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Advancing EU-China-Africa trilateral partnerships: the role of joint business ventures in promoting sustainability, innovation and institutional synergies

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Abstract

With a trilateral Africa-EU-China partnership gaining momentum, a greater understanding of this concept and its formulation in the European, African and Chinese discourse and foreign policy strategies is required. Offering an overview of the strengths, weaknesses and historical developments of the proposed Africa-EU-China trilateral cooperation, this paper critically engages with trilateral business cooperation between the three parties. Business cooperation should play a pivotal role in EU-Africa relations, functioning as the foundation upon which trilateral Africa-EU-China interactions and institutional synergies can be built, in business and beyond. First, to achieve this, greater institutional and financial backing from EU institutions for European companies active in Africa is needed. Second, the EU's Pan-African or country-specific approach to Africa should be replaced with a greater dialogue with sub-regional bodies. Third, an active engagement with China is to be sought in creating these new platforms. The paper identifies renewable energies and ICT as potential sectors for greater cooperation between the EU, China and a number of African regional bodies.

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Trilateral Africa-EU-China cooperation – An introduction

With the idea of a trilateral partnership gaining momentum, **business cooperation should play a pivotal role in EU-Africa relations** - functioning as a foundation for fostering trilateral Africa-EU-China interactions, in business and beyond. This cooperation should be **rooted in an enhanced dialogue between Europe and China** on the one hand**, and African regional bodies** on the other, and should **focus on emerging sectors** – such as **renewable energies** and Information and Communication Technology (**ICT**). This approach has the potential to **stimulate regional innovation and integration**, while at the same time **promote institutional dialogue** and the **achievement of strategic interests** shared between the three parties.

In the early 2000s, contact between China and the African continent started undergoing greater and faster expansion and diversification, involving an increasing number of countries, invested capital, and areas of interest. Around the same time, the European Union (EU) began seeking to reformulate its traditional approach toward Africa and started envisioning options for trilateral cooperation involving China and Africa. The discussion resulted in the 2008 European Commission (EC) proposal to build a trilateral dialogue with Africa and China. Despite the proposal not having matured into concrete projects yet, the expression "trilateral cooperation" is still prominent in the EU's political discourse on China affairs. China's growing importance as a global actor and its intensifying presence on the African continent has undoubtedly been a determining factor in the EC's renewed interest in developing a trilateral dialogue.

This paper will offer an overview of the historical developments and weaknesses of the proposed Africa-EU-China trilateral cooperation. It will also delve into trilateral business relations, shedding light on joint projects involving EU Member States, as well as European companies, African countries and Chinese firms. To conclude, ways forward for the EU to further promote business cooperation with Africa and China will be suggested – identifying potential sectors and partners that the EU could engage with in Africa.

Supporting a normative business environment and effectively promoting equal business partnership

Trilateral Africa-EU-China business cooperation is required to better **integrate all actors in the global economy** and to **boost overarching institutional synergies** between the three parties. However, **the EU has so far been unable to identify a regional or sub-regional African counterpart to develop an institutional framework with**, in order to effectively scale up the bilateral EU-Africa partnership in trade and investments, providing institutional support for a greater engagement of private companies from both sides.

The formulation of a clear EU-Africa business strategy focused on inter-regional private sector cooperation would undoubtedly bring about positive developments in the promotion and regulation of trilateral business ventures. It would, first, address the concerns connected to the African ownership of this trilateral process. A major limitation to the unleashing of African agency has in fact been found in the nature of the business exchanges between European and African countries. Namely, the limited European engagement with local entrepreneurial environments and emerging sectors in

African markets, stemming from uncertainty and a perceived risk of failure - due, on the one hand, to the scarce knowledge of local business practices and dynamics and, on the other, to the lack of institutional backing. **Encouraging partnerships between the European and the African private sector should be a crucial point in the new EU-Africa business strategy, with the twofold aim of enhancing the confidence of European companies active in African markets and supporting the development of an African private sector**. Second and consequently, **a stronger African entrepreneurial environment and greater African ownership of trilateral business ventures would certainly contribute to the establishment of a level playing field in African markets**. These developments would be essential to the advancement of an economic and legal environment in which all parties follow the same rules and gain equal opportunities to compete.

Action from the EU is imperative to strengthen inter-regional and trilateral business exchanges and boost growth and competitiveness of African business environments. Three main measures could facilitate this process. First, the **formulation of a clear EU strategy to back European companies and reduce the risk for private investors**. This would be essential to stimulate the presence of European companies in African markets. Some positive developments in this respect have been witnessed since the start of the new European Commission in late 2019, with the development of a 'Geopolitical Commission' and a new pivot to Africa. Following Jean-Claude Juncker's Investment plan for Europe, the new Commission has made a proposal to set up the 'European Fund for Sustainable Development-plus' (ESDF+) within the new 'Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument' (NDICI). This new financial architecture would include grants and other financial instruments, as well as a new unified and open framework for guarantees, the 'External Action Guarantee' (EAG), to cover both sovereign and commercial risks. However, more action will be required to turn it into an effective investment instrument (Bilal, 2019).

A second step to be taken is to **advance the EU's dialogues with its African counterparts on regional integration, business and trade**. The move towards more structured regionalism has been a growing trend on the African continent, a sector in which the EU's experience in regional institution building can offer valuable support. Building an enhanced dialogue and focusing on trade and business, the EU should further assist regional bodies in enhancing the local business environment and, consequently, promote partnerships between African companies and their European counterparts in advancing their cooperation and exchanges. European companies could in turn learn from the local market expertise of their African counterparts. By improving the overall business environment in Africa and enhancing EU-Africa knowledge exchange, European businesses would not only benefit from new opportunities, but the EU would also facilitate the creation of an institutional framework that regulates business cooperation between African, European and Chinese entities on the African continent – thereby strengthening the voices of African stakeholders and guiding European companies' practices in Africa.

