

TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY WITH AFRICA HOW CAN THE EUROPEAN UNION GIVE GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE WHATEVER THEY WANT TO BE

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On 9 March 2020, the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS) published their Joint Communication 'Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa', which provides a framework for the discussion that will take place at the 6th EU-AU Summit in October 2020. As Plan International, we are convinced that Youth Economic Empowerment (YEE) should be a key pillar for this renewed partnership and that it is essential to support a gender transformative approach at the same time, to ensure all young people, including young women, have the skills, knowledge and competence they need to succeed. Building on our [first set of recommendations from February 2020](#), we would like to take it a step further and demonstrate how the EU-AU partnership can give girls and young women the opportunity to be whatever they want to be.

FLASHBACK TO... OUR FEBRUARY 2020 RECOMMENDATIONS

We strongly encouraged the EU to consider the following:

I. Partners for Sustainable Growth and Jobs

- Promote measures to eliminate specific **barriers to girls and young women's education**, including their access to secondary education, vocational education and training, taking into account diversity and intersectionality. This means for example ensuring flexibility for trainings (evening, part-time etc.), safety in, around and on the way to educational facilities, improving sanitation facilities, and special learning initiatives for the retention of marginalised girls, boys and young people;
- Improve the **quality of learning** in education and training, ensuring it supports employability and is relevant to the 21st century economy;
- Support **entrepreneurial and financial skills** development, in conjunction with equal access to economic resources (capital, land and markets) for young women.

II. Partners for a Green Transition

- Promote **green skills** in formal and informal education and training, and encourage girls and young women's participation in these subjects;
- Support **green jobs and green entrepreneurship** that contribute to preserving or restoring the environment in existing industries or new green sectors.

III. Partners for a Digital and Data Transformation

- Mainstream **digital literacy and skills** in education;
- Promote **girls and young women's participation** in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (**STEM**) and Information, Communication and Technology (**ICT**) subjects, including by addressing gender biases and occupational stereotypes in curricula and training materials.

IV. Partners for peace, security, governance and resilience

- Ensure that **in fragile settings and in situations of forced displacement**, girls and young women have **access to education and training** opportunities including vocational, life skills and language training, and address gender-based barriers:
- Support the **recognition of previous qualifications** for displaced young people.

This is what we think of the Joint Communication

Overall, we welcome the EU's priorities and proposals related to youth economic empowerment and recognise the effort to address girls and women's needs in this area. However, from a broader perspective, we would like to present some general concerns:

- 1) The Joint Communication makes little linkages between its own pillars, such as between the digital transformation and sustainable growth and jobs partnerships, where the priorities on education, training and entrepreneurship are interconnected.
- 2) There is no analysis of how the different priorities and actions presented apply to different contexts, such as fragile contexts or protracted crises. This is of outmost relevance if we take into account that 14 countries in Africa are considered to be at risk of a major deterioration in their humanitarian situation in 2020.

- 3) We are missing a stronger analysis and place for human development in the Joint Communication. In the current context of COVID-19, we hope that the importance of systems strengthening and investing in human development sectors such as health, education, nutrition, social protection and WASH will be recognised.
- 4) We observe an imbalance between different sections inside the Joint Communication, where for example governance, democracy, human rights and the rule of law section and the resilience section are poorly contextualised, which leads to generic proposed actions.
- 5) Finally, we encourage the EU to further detail how it intends to take action or create initiatives to support the proposed priorities in partnership with the AU, how it will ensure coherence between the different tools and policies at its disposal, as well as to present concrete proposals for child and youth engagement in the process of this renewed partnership.

