

# **“Improve the AU-EU strategic partnership by ensuring that education for all is at the centre”**

**An open letter by civil society organisations**

The 6th Africa-EU Summit was announced to take place in February 2022 and a preparatory Ministerial Meeting will be held on 26 October. The new and long-awaited strategic partnership between the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU), which will be adopted at the Summit, cannot ignore the crisis in education that has occurred over the years and that has escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic. **A focus on education from the early years on to lifelong learning is paramount for overcoming inequalities, advancing human development, and poverty reduction.**

Inclusive education is one of the main vehicles towards social inclusion<sup>1</sup>, as it ensures that learners from all backgrounds are supported to achieve the best educational outcomes, reduces the risk of girls being pushed to an early and forced marriage and/or child pregnancy, and prevents family separation (a key pillar of the transition from institutional to family- and community-based care, a priority in EU external action).<sup>2</sup> In addition, there is robust evidence that early childhood education is one of the best investments that a country can make to prepare children for learning and give them a chance to thrive later in life.<sup>3</sup>

**Large-scale investments in education and teachers are needed to ensure an equitable recovery that addresses persistent educational exclusion and poor quality of education**, deepened in both Continents by the unprecedented global health crisis.

Prior to COVID-19, an estimated 258 million children, adolescents and youth - 97 million of whom in Sub-Saharan Africa - were not in school<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, enrollment in school does not automatically ensure learning: UNESCO has estimated that 56% of children of primary school age do not have basic reading skills.<sup>5</sup> In addition, too often the provision of education does not match the actual learners’ needs and aspirations, or it lacks relevance and vision. For example, education systems across the EU should put the European colonial past on the curriculum, as a measure to counteract racist and xenophobic attitudes and practices.

Teacher shortages continue to hamper progress towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where 4.1 million more teachers are needed to achieve universal primary and secondary education.<sup>6</sup>

Across the world’s regions, the most marginalised and underserved – children with disabilities, people with migrant background, low-income families, and girls – face the highest barriers to access and thrive in school, in particular when multiple factors of discrimination, intersect.

The European Commission’s Communication “Towards a comprehensive Strategy with Africa”, outlining the vision of the future Africa-EU partnership, **fails to recognise the central role of inclusive quality education - starting as early as possible** - as the precondition to progress to higher levels of education and training and to deliver on the strategic pillars proposed in the Communication itself (green transition and energy access, digital transformation, sustainable growth and jobs, peace, security and governance, migration and mobility). This does not seem consistent with the high-level commitments to education made by the European Commission, including in its new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) - Global Europe Instrument.

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<sup>1</sup> Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2016). General comment No. 4, Article 24: Right to inclusive education.

<sup>2</sup> The transition from institutional to family- and community-based care is featured in the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument, In the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2021-2024, and in the global dimension of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.globalpartnership.org/what-we-do/early-learning>

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO, 2019; New Methodology Shows that 258 Million Children, Adolescents and Youth Are Out of School; <sup>5</sup> UNESCO, 2017. More Than One-Half of Children and Adolescents Are Not Learning Worldwide.

<sup>6</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016.

The above concerns are better reflected in the Resolution adopted by the European Parliament in March 2021, which calls for human development to be placed at the heart of the strategy and stresses that education for all is a horizontal issue that affects every dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Summit's postponement should have given more time to deepen discussions with all stakeholders from both Continents, but we are concerned that there has not been a comprehensive and sufficient space for civil society participation, as it has been highlighted by organisations and networks (like CONCORD). The coming months are crucial to **engage in meaningful debates with stakeholders and partners** - including around education issues - and to seize the momentum and live up to the ambitions of a stronger partnership.

As Europe and Africa strive to respond to and recover from the pandemic and its consequences, our hopes are that the upcoming Ministerial Meeting and the 6th Africa-EU Summit will pave the road to a renewed partnership that places human development - and education for all - at the core of the joint efforts. In this regard, the signatories of this letter call upon the European and African leaders to ensure that:

- 1 Quality inclusive education at all levels** (from early childhood education, to primary, secondary and higher education, including technical, vocational education and training) is adequately addressed in the new EU-AU partnership, with significant investments to strengthen public education systems that respond to the needs of learners who face extra barriers accessing and thriving in education, such as children with disabilities, people with a migrant background, low-income families, women and girls. Considering current and projected shortages, investing in educators' training and professional development, salaries and working conditions is of utmost importance.
- 2 A comprehensive, ambitious plan to advance human development and social justice** is developed, relying on three pillars: addressing structural inequalities, including gender inequalities; strengthening ties across policy sectors (e.g. education, health and rehabilitation, nutrition, social protection); and meeting funding commitments. We acknowledge that this demand comes from across sectors and civil society groups, which further demonstrates the indispensability of such a plan.
- 3 Civil society is recognised as a key partner and is consulted** during the preparations leading up to the Summit, is meaningfully involved and has access to information regarding the design, the implementation and evaluation of the new Africa-EU partnership.

This letter is endorsed by (in alphabetical order):

ACT Alliance EU	International Disability and Development Consortium (IDDC)
Africa Network Campaign on Education for All (ANCEFA)	Light for the World
Bafashebigi Education for All Network, Burundi	Liliane Fonds
Cameroon Education For All Network	Lumos
CARE International	Plan International
Caritas Europe	Rede Angolana da Sociedade Civil de Educação para Todos, Angola
ChildFund Alliance	Save the Children
Education International (EI)	World Vision EU Representation
European Disability Forum (EDF)	
Global Campaign for Education International	
Humanity & Inclusion – Handicap International (HI)	