Besides supporting European companies in Africa, promoting institutional effectiveness and regional integration**, the EU should encourage trilateral agreements with China and African countries or regional bodies, to co-finance projects in Africa's emerging sectors**, such as the ICT and renewable energy sectors. Recently, advances in EU-China co-investment ventures have been made, which can provide a roadmap for co-financing in the African region. For instance, during the 20th EU-China Summit, a Memorandum of

Understanding between the European Investment Fund and the Silk Road Forum was signed, confirming the first co-funding mechanism carried out under the China-EU Co-Investment Fund. The initiative is aimed to promote “investment cooperation between the European Union and China and the development of synergies between China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Investment Plan for Europe” (European Investment Fund, 2018). Despite its focus on the enhancement of cooperation among businesses and enterprises in Europe and China it holds the capacity to represent an example for co-financed projects to be tailored to the highly diverse composition of the African continent and possible areas of action, even though its potential has not been fully reached to date. A further step would be to bring African, European and Chinese stakeholders together to create a plan for this trilateral partnership, launching co-funded projects and investments in which all three actors commit to agreed standards and obligations.

1. An overview of the Africa-EU-China trilateral cooperation

1.1 China-Africa relations and Chinese presence on the African continent

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Sino-African relations have experienced a substantial expansion in terms of trade and investments. Increasing volumes of trade have already made China the largest trading partner for many African countries (Zheng, 2016). Moreover, several financing commitments in the form of aid, investments and loans[1] have made **China a stronger and more influential player in the African context**. This development is likely to weaken Western institutions' "monopoly as preferred financier[s] of African development" (Kopinski & Sun, 2016). China has also become a more important actor in the field of security, with its greater financial contribution and military participation in UN-led peace-building, peace-keeping missions and anti-piracy undertakings. To a lesser extent, China has also sealed partnerships in the education sector, promoted the Chinese language and culture through scholarships, exchange programs and the spread of Confucius Institute branches.

The creation of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 has provided an official framework to further promote Chinese investments in African countries. During the last FOCAC Summit held in September 2018, Beijing promised to "encourage Chinese companies – [including private investors] - to make at least $10 billion of investment in Africa in the next three years", in order to diversify the investment landscape, and expand the number and type of Chinese investors in Africa (Sun, 2018). To further back this process and support Chinese companies' investments in Africa, the Chinese government has also been increasingly favouring the use of funding provided by Chinese financial development institutions in recent years, such as the China Development Bank and China-Africa Development Fund (Sun, 2018). Another relevant development in this context has been the launch of the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI).

Despite the scarce availability of complete and reliable data, a McKinsey Report issued in 2017 estimated that the total number of **Chinese-owned economic activities on the African continent already exceeds 10,000** (Sun, Jayaram, & Kassiri, 2017)[2].

1.2 Early stages of an EU trilateral cooperation proposal

In the early 2000s, **China's increased involvement** in economic development and other areas at the global level and, more specifically**, on the African continent**, was not yet perceived as a relevant issue by most EU Member States. Yet, some scholars suggest it directly or indirectly **stimulated a renewed interest and a change of approach by the EU towards Africa** (see Carbone, 2011; Hooijmaaijers, 2018; Stahl, 2018). This switch in the EU's approach became evident in 2007, with the adoption of the Joint Africa-EU Strategy at

[1] During the last FOCAC (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation) Summit, held in Beijing at the beginning of September this year, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced China's financing commitment of $60 billion to the African continent (新华网, 2018). This recent pledge adds on to a number of past financing commitments to Africa with a total of approximately $125 billion from 2000 to 2016 (Data: Chinese Loans to Africa, 2018).

[2] Estimates on the Chinese business presence vary from source to source, especially in the case of privately-owned activities. They are, indeed, more difficult to track as they might not be registered with the local governmental entities of their provinces of origins, with China's government agencies or with local authorities of the African countries where they start their activities. This would be, at least to some extent, related to the still unclear procedures and regulations issued by the Chinese government for Chinese companies to invest abroad (Gu, 2009) and to the increased number of Chinese authorities and ministries investors might refer to, as well as their absence of knowledge on local laws (Shen, 2015).

the Lisbon EU-Africa Summit. The Strategy envisioned the development of a "partnership of equals" with Africa beyond the traditional donor-recipient relationship. At the same time, the EU also started showing interest in developing a dialogue with China on Africa and the possibility of a trilateral partnership with Africa and China.

In 2008, the EC called for a "**cooperative three-way agenda** with both African and Chinese partners in a number of areas where synergies and mutual benefits can be maximised." (European Commission, 2008). According to the EC's document, the three parties involved were to adopt a shared, pragmatic and progressive approach. This meant realising result-oriented cooperation in the form of concrete projects, that would have to be fully endorsed by interested African partners. As envisaged by the EC, the trilateral cooperation would be based on a multi-level dialogue, involving best practice exchanges and consultations from local to continental level while simultaneously promoting development and aid effectiveness. This proposal was in line with the EU's attempt to reinvent its approach to Africa, going beyond traditional aid donor-recipient relations and incorporating new political objectives to traditional development goals.

The 2008 EC's proposal was supported by the Council of the EU. However, developing trilateral cooperation proved to be in the interest of the EU but not necessarily a priority for Africa and China. **The African Union (AU)** and its Member States rejected the EC's 2008 proposal, doubting the EU's real intentions behind the offer. They **perceived it as an attempt by the EU to interfere into African affairs** and to impose EU priorities and standards rather than adapting to the African ones (Stahl, 2015). Meanwhile, the Chinese authorities were not particularly interested in starting a trilateral dialogue with the EU and Africa. Although over time they started seeing the EC proposal as an **opportunity to boost China's image internationally and in Africa**, they would not give up the principles of non-interference and equal partnership. Consequently, they would engage in the trilateral projects only if endorsed by the African counterparts, too (Stahl, 2015).

On its side, the **EU** made little effort to make its proposal of trilateral cooperation more attractive. First of all, despite organising official meetings with China, the EU **did not seek exchanges with African authorities**, failing to adequately integrate their viewpoints and priorities. Furthermore, the EU seemed to be reproducing its old normative approach, by suggesting China learn from the European experience and adhere to its development standards (Stahl, 2018).