There are things we welcome

- 1) We welcome the recognition of young people and women's **potential and key role in transforming their continent through their contribution to peace, sustainable and inclusive development**, and the willingness to respond to their aspirations.
 - Unlocking the potential of young people and women will require investments from an early age and throughout the lifecycle, including but not limited to their economic empowerment. It will also require safe, inclusive and meaningful participation for them to speak out on what matters most to them. The EU needs to include the voices of young women and young men in all their diversity at the heart of this process towards a renewed EU-AU partnership, for the partnership to respond effectively to their needs and priorities.
- 2) We are glad to see that the Joint Communication underlines **the need for specific action to make sure women and girls are included in the digital transformation**. This is in line with the EU-AU Digital Economy Task Force report that states “adopting strategies that focus on bridging the gender digital divide is necessary for African countries to have a successful digital future”. Digitalisation has the potential to be a key enabler in different areas of girls and women’s life, including economic empowerment but also civic and political participation. The global COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to boost the digital agenda on both continents, and keeping a youth and gender transformative approach will be crucial to ensure inclusion.
 - Bridging the digital gender gap¹ requires a number of actions: gender norms and stereotypes, a lack of digital skills, the cost of access to digital technology and the internet, and violence against girls and young women online are key factors that prevent girls and young women from equally enjoying and being key drivers of the digital transformation. In addition to specific policies targeting girls and women, we need to ensure that gender equality is mainstreamed across the entire pillar on the partnership for a digital transformation. For example, when supporting digital entrepreneurship and innovation, the EU needs to consider the specific barriers young women entrepreneurs face, such as access to financial services. The same applies to actions for quality learning and training opportunities.

¹ Plan International is part of the Solutions for Youth Employment (S4YE) coalition, gathering public and private sector actors and civil society to close the Gender Digital Divide: <https://www.s4ye.org/>

The Smartup Factory model is an innovation hub, idea incubator, training center and mentoring programme for marginalised youth between ages of 17–26. It offers young people classes in topics such as computer skills, coding, entrepreneurship, photography and more. The content is largely driven by the youth and their interests, and the youth take charge of facilitating many of the classes and become mentors for new students. The project started in 2016 in Uganda, supported by Plan International Uganda and Plan International Finland, and now has 7 hubs in Uganda and 2 hubs in Ethiopia. The project pays particular attention to empowering girls and women and bridging the gender gap, and aims to reach the most marginalised youth in the communities it serves.

Fashion designer **Aminah** opened a shop selling clothes after being inspired to start her own business following sessions at the SmartUp Factory in Uganda. Access to computers and digital training have enabled Aminah to boost her business using technology. Online sites help her to market and sell her designs and to bring new customers to the shop. Aminah now volunteers as a youth mentor at SmartUp, inspiring other girls to engage with ICT and bridge the digital gender divide.

- 3) We welcome the fact that **special attention is being given to girls' and women's access to quality, inclusive education at all levels**, including to vocational education and trainings. As Plan International, we believe that a life-skills based education – from foundational numeracy and literacy skills, to digital, green and financial education – should be available to all children and youth.
 - To ensure this, the EU should promote the mainstreaming of digital, financial and green skills into national curricula. It should also support measures to eliminate specific barriers to girls and young women's education and training, in content and delivery and in any learning settings. These measures should be taken into account diversity and intersectionality, such as girls and young women living in rural and remote areas, disability, or displaced and refugee children and youth. Measures can include, for example, flexibility of trainings (evening, part-time etc.), ensuring safety in, around and on the way to educational facilities, improving sanitation facilities, and creating special learning initiatives for the retention of marginalised girls, boys and young people. This also applies to educational and training opportunities under the partnership for digital transformation.
- 4) We are happy to see the recognition that (young) women's empowerment requires **tackling discriminatory laws and practices**, and ensuring they have knowledge, skills, microcredit and finance for entrepreneurship.
 - While this is a step in the right direction, we would like to unpack what it means. There are number of laws and regulations that prevent women from enjoying the same economic opportunities as men. For example, laws that limit their freedom of movement by setting specific requirements for women to get a passport or ID, and laws and requirements that prevent them from accessing financial services such as credit, insurance and mortgages, to open a bank account, or to sign contracts. Property and inheritance laws have an impact on access to land and other productive assets.² These are important barriers for young women, especially when starting their own business from the ground, which need to be tackled if we want them to reach their potential.
 - In addition, while we welcome the paragraph on Decent Work, the environment at work is an important factor for (young) women's employment retention. It is therefore essential to mainstream gender equality in decent work, for example by encouraging companies to support work environments with parental scheme leaves and access to social protection, and free from harassment, discrimination and stereotypes, and gender pay gaps. Lastly, the EU should encourage the ratification of ILO conventions and apply due diligence when collaborating with the private sector.

