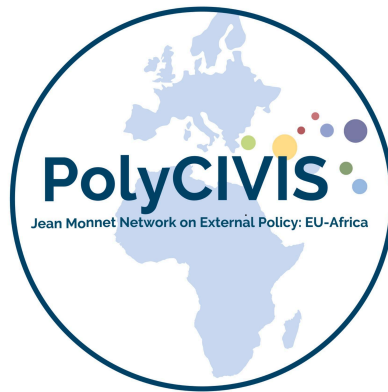


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Introduction

The PolyCIVIS Network¹, consisting of 21 African and European Universities, and funded by the European Union Erasmus+/Jean Monnet Programme, held its second Agora Forum² at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) in Dakar, Senegal on 23 April 2025. The aim of the PolyCIVIS Network is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the concept of polycrisis³, and its implications for global governance and security through research, policy and education.

At the Agora Forum, African and European academics and stakeholders discussed how to reinvigorate international cooperation on environmental degradation, climate change and energy transition. It explored how simultaneous crises - from geopolitical conflicts to climate shocks - are reshaping policy priorities on both continents, and how Europe and Africa can still find common ground to tackle environmental challenges.

Context

The world is experiencing a polycrisis - multiple, interconnected crises - that is testing the resilience of Africa-Europe relations. The COVID-19 pandemic, global economic challenges and, in particular, the Russia/Ukraine war have created spill-over effects that complicate cooperation on pressing issues such as climate change and energy. The war in Ukraine has triggered a continental energy crisis in Europe, forcing a rapid rethink of energy security and prompting emergency measures to reduce dependence on Russian fuel (Knaepen et al., 2023).

Europe's focus has shifted to energy sovereignty - ensuring control over its energy supply - which has meant both accelerating the green transition at home and seeking new energy partners abroad. Meanwhile, Africa has been hit by soaring food and fuel prices, debt pressures and climate disasters, deepening its vulnerability. Amid these shocks, Africa and Europe identify climate change as an existential threat. But within this context, their climate and energy partnership has suffered setbacks. African leaders have recently expressed frustration that Europe's responses to the crisis - however well-intentioned - sometimes appear one-sided, serving European interests first and providing insufficient support for Africa's adaptation needs.

¹ For further details, see <https://civis.eu/en/discover-civis/civis-alliance-projects/polycivis>

² The Agora Forum is a platform for dialogue and exchange of ideas between policy makers, researchers, and civil society on the polycrisis and its possible solutions. This document, prepared jointly by the PolyCIVIS Policy and Management Work Packages, follows the Agora Forum.

³ The term "polycrisis" is defined by an era of interconnected global challenges. Characterised by trans-boundary effects, multiple causality, and complex system properties, the polycrisis presents unique obstacles to traditional forms of governance.

Impacts of the Polycrisis on Africa-Europe Cooperation on Climate, Environment and Energy

Geopolitical upheaval has changed the landscape of climate cooperation. Europe's immediate response to the war in Ukraine was to secure alternative energy sources and absorb economic shocks, even if that meant short-term reliance on fossil fuels or finding new suppliers. The European Union (EU) launched initiatives such as REPowerEU to accelerate the transition to renewables and energy savings but also signed deals to import gas from Africa and elsewhere to replace Russian supplies. While these initiatives met immediate needs, they raised concerns among African partners about long-term commitments and fairness. At a time when the United States of America is drastically cutting its development assistance funding, there is a risk that Europe's crisis-driven measures to bolster energy security may sideline environmental sustainability, particularly affecting sustainable transitions in the Global South (Kuzemko et al., 2022). In addition, the upscaling of defense budgets of EU Member States will have an impact on EU resources for environmental and climate actions. Indeed, observers note that the EU's recent climate and energy actions "risk exacerbating tensions with countries in the Global South that see the EU's green transition as an exclusive project and a danger to their economic development" (Knaepen et al., 2023).