As a result, despite the EU and China's engagement in a bilateral dialogue on Africa within the EU-China Strategic Partnership, **the trilateral Africa-EU-China cooperation never moved beyond the experimental stage.**

1.3 Trilateral cooperation in today's political discourse

The EU's will to develop a tripartite partnership has, in fact, not vanished over time and has also recently been expressed on several official occasions. In the European Commission's Joint Communication to The European Parliament, the European Council and the Council titled **"EU-China – A Strategic Outlook", issued in March 2019**, it is acknowledged that Chinese business and investment activities have become extensively present in regions of high consideration for the EU, such as Africa. It is suggested that China's widespread presence can provide **great opportunities for positive engagement in trilateral cooperation**, if "demand-driven and based on mutual interests and understanding" (European Commission, 2019). A trilateral dialogue could also work as a regulatory tool, as European businesses suffer a lack of level playing field when competing in third countries' markets with Chinese firms, which are seemingly advantaged by state-backed loans and export credits at preferential terms, while applying different corporate and labour standards (European Commission, 2019). Later, at the 21st China-EU Summit, held in Brussels in April 2019, the EU and China reiterated the importance of consultations on foreign policy and security issues, including exchanges on Africa. At the 11th Round of China-European Union Consultation on African Affairs, held in Beijing in July 2019, EU and Chinese representatives discussed priority issues in Africa and exchanged views on potential avenues for trilateral cooperation.

However, in spite of its presence in the EU's policy discourse, the **concept** of trilateral cooperation insofar **lacks a clear and commonly-agreed definition**, in both political and academic texts (Stahl A., 2015).

As mentioned previously, the European Commission's proposal to build a trilateral dialogue with Africa and China issued in 2008 outlined the EC's understanding of what should constitute this trilateral cooperation and its development-oriented approach.

China currently engages with the EU in a bilateral dialogue on Africa and in bilateral partnerships with African countries, for example through Memoranda of Understanding related to the Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese actors have also taken part in trilateral projects with European and African state and private actors. However, **China** seems to **frame** trilateral cooperation with European and African partners **as a tool to develop business opportunities and to engage rather at state level than through regional bodies**. It has indeed started third-party cooperation (第三方合作 *disanfang hezuo*) with some EU Member States in Africa. The aim is, first, to combine China's and developed countries' comparative advantages to meet the needs of developing countries with lower prices and higher quality and drive. Secondly, to enable China's industrial upgrading and developed countries' export expansion (Yu, 2015).

However, as it can be understood, the establishment of effective Africa-EU-China trilateral cooperation did not become a central topic within the African Union – the selected dialogue partner on the African side in 2008. Hence it is difficult to discern the "African" expectations regarding the form and content of this trilateral dialogue.

In conclusion, this shows that **no advantage from a trilateral partnership is perceived by African stakeholders as long as Africa's needs and priorities are seriously taken into consideration.**

2. Trilateral business cooperation, in practice

As discussed, **the concept of trilateral cooperation and the way the EU has so far attempted to operationalise it, display significant limitations**. First, the idea of setting up trilateral cooperation put forward by the EU was met with caution by the African Union and reformulated in China's strategy through the lenses of the BRI. Second, the European Union's approach to this cooperation has been focusing on the creation of dialogue platforms *with* China *on* Africa, not upholding its own proposal of developing a trilateral partnership between equals. Third, the EU has failed in developing strong inter-regional partnerships within the broad and multifaceted African environment. The EU has not been able so far to create a strong relationships with the AU or other sub-regional entities, consequently missing a fundamental African counterpart in building trilateral cooperation.

In the following section, **this chapter discusses the current status of trilateral Africa-Europe-China business cooperation** – a realm in which effective tripartite cooperation has proven particularly difficult to achieve. In doing so, it critically engages with the **institutional role played by both the EU and China in regulating this emerging kind of partnership**, assessing the extent to which these institutional developments – or lack thereof – impact European and African interests. The second section provides **a country-specific evaluation of trilateral business cooperation** between, on the one hand, France, Italy and Germany, and Africa and China on the other. The analysis of these findings will conclude with a discussion on the main limitations in existing trilateral business cooperation projects and the evolving institutional frameworks connected to them. The findings and discussion outlined in this chapter are the fundamental building block both for the recommendations presented in the introductory chapter, and for the sectoral strategies in the conclusion.

2.1 Taking a closer look at Africa, Europe and China business cooperation

Regarding trilateral Africa-Europe-China partnership in the business realm, the key problem on the EU side has been the overall lack of institutional effectiveness. **The EU has not yet succeeded in creating a compelling legal and financial framework for trilateral business cooperation between its Member States, African countries and China**. Such a framework is essential, as it would allow the incorporation of the key priorities of the three sets of actors, while specifically safeguarding and supporting the interests of European companies active on the continent.

Despite this limitation, **individual EU Member States have been increasingly involved in trilateral cooperation ventures with Chinese and African counterparts**. Over the last decade, a growing number of European companies have been looking at African markets as lands of opportunity, and at Chinese companies as crucial partners in exploring these new markets. The interest in doing business with African countries represents a change of course for European companies. Progressively moving away from the donor-recipient paradigm, **European companies are today attempting to enter African markets as equal partners** – slowly leaving behind the influence that the aid industry had had on the EU-Africa investment and business climate. **They are nonetheless facing a number of limitations**. First, European companies are often not able to adapt and fully develop their potential in the highly multifaceted – and at times uncertain – African business environment. Moreover, the lack of institutional backing from the EU on the one hand, and the growing number of flexible business players from the Global South on the other

– not just China, but also Brazil, India, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey –, further complicates the ability of European companies to adapt and build solid partnership on the African markets.

Filling the institutional gap left by the EU, **the Chinese government has taken the lead in developing bilateral frameworks to enhance its partnerships with European nations and their major companies**. Beijing has enhanced its relations with several EU Member States, upgrading their relations to strategic comprehensive partnerships, while framing Chinese business relations with European nations beyond their respective borders according to the **Third-Partner Market Cooperation (TPCM) framework**. This supposedly follows a "triple-win" model (三方共赢 *sanfang gongyin*), designed to "effectively bring together China's high production capacity, the advanced technologies of developed states and the needs of developing nations" (Duchâtel, 2019). This framework is **driven by shared economic interests**. Companies should take the lead in developing partnerships, and national governments should adopt institutional measures to facilitate them (Cabestan, 2016). Since 2015, China signed TPCM agreements with Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. Given its strategical importance to the BRI, both for geographical reasons and for its untapped market potential, the African continent has been the main arena for this market cooperation (NDRC, 2019).