² See also: World Bank report Women, Business and the Law 2019

- 5) We are glad to see a reference to the need to **“better align skills and learning outcomes to labour market demand and new emerging sectors”**. In particular, it is crucial to invest in improving the quality and effectiveness of education and Technical, Vocational Education and Training (TVET).
- There are many ways to close the skills gap, such as promoting competency-based approaches to learning, skills acquisition, validation and certification; encouraging innovative learning methods that cultivate inquiry- and problem-based approaches and entrepreneurial thinking; and linking with chambers of commerce and business associations to provide youth with up-to-date labour market information. Plan International has been implementing its own approach to matching skills with the labour market for several years. It involves market analyses, collaborating with the private sector, counselling and mentorship, training (including on entrepreneurship), and post-placement follow-up. To ensure this approach is truly sustainable and gender transformative, it also covers life-skills such as SRHR, supporting an enabling working environment (e.g. working with companies on addressing negative gender norms in the workplace), and other kinds of support such as childcare and safe transportation.
- 6) Finally, we welcome the recognition of the importance of a broader enabling environment, beyond the world of work, through a **priority on gender equality, human rights and democracy and the call for concrete initiatives**, as this is key to girls and young women’s empowerment and benefits all of society.
- In particular, girls and young women’s active participation in civic and political life supports their agency in all areas of their life. In this regard, the role of digitalisation and the challenges girls and women face online should be considered. In relation to participation, we also welcome the willingness to implement the Women, Peace and Security and Youth, Peace and Security Agendas; however, these require clear frameworks for implementation and allocated budgets.



And then there are things we believe could be improved

- 1) **The green sector has potential for job creation, but it needs to be linked to youth economic empowerment.** The partnership for green transition and energy access overlooks this, while the section on education and skills under sustainable growth and jobs makes one reference to green and climate-friendly technologies.
 - In order for young people to benefit from opportunities in the green sector, the EU and the AU should consider actions for green skills development in order for young people to access those jobs, as well as support for green entrepreneurship. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the response can help support young women's businesses and livelihoods, and the transitions towards a climate-friendly, green economy. This is in line with the AUC and the EUC's intentions, as stated during the 10th Commission-to-Commission meeting in February 2020, to "enhance youth skills development and better match skills with the demands of the labour market", including in the climate-friendly/green economy and the renewable energy sector.
- 2) **In fragile and emergency contexts, young people's access to economic opportunities is often limited.** The obstacles that young women usually face are compounded, in addition to new ones such as trauma or security concerns that restrict their mobility. A lack of decent jobs and training opportunities may have a negative impact on their future and create further social instability.³ In addition, lack of access to safe, legal employment affects young women as they are more likely to be forced into unsafe, insecure and low paid work where they are at risk of violence and exploitation. During times of crisis, education and employment create a sense of normality. It supports the successful integration of young people into the host community, and later, their reintegration and active involvement in the recovery of their own communities. Taking into consideration efforts of the African Union to work on durable solutions to forced displacement in Africa, and given the EU priority on peace, security, governance and resilience in the Joint Communication, we believe youth economic empowerment in emergencies is an essential area of action to consider within this renewed partnership.
 - Ensure that in fragile settings and in situations of conflict and forced displacement, girls and young women have access to education and training opportunities including vocational, life skills and language training, and are supported to establish livelihoods and to access legal, decent employment. To do so, the EU needs to identify and address the barriers that young people face, such as the recognition of previous qualifications, laws and policies that restrict young refugees' ability to work legally in a host country, as well as specific gender-based barriers such as safety concerns.

'Hope Together', a project implemented by Plan International Egypt, aims at improving self-reliance and social cohesion for Syrian refugees and Egyptian host communities through economic participation, integration and awareness-raising on inclusive work conditions, in particular for women. It promotes sustainable youth economic empowerment through technical and life-skill development, cash grants and business development trainings, and ongoing mentoring. At the same time, it also promotes social cohesion through trainings on gender equality and positive engagement in local communities.

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³ ILO technical note, Promoting Youth Employment in Fragile Settings, 2019: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_732585.pdf