



POLICY BRIEF

Enhancing Africa's Participation in European Union Research Projects: A Case study of Just Transition to Circular Economy Project (JUST2CE)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Africa-EU research partnerships are vital for sustainable and inclusive development in both regions. However, African partners remain underrepresented in EU-funded research projects. This policy brief, using the case study of the Just Transition to Circular Economy (JUST2CE) project, identifies three key barriers hindering equitable Africa-EU scientific cooperation:

- International Travel Mobility - Limited funding, stringent visa processes, and logistical barriers restrict African researchers' ability to participate in international research activities in Europe.
- Decolonization of Knowledge - Research has historically been shaped by Western perspectives, marginalizing African knowledge systems and perpetuating unequal power dynamics.
- Research Output Utilization - There is limited translation of findings from EU projects into tangible policy impacts and solutions in African contexts.
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To address these issues, the brief recommends:

- Facilitating international mobility through streamlined visa processes, travel funding, and virtual/hybrid formats.
- Promoting decolonization by supporting indigenous methodologies, institutional reforms, and inclusive dialogue platforms.
- Enhancing research utilization via research-industry-policy partnerships, building local innovation capacities, and enabling environments.
- Ensuring fair recognition through equitable authorship policies, transparency, and valuing diverse knowledge contributions.
- Implementing such initiatives can foster more inclusive, equitable, and impactful Africa-EU research collaboration vital for advancing science, innovation and sustainable development across both continents.



INTRODUCTION

Africa-EU research partnerships are crucial for both continents' sustainable and inclusive development, as acknowledged by the several agreements signed by the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) in the last decades and the various initiatives to facilitate and strengthen Africa-EU research cooperation (e.g. [ERAfrica](#)) Jauhiainen, (2023). In July 2023, the AU and the EU adopted the [AU-EU Innovation Agenda](#) to support scientific cooperation and the sharing of technology and expertise, seen as pivotal to economic growth and reducing poverty and inequalities Kraemer-Mbula et al. (2018)

Despite growing recognition of the need for international collaboration in research and innovation, there remains an underrepresentation of African partners in EU-funded projects. This uneven participation perpetuates knowledge gaps, limits the exchange of perspectives, and hinders the co-creation of contextualized solutions that address the unique challenges faced by African nations. Implementing the ambitious AU-EU agreement will require addressing some of the key obstacles which have also been encountered on the JUST2CE Project, that have so far hindered inclusive and equitable AU-EU scientific cooperation namely; International Travel Mobility, Decolonisation of Knowledge, and Research Outputs.

Reducing these barriers, policymakers can foster greater collaboration between African and European researchers, enhance the continent's scientific capacity, and ultimately contribute to more inclusive and impactful research outcomes on a global scale Luczak-Roesch et al (2023). When African researchers have equal access to international collaboration opportunities, they can leverage diverse perspectives and expertise to address pressing challenges facing their communities and contribute valuable insights to global research efforts Cerdeira et al (2023). Fostering a more inclusive and equitable research landscape, policymakers not only empower African researchers to participate more actively in EU research projects but also strengthen the overall quality and relevance of scientific research conducted on both continents.

KEY ISSUES

International Travels and Mobility

One of the primary obstacles to Africa's participation in EU research projects is the unequal access to international travel opportunities. Limited funding, stringent visa requirements, just like one that African partners on the JUST2CE project face when applying for the visa for a meet held in Spain. and logistical barriers often impede African researchers' ability to participate in project meetings, conferences, and collaborative activities held in Europe. These barriers not only limit the exchange of ideas and expertise but also hinder the formation of meaningful partnerships and collaborations. Furthermore, they perpetuate a cycle of inequality by restricting access to crucial networking opportunities and knowledge-sharing platforms for African researchers. Ultimately, bridging the gap in international travel opportunities paves the way for more meaningful partnerships and collaborations that drive scientific progress and benefit society as a whole Dine et al, (2023).



Decolonization of Knowledge

The decolonization of knowledge remains a critical challenge in Africa's engagement with EU research projects. Historically, research agendas and methodologies have been shaped by Western perspectives, often marginalizing African voices and perpetuating unequal power dynamics. This imbalance not only undermines the credibility and relevance of research conducted in African contexts but also perpetuates a legacy of dependency and disempowerment. To foster a more inclusive and equitable research landscape, it is imperative to promote the co-creation of knowledge and the incorporation of diverse perspectives and methodologies Gobena et al (2023). Just as JUST2CE prioritized local capacity-building, indigenous methodologies, and mutual respect, which ultimately not only rectifying historical injustices but also building a more just, inclusive, and sustainable future for all.

Research Outputs

A key challenge is the limited utilization of research outputs generated through EU-funded projects in Africa. Despite the significant investment in research and innovation, the translation of research findings into tangible outcomes and policy impact remains insufficient. This gap hinders the potential of research to address pressing societal challenges and contribute to sustainable development across the continent.

Furthermore, international research projects tend to disproportionately benefit researchers from high-income countries, especially in terms of leadership and control of the research process, [authorship](#) and international profile. National researchers' involvement is often concentrated in data collection, with little or no influence over the other phases and or recognition for their labour Shackleton et al (2023).

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Facilitate International Mobility

- Streamlining visa processes and providing dedicated travel funding for African researchers promotes equitable access to participate in international research activities and networking opportunities that their European counterparts may take for granted.
- Exploring innovative mobility models like virtual/hybrid formats allows African researchers to engage regardless of financial or logistical constraints, preventing their perspectives from being excluded.
- From a justice lens, removing these mobility barriers helps level an uneven playing field.

2. Promote Decolonization of Knowledge

- Supporting indigenous research methodologies uplifts traditionally marginalized African approaches on par with dominant Western paradigms.
- Institutional reforms and dialogue platforms challenge entrenched biases and power dynamics that have subjugated African voices in knowledge production processes.
- Fostering inclusion and diversity ensures African perspectives have an equally valued place in shaping research agendas and discourses.
- Decolonizing knowledge decenters the Western gaze and democratizes who defines what knowledge counts.

3. Enhance Research Output Utilization



- Research-industry-policy partnerships ensure African contexts and priorities are centered in translating research into practical impacts and solutions.
- Building local innovation capacities and entrepreneurship empowers African stakeholders as leaders rather than just participants in utilizing research.
- An enabling environment allows African communities to equitably harness research for sustainable development based on their needs.

4. Ensure Fair Recognition

- Equitable authorship and acknowledgement policies to correct the injustice of African intellectual contributions being undervalued or obscured.
- Transparency around research processes and decisions challenges unfair power dynamics.
- Recognizing diverse intellectual inputs beyond traditional Western metrics values different ways of knowing equitably.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Africa's meaningful participation in European Union research projects is crucial for advancing scientific collaboration, driving socioeconomic development, and addressing global challenges. However, achieving this requires addressing systemic barriers related to international travel, knowledge decolonization, and research output utilization. By prioritizing initiatives that promote inclusivity, equity, and collaboration, policymakers can create an enabling environment that empowers African researchers to fully engage in EU-funded projects and contribute to the advancement of science, innovation, and sustainable development in Africa and beyond.

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