From the EU perspective, the fact that China has been stepping up its bilateral engagement in TPCM since the launch of the BRI in 2013 can be read as both a positive and a negative development. **These bilateral agreements could represent a building block for the establishment of a trilateral Africa-EU-China cooperation framework**. Starting from these agreements, the EU could easily identify priorities and interests shared by its Member States and China – and attempt to create a framework that brings them closer together. At the same time, **the existence of bilateral arrangements has the potential to bring about major setbacks for the role of the EU**. Specifically, it may further hamper the EU's ability to uphold its values while building a trilateral partnership between European companies and their African and Chinese counterparts – as well as its power to conciliate the variety of interests and priorities that different member-states hold in regard to this trilateral cooperation.

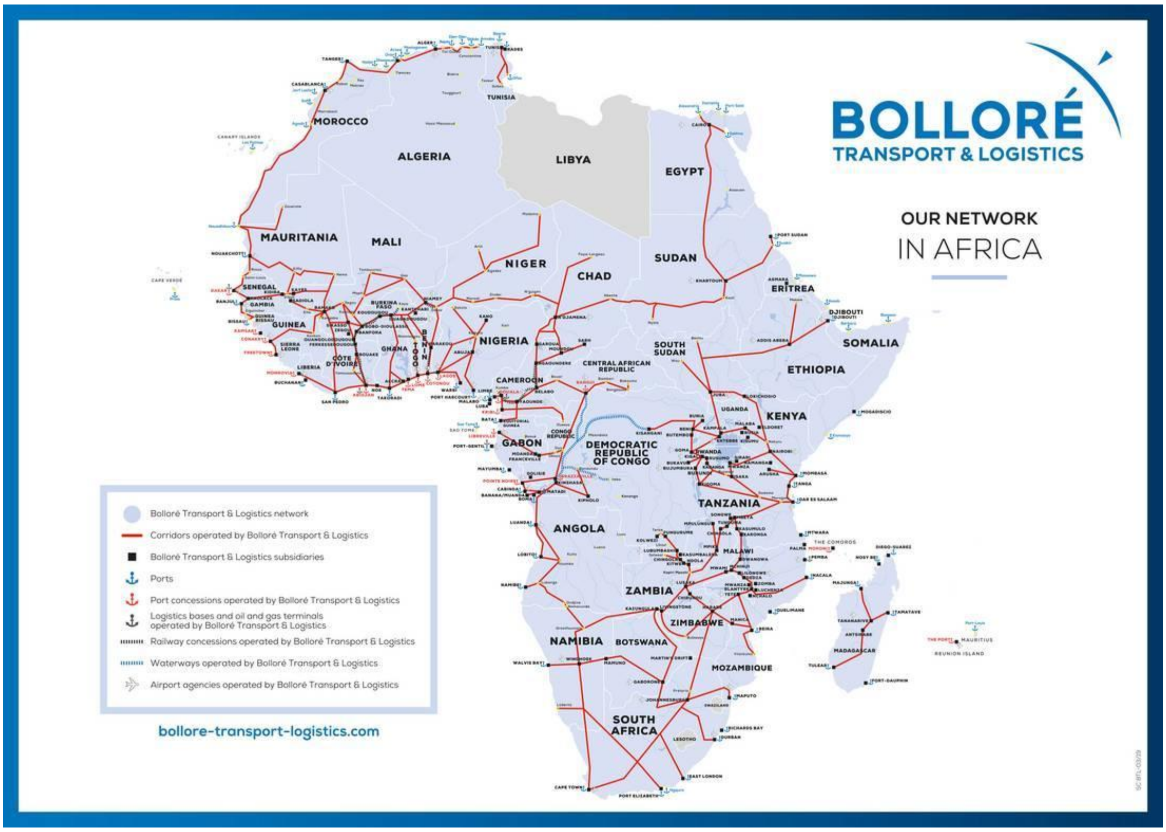
Turning now to the **African standpoint**, an enhanced involvement of foreign companies on national markets and improved competition with and between them is undoubtedly needed to further **improve the regional business environment**. Nonetheless, at present the **limited engagement of African actors in developing frameworks for trilateral cooperation**, both from an institutional and a business perspective, represents a major drawback for the creation of an inclusive and effective trilateral partnership. It has been discussed how the EU has attempted to engage with China in Africa, and how China has succeeded both in reaching out to, on the one hand, European companies and nations and, on the other, African nations in working together to support the achievement of shared interests in the region. On the contrary, to date **examples of Africa-led trilateral ventures remain scarce**.

2.2 Existing trilateral projects: actors involved, their nature and limitations

This section provides an **overview of how European companies are present in African markets, how they have so far jointly cooperated with Africa and China in business ventures** and the role played by their respective governments. The focus will be set on **French**, **Italian** and **German companies** as three major leading European actors involved in tripartite cooperation. This choice is motivated by the fact that both companies and governments from these countries hold dissimilar business focuses, links and priorities vis-à-vis Africa – and have displayed different approaches to the development of business partnerships with Chinese and African counterparts.

France, Africa and China

France is one of the EU Member States with deeper **historical and economic ties to the African continent**. Since the end of its colonial period, France has maintained strong trade links with the region, particularly with Northern, Western and Central African states. Turning to investments, in 2017 France ranked third in sources of FDI to Africa – despite its proportional share lowered by 25% compared to 2016 (EY, 2018). Among the highest-profile French companies active in Africa, we find *Bolloré Ports*, part of the *Bolloré Transport & Logistics Group* and one of the major port operators on the continent;



Orange, a telecom service group currently active in 19 African countries;[3] *Total*, one of the major international oil companies in Africa;[4] and *Société Générale*, the only French financial service group left on the continent, which has been scaling up its decade-long presence in

[3] To date, Orange is active in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Senegal, Guinea Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, DRC, Botswana, Madagascar and Mauritius (data retrieved from company's website, https://www.orange-business.com/en/regions/africa)

[4] To date, Total is active in Botswana, Cameroon, Gambia, Gabon, Lesotho, Namibia, Republic of Congo, and South Africa (data retrieved from company's website, https://www.total.com/en/group/strength/deep-geographic-roots).