To this end, if Europe's green policies are perceived as Europe-first – for example, imposing strict carbon tariffs or redirecting funds to its own energy security – trust with African nations may erode. At the same time, Africa is grappling with its own crises that intersect with climate vulnerability. Many African countries face unsustainable debt burdens (exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic and the Ukraine-induced economic downturn) that constrain their ability to invest in climate resilience (Medinilla et al., 2023). In the Sahel, prolonged droughts and land degradation - compounded by climate change - are contributing to resource conflicts and instability. Addressing these challenges is not just a local priority, but a global security issue: building climate resilience in hotspots like the Sahel is "integral to European security" (Knaepen, 2025), highlighting a shared interest in addressing climate-related risks. In West and Central Africa, countries must balance the protection of vital ecosystems (such as the Congo Basin rainforests, often referred to as Africa's "green lung") with the pursuit of economic development and energy access for their growing populations.

The interdependence of Europe and Africa in the current polycrisis is evident, and can be framed as follows:

- Climate impacts in Africa - whether drought in the Sahel or flooding in coastal West Africa - can have migration and security implications that reach Europe's shores.
- Conversely, crises in Europe (war, inflation) can divert attention and resources from global climate cooperation, directly affecting African countries that rely on pledged climate finance and support.

While potentially exacerbating tensions and mistrust, the polycrisis also offers opportunities for renewed cooperation. Both continents have seen that siloed approaches are insufficient when crises overlap. As mentioned above, the shock to energy markets caused by the war in Ukraine has in some ways acted as a turning point (Steffen & Patt, 2022), accelerating Europe's resolve for a green transition - renewable energy is now not just an environmental goal, but a strategic imperative for energy independence (Falkner, 2023; Raina & Tewari, 2024). This opens opportunities for Europe-Africa cooperation: Europe is looking for reliable partners for its energy needs, and Africa - rich in solar, wind and other resources - could benefit from investment in clean energy infrastructure. Rather than being "collateral damage" in the global turmoil, African countries can be key partners, leveraging their assets (solar energy, critical minerals, and young workforce) in joint initiatives.

The challenge is to ensure that such partnerships are equitable. As one analysis noted, African countries risk being treated as an afterthought, despite having "a number of critical (mineral) assets for a global green transition". It highlighted that while the African Union (AU) and EU share climate goals, their starting points are different - leading to tensions over African agency, the optics of unilateral EU action, and inadequate climate finance relative to Africa's needs (Karkare & Mendinilla, 2023).

Proceedings

The Agora Forum consisted of one Panel Discussion and two Roundtables. The discussions focussed on how the polycrisis impacts on climate and environmental cooperation between Africa and Europe, and explored concrete joint Africa-Europe projects that support a balanced approach to energy transition, despite technical and political hurdles. The following key questions framed the debates and exchanges at the Agora Forum:

- How has the 'polycrisis' (war in Ukraine, global economic instability, pandemic, etc.) affected the Africa-Europe partnership on climate and energy?
- What adjustments in EU policies (energy, climate, trade) could make them more supportive of Africa's development and climate priorities?
- How can African and European actors work together to bridge the climate finance gap?
- How can the two continents better coordinate their climate diplomacy and strategy?
- What research, innovation and knowledge sharing are needed to underpin cooperation?
- Finally, what immediate next steps can Agora Forum participants identify to strengthen Africa-Europe cooperation?

Key takeaways

Avenues discussed to respond to these questions and to promote Africa-Europe collaboration, included the following:

⇒ ***Finding Common Ground in Policy and Narrative***

Both Africa and Europe need to move beyond zero-sum thinking. Indeed, Europe's Green Deal and Africa's Agenda 2063 do not have to be at odds - there are complementarities to be highlighted. One example is green industrialisation: Europe's quest for supply chain security (for batteries, solar panels, etc.) can support Africa's industrial growth if investment is directed towards manufacturing in Africa. Already, the EU is starting to invest in local processing and training, rather than simply mining Africa's raw materials. These models should be replicated across more countries and sectors. Likewise, Africa's push for universal energy access can align with climate goals if supported by European technology and financing for renewables and grid expansion.

