación y Economía Circular - CIEC*
[14] European Commission, 2020

years, promote economic integration, minimise armed violence, and foster a new pan-Africanism rooted in cultural identity and independence from external influence. In 2018, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) was established with 23 initial member countries, aiming to eventually include 54 countries, representing 1.3 billion people and an estimated population of 2.5 billion by 2050, with 83% dependence on natural resources, while at the same time representing 30% of the world's supply of mineral reserves.

At the World Circular Economy Forum (WCEF Brussels 2024), the efforts of the African Development Bank, through the African Circular Economy Fund (ACEF) and the African Circular Economy Alliance (ACEA), were highlighted. Efforts are focused on addressing the triple crisis of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss in Africa. The strategies emphasize driving a systemic circular transformation through tailored financial solutions, sectoral support, and collaboration between stakeholders.

The primary challenges revolve around assigning responsibility and financing the green transition. Africa is among the continent's most severely impacted by climate change, despite contributing only 3.7% of greenhouse gas emissions, with significant effects on agriculture, water resources, coastal regions, and arid lands[15]. Since the first Joint Africa-EU Strategy in 2007, a shared interest in environmental sustainability has been a foreign policy priority. While there is a consensus that the most developed and polluting nations should bear the greatest financial responsibility, as stipulated since the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, 53 African countries presented their voluntary national contributions in 2021. The necessary contributions have not been met, making the 2030 objectives unattainable and imperil international commitments with Africa. The EU's agricultural policies also pose challenges to its viability.

Therefore, two key issues hinder the development and financing of environmental programmes: 1) **mutual distrust** and 2) differences in the **narratives** presented regarding African countries, which often portray them solely as rule-takers rather than as key actors, with agency in the design of in their own development trajectory. Negotiations for the Joint strategy have been complicated by historical scepticism among African countries, stemming from a perception that Europe applies a double standard— espousing a realist lens on economic and security issues while assuming a moral high ground on environmental and human rights concerns. The trade relations between the EU and Africa are characterized by several key asymmetries. For instance, Africa's exports to the EU are primarily commodities and raw materials, whereas Europe exports manufactured products and services.

The interplay between the circular economy and Africa's geopolitical landscape is deeply influenced by the broader dynamics of the polycrisis. The resurgence of military conflicts, such as those stemming from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, ongoing tensions in the Middle East, and the lingering effects of the Arab Spring, have intensified global competition for influence in Africa. This phenomenon, often referred to as "the new scramble for Africa[16]," underscores the continent's strategic importance as a resource hub. Compounding this is the rise of autocratic governance trends and the emergence of a "new cold war[17]" in Africa, driven by competing interests from global powers such as Russia, China, and India. These actors primarily focus on securing access to raw materials, often sidelining

[15] Boko *et al*. 2007
[16] The Economist, 2019.
[17] Declan, 2023

critical social and environmental considerations[18].

(4) Policy Recommendations

To effectively transform the circular economy into a strategic asset for mitigating the polycrisis and fostering sustainable development across Africa, in alignment with both African and EU priorities, the following recommendations are presented. **These recommendations address systemic barriers and build upon the insights from critiques of EU-Africa environmental policy**.[19] These include:

(i) Many initiatives are reformulations of previous efforts, lacking substantial innovation or transformative impact.

(ii) A critical assessment reveals that EU-Africa environmental policies tend to align disproportionately with European interests, potentially overlooking or marginalizing the unique needs and priorities of African nations.

(iii) Despite the proclaimed rhetoric of an equal partnership, the EU-Africa relationship remains fundamentally asymmetric, characterized by significant power imbalances and unequal access to resources and decision-making processes.

(iv) A persistent post-colonial legacy continues to influence EU-Africa relations, often manifesting as a "double truth" characterized by conflicting agendas and priorities. This legacy manifests in issues ranging from transitional justice mechanisms to the historical context of armed conflicts, highlighting the complex interplay between historical injustices and contemporary development challenges[20].

(v) The decision-making and implementation processes within the EU are often characterized by bureaucratic inefficiencies and procedural delays, hindering the timely and effective response to urgent global crises.

Drawing on the discussions above regarding the circular economy, we put forward the following policy recommendations:

[18] European Commission , 2024
[19] Adelle and Lightfoot, 2018; Masters and Landsberg, 2020; Mcnair, 2022
[20] Buckley-Zistel S *et al*., 2015

Policy recommendations

(i) **Overcoming Asymmetries through Value-Driven Collaboration:** Reframe the EU-Africa relationship to prioritize reciprocal benefits and shared values related to the circular economy. This requires moving beyond traditional donor-recipient models to foster genuine partnerships based on mutual respect and equitable resource governance. A singular, ethically grounded narrative, free of double standards, must guide engagement, particularly given the geopolitical challenges posed by autocratic tendencies in some African nations.