Africa, expanding beyond francophone countries[5] and focusing on mobile banking, financing of investment banking deals and infrastructure projects. (Euromoney, 2018)

Although French and Chinese interests in Africa are often perceived as competing, **during the last two decades, companies from these two countries have cooperated on several projects in Africa** – particularly when shared interests in exploiting natural resources, developing hydropower and conducting medical research where found.[6] In **2015**, in a move to regulate and support business cooperation, Paris and Beijing issued a joint statement titled **'France-China Partnership in Third Markets'**, aimed at further enhancing company-led partnerships in the developing world – with African countries identified as priority countries. This agreement made of France the **first European country to take part in an institutionalised business agreement with China geared toward a joint exploration of developing markets**, in particular in the realms of infrastructure, energy, transportation, agriculture, health, industrial development, finance and banking (Cabestan, 2016). **Since the launch of this agreement, progress in Africa-France-China cooperation has nevertheless been slow**. Not many infrastructural projects have been jointly implemented. This with the exception of some cases in Nigeria, such as the Tincan Island Container Terminal in the Port of Lagos, jointly operated by *Bolloré Ports* and the *China Merchants Group*, as well as the *Lekki Port*, whose container terminal has been built by the *China Harbor Engineering Company* and will be operated by *CMA-CGM*, a French container transportation and shipping company (Duchatel, 2019).

Progresses have been even slower in creating effective joint financial platforms for investment – a fundamental aspect highlighted in the joint statement, proposing that sub-contracting practices should be replaced by co-constructing and co-financing (Cabestan, 2016). After difficult negotiations were concluded, the joint Sino-French Fund for Third Country Cooperation was created in 2016, managed by the French Public Investment Bank BPI and the Chinese sovereign fund, the China Investment Corporation (CIC) (Duchatel, 2019). Nonetheless, to date the only project that has been implemented through this fund in an African country is the Ombepo Wind Farm in Namibia, a partnership between the French *Innosun Energy Holdings*, the local assembly of Lüderitz and *XEMC Windpower* as the equipment supplier ("Déclaration de M. Bernard Cazeneuve à l'issue de son entretien avec M. LI Keqiang, Premier ministre de la République de Chine", 2017; Wei, 2019).

Italy, Africa and China

Often overlooked, over the last decade **Italy and its companies have been scaling up their already existing economic links with the African continent**. While historically Italian companies have focused on North Africa, they have been increasingly diversifying both their geographic scope and sectors of focus in recent years. In 2015, Italy was the top investor by capital investment in the region, with projects valued at $7.4bn. Although it ranked 7th for number of active projects and 3rd European source after the UK and France, the number of projects carried out by Italian companies doubled from 2014 to 2015 (EY, 2016; FT, 2016). The number of active projects in 2016 and 2017 were 20 and 17 respectively, with a

[5] To date, Société Générale is active in Algeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Madagascar, Morocco, Mauritania, Mozambique, Senegal, South Africa, Togo, Tunisia. It is also the top private bank in West Africa and Algeria. Data retrieved from company's website, https://www.societegenerale.com/en/about-us/our-businesses/our-locations).

[6] French companies such as Alstom have been cooperating with Chinese companies such as Sinohydro in hydropower projects and with Chinese railway companies in infrastructural projects in Nigeria, Uganda, Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire (Cabestan, 2016; Duchatel, 2019).

proportionate share dropping from 4.3% to 2%. (EY, 2017-2018). The hydrocarbon firm *ENI* is one of the top oil companies in Africa[7], and the number of its investments it has made represents a fundamental contribution in the fluctuation of FDI flows from Italy to the continent (FT, 2016). Another major Italian company active in the continent is *Salini Impregilo*, a construction group that has carried out infrastructural projects in the water and transport infrastructure sectors since the 1960s.[8] *Enel Green Power* (ENG), a subsidiary of the power generation firm *Enel*, figures among the most recent Italian entrants to the African renewable energy market. After launching its first photovoltaic plant in South Africa in 2015 (ENG, 2014;2015), the company initially scaled up its investments in the country to then enter the energy and renewable markets in Kenya, Morocco, Zambia, Uganda and Ethiopia, engaging in electrification projects and building wind farms and solar plants.[9]

Rome and Beijing have jointly cooperated with African countries and, more recently, they have been working on their bilateral institutional ties to further enhance business cooperation abroad. An example of trilateral Africa-Italy-China business cooperation is the controversial Gilgel Gibe III Hydro Station in Ethiopia, which entered into operation in August 2016 as a result of a partnership between the Ethiopian *Electric Power Corporation*, the Chinese *Dongfang Electric Corporation* and the Italian *Salini Impregilo* (NDRC, 2019). **After signing a MoU on TPCM in September 2018, the first China-Italy TPCM Forum was held in Rome in March 2019**. Similarly to France, these venues of cooperation have focused on forging new partnerships in Africa in particular, specifically in the fields of infrastructure, energy, finance and manufacturing. (MISE, 2018; Amato, 2019) So far, **the number of joint infrastructure projects launched and implemented in Africa as a result of these institutional developments is still limited.**

In the realm of **financial cooperation**, an existing case of multilateral cooperation involving African, Chinese and Italian enterprises as well as Chinese financial institutions is the Coral South Floating Liquefied Natural Gas project, which dates back to 2017. This megadeal to explore Mozambique's gas resources involved the joint action of Italian oil major *ENI*, China *Natural Petroleum Corporation (CNPC)*, Mozambique's *ENH* and Portuguese *GALP*, along with the Bank of China, the China Development Bank, the Export-Import Banks of China and Korea, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, Korea Trade Insurance Corporate, the China Export & Credit Insurance Corporation (SINOSURE), and 17 commercial banks among others (Rigby, 2017; 2018). This multilateral megadeal brought *ENI* and the Bank of China closer, stimulating a process of mutual learning that could have the potential to be a starting point in establishing further financial cooperation between Chinese and Italian enterprises and institutions in African markets. In line with the 2018 Sino-Italian MoU on TPCM, **Italy and China are currently supporting the creation of a cooperation platform between their Export Credit Agencies and financial institutions on the one hand,**

[7] To date, Eni is active in Algeria, Angola, Republic of Congo, Egypt, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Libya, Mozambique, Nigeria and Tunisia.