⇒ ***Revitalising Climate Finance and Investment Mechanisms***

Money is often where good intentions run aground. The Forum explored creative financing solutions such as scaling up debt-for-climate swaps (forgiving part of a country's debt in exchange for investment in climate projects) or blended finance schemes (using public funds or guarantees to de-risk and attract private investment in African green projects).

Participants also discussed opportunities for a reset on the global political stage: upcoming events such as the G20, COP30 (2025) and the planned AU-EU Summit (2025) are opportunities to announce joint commitments (such as new targets for adaptation support). In this regard, Africa and Europe should work together to push multilateral development banks to reform and provide more concessional climate finance. Participants supported initiatives such as the creation of an African Climate Bank or leveraging Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) for climate action. It was emphasised that the quality of finance matters as much as quantity – grants for adaptation, not just loans, and aligning funding with African countries' own climate plans (Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and National Action Plans (NAPs)).

⇒ ***Joint Initiatives for a Just Energy Transition***

Concrete joint projects exemplify a balanced approach to energy transition, despite the technical and political hurdles. Europe must support coal-dependent African countries in their transition, considering their desire to develop economically in a balanced and sustainable manner. Examples such as the South African Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP), the North African solar and wind projects supplying Europe (via undersea cables or green hydrogen shipments), and the Euro-African "green power pool" that interconnects grids across the Mediterranean, could be structured as Africa-Europe partnerships.

⇒ ***Aligning Policies and Standards***

Mechanism should be developed for Africa and Europe to consult on major policy changes. This could prevent unilateral action, unnecessary negative impacts and provide guidance in developing environmental standards that reflect global best practices. Participants were of the view that the concept of an 'Africa-EU Climate Alliance' should be revisited as the vehicle to institutionalise cooperation on climate policy, science and action.

⇒ ***Emphasising Co-Benefits and Human Dimensions***

Ultimately, climate, environment and energy cooperation should deliver tangible benefits that are effective and equitable for people in both Africa and Europe. The Forum emphasised that issues such as job creation, health, education and access to basic services should not be overlooked.

General discussions on the two key issues covered during the Agora Forum - energy transition and climate change - produced the following additional perspectives and recommendations:

- Acknowledgment that energy transition improves people's living conditions and reduces environmental pollution, which is a source of disease and climate change.
- The urgent need for an increased focus and effort at both the African and European levels to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- For Africa-Europe cooperation on energy transition, the emphasis should be on the green transition, which would allow for greater energy inclusion in Africa and the diversification of partners in energy policies.
- Prioritise the establishment of Africa-Europe collaborations through multi-stakeholder partnership that complement multilateral approaches to ensure de-risking and the diversification of energy supply.
- Africa and Europe should collaborate and build joint strategies to commence the process of the reform of global governance institutions, as they embed inequalities that disproportionately impact Africa.
- Greater AU involvement in the energy policies of African countries is needed to, inter alia, provide finance for young people to study and improve human capital, and to ensure more effective collaboration between research and policy.
- A call for improved and inclusive communication to ensure buy-in of environmental policies at all levels of society and to raise public awareness of responsible and sustainable production.
- Greater cooperation is needed between European and African Universities to allow academics to jointly and holistically look at regional, continental and global challenges and opportunities with a view to build resilience and propose solutions. Strong and frequent academic collaboration and engagement are prerequisites and critical for evidence-based policymaking. Researchers need to reinforce the impact of research and innovation in policy making. In this regard, the PolyCIVIS Network needs to use its wide geographical reach to engage with all stakeholders, including policymakers.

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PolyCIVIS: confronting the polycrisis in Europe and Africa

PolyCIVIS is a Euro - African collaboration that brings to the forefront the global polycrisis, allowing a better understanding of the impacts of several concurrent major societal crises challenging the world in the form of a polycrisis.

In the wake of the global polycrisis, urgent challenges have emerged, prompting PolyCIVIS to take action. Our initiative is dedicated to addressing these pressing global issues and their interconnected consequences.

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