(ii) **Promoting Horizontal and Symmetric Relationships**: Cultivate symmetry and horizontality in collaborative schemes, recognizing the distinct yet equitable roles of African nations in driving their development agendas. This entails empowering African stakeholders to lead initiatives, fostering a sense of ownership, and ensuring alignment with local contexts and priorities. This revised relationship framework should extend to all involved parties, including multilateral funders and private sector actors.

(iii) **Developing a Realistic and Actionable Agenda**: Formulate a clear, time-bound agenda with measurable Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that align with global climate and environmental targets and the urgent need for sustainable energy transitions. This agenda should reflect a nuanced understanding of the African context and prioritize scalable solutions that can deliver tangible results in a timely manner.

(iv) **Establishing Transparent and Equitable Funding Criteria:** Design transparent and equitable funding criteria that promote economic and financial viability, reducing reliance on subsidy-based systems susceptible to geopolitical manipulation. This requires a shift towards innovative financing mechanisms that incentivize private sector investment, promote resource efficiency, and foster circular business models.

(v) **Investing in Eco-Innovation and R&D:** Prioritize strategic investments in eco-innovation and localized Research & Development (R&D) to drive sustainable development and achieve environmental objectives. This should include supporting the development of context-specific technologies, promoting knowledge transfer, and building local capacity to address unique challenges and opportunities within the African context.

Broadly, these recommendations focus on three main objectives: first, to strategically embed circular economy principles within the core processes of raw material extraction, sustainable production methodologies, and renewable energy generation across Africa, thereby mitigating the impacts of the polycrisis. Second, to foster a horizontal alliance between Europe and Africa characterized by shared values, mutual respect, and reciprocal development autonomy, acknowledging and addressing existing power asymmetries. And third, to actively co-create and implement innovative technological solutions and sustainable financing mechanisms tailored to the specific needs of diverse sectors and enterprises, facilitating the practical application of circular economy models across the continent.

(5) Conclusion

This policy brief has highlighted the pivotal role of the circular economy in Africa as part of the solutions aimed at addressing the complex challenges posed by the polycrisis. By adopting circular principles, Africa can enhance its resilience to climate change, resource scarcity, and economic shocks, while simultaneously promoting sustainable development and improving the livelihoods of its citizens. Furthermore, the collaborative efforts of the EU, international organizations, and African governments are crucial to realizing the full potential of the circular economy.

Multilateral international organizations have launched numerous initiatives aimed at addressing environmental risks, yet their success has been limited by the complexity of the challenges and the inherent inertia of large-scale interventions. Beyond issues of financial non-compliance, the implementation of effective environmental strategies is further complicated by the enduring legacies of post-colonialism, recent political instability marked by coups and autocratic shifts, the transformative political changes stemming from the Arab Spring, and the internationalization of regional conflicts. The increasing geopolitical engagement of actors such as Russia, China, and India on the continent serves to amplify the multifaceted dimensions of the polycrisis. Recognizing the limitations of existing approaches, the European Union and China are emerging as key drivers in the development and promotion of circular economy models, with Africa playing an essential geopolitical role in their respective strategies. The continent's geostrategic location, shared historical ties with Europe, and its significance as a primary source of natural resources underline its positioning at the epicentre of global politics, with the potential to shape the trajectory of future collaborations and partnerships.

Future Directions

To effectively incorporate circular economy policies for mitigating the polycrisis and fostering sustainable development in Africa, the following strategic directions are recommended:

1. ***Establishment of Sector-Specific Environmental KPIs***: Develop and implement comprehensive Environmental Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) tailored to specific sectors and activities to drive accountability and monitor progress towards circularity.

2. ***Comprehensive Roadmap and Agenda***: Develop a clear and comprehensive roadmap and agenda guided by the urgency of the climate and environmental crises, ensuring alignment with global climate agreements and sustainable energy transition plans.

3. ***Integration of Synergistic Economic Models***: Promote the integration of complementary economic models to holistically address the polycrisis. This includes, but is not limited to, the functional economy, social economy, collaborative economy, and sustainable finance.

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Acknowledgements

Co-funded by the European Union

The CIVIS network is a consortium of 21 universities in Europe and Africa. In October 2023, it initiated the PolyCIVIS project, focused on confronting the Polycrisis in Europe and Africa through Research, Policy and Education. The PolyCIVIS project is funded by the European Union, Erasmus+.