[8] Among Salini Impregilo's most noticeable projects completed in Africa we found: Trans-Cameroon Railway, Gilgel Gibe III Hydroelectric Project (Ethiopia), Akosombo Hydroelectric Plant (Ghana), Katse Dam (Lesotho), Port of Apapa, Ingula Hydroelectric Plant (South Africa), Khartoum-Port Sudan Highway, Sfax-Gabes Motorway (Tunisia), Bujagali Hydropower Plant (Uganda), Kampala Northern Bypass (Uganda), Legadadi Dam (Ethiopia), Osborne Dam (Zimbabwe), Tokwe Mukosi Dam (Zimbabwe). Among the ongoing projects, we found: Koysha Hydroelectric Project (Ethiopia), Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Neckartal Dam (Namibia), Nigeria Cultural Centre and Millennium Tower, Ogoni Andoni Opobo Road (Nigeria).

[9] Information retrieved from the company's website, https://www.enelgreenpower.com/media/press-releases

and the two countries' leading enterprises on the other, so as to provide solutions in finance and insurances to support cooperation in third markets (MEF, 2019).

Germany, Africa and China

Germany offers a different picture of European cooperation with Africa, given its modest provision of FDI to the continent, its traditional focus on South Africa as a major business partner and its relatively recent business involvement with other African markets (Heinemann, 2018, Collins, 2018). Two major German companies active since the last century are *Siemens* and *Voith Hydro*, which have played a prominent role in the country's energy generation and hydropower exploitation.[10] Overall, German companies have been rather hesitant to enter African markets and focused more on exploring emerging Asian markets (Collins, 2018).

In recent years, as a result of the steady economic growth of the continent, **the German government has developed several measures to stimulate the interest in German and European companies in African markets**, supporting European SMEs in developing financial ties with the continent. Among the most recent and notable institutional developments supporting African-German business partnership, since 2015, top business and government leaders from Germany and Sub-Saharan Africa have been meeting bi-annually at the **German African Business Summit (GABS)**. During its G20 presidency in 2017, Germany further demonstrated cooperation with Africa to be a top priority by launching the **Compact with Africa (CwA)**, jointly co-chaired by Germany and South Africa. This initiative promotes the development of private sector-led business cooperation ventures between interested African and partner countries, improving the investment environment in Africa.[11] To support the CwA, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) has set up the **Development Investment Fund (EIF)** and a **Digital Initiative for Africa** (BMZ, 2019b). Finally, in 2019 the Germany Africa Business Forum (GABF) launched a multi-million-dollar **funding commitment to invest in German start-ups that focus on African energy projects** (Christian, 2019).[12]

Turning to African-Sino-German cooperation, to date **no MoU or similar bilateral agreement on TPMC between Berlin and Beijing has been signed**. Nonetheless**, several platforms for trilateral cooperation are already active** – such as the Conference on China-Germany-Africa: Opportunities for Trilateral Cooperation jointly organised by the Sino-German Centre for Sustainable Development (CSD), the German Embassy to Beijing and the German Chamber of Commerce AHK Greater China (SGSD, 2017). Moreover, **many trilateral projects have already been completed or are currently being implemented**. German *GAUFF Engineering* figures as one of the main companies involved in tripartite business ventures involving African countries and Chinese companies. Active in 7 African countries, *GAUFF Engineering* has been involved in ten trilateral projects

[10] After entering the South African Market, Siemens has expanded is operations to Angola, Ethiopia and Kenya. Data retrieved from company website, https://new.siemens.com/global/en/company/about/history/countries-and-regions.html. Voith Hydro, part of the Voith Group, is currently active in 25 African countries. Data retrieved from company website, http://www.voith.com/hydro-in-africa-en/index.html?#120266).

[11] For further information about the CwA, please visit the website: https://www.compactwithafrica.org/content/compactwithafrica/home/about.html

[12] For further information about the fund, please visit the website: https://germanyafrica.com/event/germany-africa-business-forum-announces-multi-million-euro-funding-commitment-to-invest-in-german-african-energy-startups/

– of which one in Mozambique, seven in Gabon and two in Angola –, mainly provide consultancy and supervision services.[13]

As for **financial cooperation**, in the **Joint Statement on the 2nd China-Germany High Level Financial Dialogue**, Germany and China have shown interest in deepening financial cooperation in third countries, specifically 'between official German export credit and investment insurance institutions and the China Export Credit Insurance Corporation, to explore how joint insurance [...] involving exporters from both countries can be provided [...] to support cooperation between our companies in third-party markets' (BMZ, 2019a).

What can we learn from these experiences?

Through the analysis of the three country-specific examples of trilateral Africa-Europe-China business cooperation ventures provided in this section, we can highlight **three main limitations in existing instances of trilateral business cooperation**:

1 – Overall, the **African agency in trilateral cooperation ventures is still very limited** and often remains just formal and on paper. With French and Italian companies in particular, the analysis focused on business projects established on the basis of priorities identified by African governments and jointly carried out with Chinese companies. The analysis is indeed constrained by factual circumstances: **the limited presence of a strong entrepreneurial environment and a solid private sector in the majority of the African countries represents an inherent limitation to the feasibility of an equal business partnership**. China, the EU and its Member States cannot and should not overlook this factor. This limitation is nonetheless coupled with an **overall lack of engagement, from the European actors under analysis, with their African counterparts – exception made for Germany**, the only assessed European country to show a deviating pattern, since it has been actively engaging with, and stimulating the growth of, an African business environment. This approach raises significant concerns – first and foremost, that these concepts of 'trilateral business cooperation' or 'third-party market cooperation' risk becoming just a business-oriented rephrasing of the donor-recipient relationship, mostly dictated by the needs of stronger economies willing to join hands in broadening their market presence. Secondly, it identifies the need for further capacity-building mechanisms to strengthen African local business framework at its foundation.

2 – **The majority of the trilateral business projects found are still rooted in the traditional sectors connected to the 'developmental view'** that has long characterised North-South relations, focusing on enhancing transport and energy infrastructures. Although companies from the three European countries under analysis have been focusing on non-traditional sectors – such as mobile banking and microfinancing for France, renewable energy for Italy and digitalisation and connectivity for Germany –, no example of tripartite cooperation in these sectors could be found.

3 – Existing tripartite business ventures represent a form of pragmatic cooperation based on country and sector-specific interests and experience vis-à-vis Chinese and African counterparts. Consequently, **trilateral business cooperation has so far relied on loose, ad-hoc sectoral and institutional agreements that have failed to stimulate any**

[13] To date, GAUFF Engineering has been active in Angola, Ethiopia, Gabon, Madagascar, Mozambique, Senegal and Uganda. Its projects focus on consultancy, transport and energy infrastructures. Data retrieved from the company's website, available at: https://www.gauff.net/en/references.html

significant advancement in norms and standards regarding international business cooperation between Africa, Europe and China.

Final recommendations: a sectoral and sub-regional focus

This research has shed light on the obstacles that the EU has encountered in its attempts to develop EU-China-Africa trilateral cooperation. In order to successfully realise trilateral cooperation in the business sector, **African stakeholders will have to be better incorporated in the dialogue and further investments will have to be made**. The high diversity in priorities and opportunities of various African countries and African regions should also be taken into account. The EU has already adopted a **region-to-region approach** in the negotiation of Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs). They consist of trade and development agreements specifically directed at African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) partners engaged in regional economic integration processes, taking into consideration their specific socio-economic circumstances. However, to better address their priorities and seize the opportunities offered by African markets, **the EU should enhance and expand dialogue and cooperation with African regional and sub-regional bodies beyond trade and development**.

This research has also highlighted that **the EU and China might have different visions and expectations from trilateral cooperation with Africa**. Building on the already existing EU-China bilateral dialogue on Africa, the two parties should identify sectors of crucial importance for Africa and in which European and Chinese companies can offer their respective and complementary expertise. China's business-oriented approach, indeed, does not exclude positive outcomes in the development realm. Already existing examples have shown that **cooperation between European and Chinese firms is possible and might even facilitate mutual understanding between the two sides**[14].

This study has also shown that **different Member States might have different interests and approaches to Africa as a result of their historical ties with the continent and current economic interests in Africa, not to mention the effects of the growing Chinese presence**. For this reason, there is the need to formulate a **new approach to the establishment of trilateral Africa-EU-China cooperation**. One that pushes for developments that enable the EU and EU Member States to adopt a common strategy while addressing African priorities and Chinese interests. This approach should **focus on emerging sectors** with high potential for future and long-lasting institutional and economic developments from which the three parties would be able to benefit. Moreover, a new strategy should abandon the simplistic perception of 'Africa' as a monolithic entity and be **rather tailored to sub-regional and country-specific needs and priorities**.

1. The field of renewable energy has the potential to become a sector at the forefront of promoting effective trilateral business cooperation.

Increasing African people's access to clean and affordable electricity, improving livelihoods and ensuring environmental sustainability, are among the objectives of the African Union's Agenda 2063 (African Union). The Southern African Development Community (SADC), as well as other African regional organisations, also hold the larger

[14] A deeper analysis should also consider the high diversity of Chinese actors engaging on the African continent. Chinese firms are engaged in virtually the whole African continent and in many different economic sectors. Even though Chinese SOEs are usually larger in size and are accountable for high-value investments, a large number of smaller provincial or local SOEs followed suit and started competing for overseas projects. Besides, the quantity of SOEs has been already by far outnumbered by that of private activities. For this reason, a deeper analysis might consider avenues to establish partnerships with China at province, city and even company level.

adoption of renewable energy options and energy efficient technologies as one of their top priorities (Southern African Development Community, 2018). Referring specifically to **SADC**, most countries in Southern Africa are **affected by insufficient power supply and scarce investments in energy efficiency technologies**. An SADC Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Action Plan (REEESAP) 2016-2030 is already in place to provide SADC Member States with renewable energy strategies. An SADC Centre for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency to monitor the implementation of the REEESAP was also established in 2016. Some **SADC Member States have adopted** Feed-In Tariff **programmes to stimulate the renewable energy sector** and there is a number of local southern African companies that engage in hydro-power, solar, wind, geothermal, biofuel and biomass projects (Southern African Development Community, 2018). However, inadequate knowledge to support the development of new technologies or the adaptation of existing ones to the local environment, along with the difficulty in attracting financing and private sector participation, are persistent obstacles despite technological developments, while decreasing costs are making the adoption of renewable energy more affordable around the world. **More effective energy supply**, which would prevent energy shortages and meet the energy demand of SADC Member States, **would be a catalyst for industrialisation** (Southern African Development Community, 2018). The expansion of electricity grids across the Member States' borders would also **enable energy access to a larger portion of population and facilitate regional integration** (Ibid.).

Both the EU and China are committed to sustainable development and the fight against climate change. **European and Chinese companies involved in the production of clean energy are also already present in African countries** (Southern African Development Community, 2018; Africa Energy Portal, n.d.). Attempts to concretise third-party cooperation in the renewable energy sector between European countries, i.e. France, and China have also been made (Duchatel, 2019). Hence, the **renewable energy sector is already providing a stimulating business environment, likely to expand in the future**. The EU and China have the chance to cooperate in financing and providing expertise in a sector that is essential for SADC and more broadly the African continent.

In particular, the EU should:

- Engage in dialogue with SADC and SADC Member States beyond trade objectives. The EU and few SADC Member States have, indeed, signed an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) in 2016, yet, cooperation should be improved and further consolidated. Given its experience and expertise, **the EU has the tools to assist SADC in the process of regionalisation and formulation of an updated legal and institutional framework that responds both to emerging global challenges such as climate change and to SADC local needs**. Such a framework would regulate the regional renewable energy incentives, generation and distribution, as well as investments from local and international stakeholders in a fair manner.
- Add **more explicit commitments** to environment and climate objectives, as well as investment incentives and assistance, in the new NDICI and EFSD+ (Bilal, 2019). This would not only encourage company-level engagement in the sector, but also constitute the **basis for a more coherent framework among EU Member States**.
- Develop **co-financing instruments together with China, devoted specifically to investments in the renewable energy sector**. These instruments could be part

or the China-EU Co-Investment Fund or be developed separately taking example from it.

- Encourage **expertise exchange among European**, African and Chinese companies involved in the sector though the **creation of dedicated platforms** and through the development of tripartite projects[15]. Successful projects will also facilitate the adoption of common environmental and labour standards

2. Another sector to be targeted is Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

Worldwide, **the ICT sector has been a strong driver of GDP growth**. A strong and well-regulated ICT sector is essential to stimulate progress in a number of vital sectors – from digital governance, economy, trade and banking, to traditional sectors such as agriculture, health and education. It is also essential to promote private sector growth, which is one the factors currently affecting the establishment of an equal trilateral business partnership between Africa, Europe and China. In the last decade in particular, **African governments and regional entities have been increasingly prioritising advancements in ICT-related policies and infrastructures**. **Chinese investments in Africa have also increasingly been focusing on this sector**, resulting in major advancements in African ICT infrastructures. The **EU**, on the other hand, has launched its international cooperation **initiative 'ICT-58-2020: International partnership building between European and African innovation hubs'** as part of the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme, directed towards low- and middle-income countries in Africa. [16] Although a number of African countries have achieved substantial improvements in access to ICT services, and despite the growing investment attractiveness of the African ICT market, **progress is still slow and there remains significant room for improvement**. (Ewing, Chevrolier, Leenderste, Quigless & Verghese, 2014)

Africa-EU-China cooperation in the African ICT sector could be essential in fast-tracking Africa's ICT development - and overall economic development – while simultaneously allowing African, European and Chinese companies to jointly benefit from a new business partnership in this realm. The Economic Community of West African States (**ECOWAS**) represents a potential sub-regional partner for setting up this kind of platform. ECOWAS has developed its own ICT policy "geared towards the promotion of the development of economic and technological infrastructures" ("ICT | Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)", n.d.; Mayaki, 2015). ECOWAS members such as Nigeria have been at the forefront of ICT development in West Africa, and China is already seizing the potential business opportunities stemming from this development. **Building a solid ECOWAS-EU-China partnership for ICT development could represent a useful starting point upon which the local regulatory environment can be enhanced, while building tripartite dialogue, stimulating mutual learning processes and business cooperation**.

[15] Despite not focusing solely on the renewable energy sector or on exchanges among actors in the private sector, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) represent an interesting example. Though the 'China in the world' programme, this London-based independent policy research institute has sought to improve the effects of Chinese-linked activities on communities in Africa. For example, by advising African governments and civil society on formulating strategies for engaging Chinese government and private actors in local development priorities.

[16] For further information on this initiative, please read the Work Programme, pp. 114-116, available at https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/wp/2018-2020/main/h2020-wp1820-leit-ict_en.pdf

- The EU should **move from its Pan-African and country-specific focus**, expressing its readiness to provide technical assistance to ECOWAS and other African counterparts willing to **advance ICT-related regional regulations, monitoring and taxation mechanisms**. Only a regulated local environment can guarantee a level playing field for local and international investors in this sector. Regional entities are a feasible middle way between a narrow country focus and a continental one.
- The EU should **create dialogue platforms with ECOWAS and other African regional bodies and China to develop region-specific ICT commitments**, as well as **shared standards** for business management and practices.
- The **EU** should join **China** and scale up its support to the **enhancement of ICT infrastructures**. ECOWAS, the EU and China should jointly embark on the formulation of a **tripartite PPP built on regional priorities that allows for equal participation of African, EU and Chinese companies** – while integrating their respective strategies in the energy and industrial sectors, fundamental for ICT development.
- Accordingly, the EU and China should **actively engage in joint planning and financing for regional ICT developments**. Through joint investment funds backed by European and Chinese financial institutions, private firms should invest more in capacity building, start-ups and entrepreneurial ventures that want to capitalise on ICT development and advance the African tech community. Business partnerships should be set up through equity investments for technology entrepreneurs.

To conclude, **dialogue and cooperation should not be limited to the two suggested African regional bodies and sectors**. Renewable energies and ICT bear the potential to be developed in other regions, and trilateral Africa-EU-China cooperation can fast-forward this development. For instance, not just SADC but also other African Regional Economic Communities such as the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (**COMESA**), the East African Community (**EAC**), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (**IGAD**) and the Indian Ocean Commission (**IOC**) have actively supported the Enhancement of a Sustainable Regional Energy Market in Eastern Africa (**EA**), Southern Africa (**SA**) and Indian Ocean (**IO**) Region (**ESREM- EA-SA-IO**) Programme. One of the main objectives is to develop regulatory frameworks to promote a harmonised regional energy market able to attract investments.[17] As for ICT, the EU could, together with China, reach out to other regional bodies - such as **COMESA** and **EAC** - to jointly collaborate on projects aimed at stimulating innovation, supporting initiatives in Africa for the digitalisation of their economy and society. Specifically, the EU and China could jointly provide assistance to projects such as the Central African Backbone (**CAB**), the East Africa Broadband Network (**EABN**), the South Africa Region Backbone (**SATA Backhaul**), the West Africa Network (**ECOWAN**) and the

[17] For further information about the ESREM-EA-SA-IO Programme, please visit: https://www.comesa.int/services/enhancement-of-a-sustainable-regional-energy-market-in-eastern-africa-southern-africa-and-indian-ocean-region-esrem-esa-io/

ECOWAS Power Pool-based Fibre Network.[18] This would result in the reinforcement of strategic partnerships between Africa, the EU China in ICT areas of mutual interest.

Effective trilateral cooperation in the fields of renewable energies and ICT is fundamental to address what the majority of African countries and regional bodies have identified as their most pressing needs. In turn, enhanced energy generation capacity and access to electricity, as well as improved connectivity paves the way to new venues for further trilateral cooperation ventures. **Digital health** represents a perfect example – with 41 African countries reported having a national eHealth strategy, and the EU and China holding relevant and complementary experience in this field.[19] **FinTech** development, and **mobile banking** in particular, are other sectors that would greatly benefit with enhanced electricity access and connectivity – as well as an additional area of potential Africa-EU-China cooperation.

Successful examples of business cooperation in other sectors and other regions might ease the development of a broader institutional framework that regulates business activities of African, European and Chinese actors in African countries – strengthening the voice of African stakeholders and enhancing European and Chinese companies' experiences in the continent.

[18] For further information about these projects, please visit https://www.afdb.org/en/topics-and-sectors/sectors/information-communication-technology/ict-initiatives

[19] For further information about eHealth strategies formulated by African countries, please visit https://www.ictworks.org/african-national-ehealth-strategy-policy/#.XjQz83d2vRN.

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