

Churchill Otieno and Aderonke Ige
November 2025

Beyond Aid and Fear

*A Progressive Path to Africa's
Growth Resurgence*

Imprint

Published by

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e. V.
Godesberger Allee 149
53175 Bonn
Germany
info@fes.de

Issuing Department

Division for International Cooperation |
Global and European Policy

Responsibility for Content and Editing

Nina Netzer | Policy Advisor | Social Democracy
nina.netzer@fes.de

Contact

christiane.heun@fes.de

Editing

Jessica Wood

Design/Layout

pertext | corporate publishing
www.pertext.de

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES). Commercial use of media published by the FES is not permitted without the written consent of the FES. Publications by the FES may not be used for electioneering purposes.

November 2025

© Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e. V.

ISBN 978-3-98628-797-9

Further publications of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung can be found here:

➤ www.fes.de/publikationen



Churchill Otieno and Aderonke Ige
November 2025

Beyond Aid and Fear

A Progressive Path to Africa's Growth Resurgence

Contents

- Executive Summary 3
- 1. Global North Populism and its African Nexus 4
- 2. The Politicisation Of Development Assistance 5
- 3. The Looming and Drooping Repercussions for African Trade 6
- 4. African Responses and Diversification Strategies 8
- 5. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations 10

Executive Summary

In an era increasingly shaped by right-wing populism in the Global North, Africa faces significant challenges as the rules of aid, trade, and global governance are being fundamentally rewritten. This shift often works to Africa's detriment, as development assistance becomes transactional, tied to migration control and the export of divisive ideologies, while protectionist trade barriers proliferate.

This position paper offers a critical guide for progressive African politicians, proposing a clear and actionable playbook to navigate these global headwinds. It advocates for five core imperatives aimed at fostering a self-determined, resilient, and influential Africa: building fiscal independence, deepening regional trade, investing in people and innovation, defending sovereignty through strong governance, and championing inclusive Pan-African values.

This paper highlights how aid has become transactional, often tied to migration controls and cultural conservatism, while protectionist barriers undermine Africa's competitiveness.

However, Africa is not a passive recipient of these policies. This paper highlights strategic African responses, including the assertive advancement of an equitable African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to deepen regional integration and the proactive diversification of partnerships towards the Global South. These efforts, though imperfect, are seen to offer alternative markets, infrastructure financing, and commodity-based trade without the ideological strings often attached to Western agreements.

In conclusion, the rise of right-wing populism in the Global North underscores Africa's over-reliance on externally controlled markets and politically conditional trade regimes. Africa's counter-strategy must be multifaceted, combining continental self-reliance through AfCFTA with a diversified external portfolio anchored in Global South cooperation. This approach is not merely an aspiration but a survival strategy designed to transform structural disadvantages into strategic advantages, ensuring that Africa can shape its development path in an increasingly complex global landscape. The paper also recommends that Western counterparts adopt approaches to aid and trade that are more equitable, more respectful, and less transactional, reinforcing multilateralism and addressing the domestic drivers of populism within their societies for a more stable global order.

1. Global North Populism and its African Nexus

In an age where political tides in the Global North increasingly shape the destinies of nations far beyond their borders, Africa finds itself at a strategic crossroads. The rise of right-wing populism, once considered a domestic phenomenon in Europe and North America, has now become a defining feature of the global political economy. Its effects are neither abstract nor distant: they are felt in the conditions attached to development assistance, in the barriers erected against African exports, in the re-shaping of global financial rules, and in the cross-border diffusion of social conservative agendas that undermine hard-won rights.

These movements have reframed development cooperation into a transactional instrument, one that is as much about controlling migration and exporting cultural conservatism as it is about alleviating poverty or fostering growth. The EU has forged migration partnerships with African countries, such as Niger and Morocco, conditioning development aid on cooperation with European border control efforts, which prioritises migration management over local development needs. Similarly, U.S. initiatives such as the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) link trade and investment assistance to compliance with social reforms that reflect Western ideological values, influencing migration patterns. Additionally, the UK's aid strategy includes programmes aimed at addressing the root causes of migration in African nations, often requiring the implementation of border security measures and alignment with conservative social policies. They have fuelled protectionist trade regimes that disrupt African supply chains, shrink market access, and erode investor confidence. They have used their influence over international financial systems to entrench structural dependencies, while simultaneously seeding ideological imports that challenge local agency and human rights.

Yet Africa is far from a passive spectator. Across the continent, governments, regional blocs, and civil societies are crafting strategic responses, diversifying partnerships, advancing AfCFTA, mobilising domestic resources, and investing in homegrown innovation. Some are reclaiming sovereignty over development agendas, countering external pressure with resilient governance systems and people-centred narratives rooted in Pan-African values. All a true testimony to Nelson Mandela's counsel that "the greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in falling to rise again". Others, however, risk internalising strands of Global North populism without recognising their corrosive implications.

For progressive African politicians operating within political parties, this moment demands clarity of purpose and boldness of action. The challenge is not merely to insulate Africa from the adverse effects of right-wing populism in the Global North, but to proactively shape policies, alliances, and narratives that protect sovereignty, advance inclusive development, and strengthen democratic legitimacy on African terms.

This position paper is both a diagnosis and a prescription. It lays bare the mechanics of Global North populism, showing how it manifests, the levers it pulls, and the vulnerabilities it exploits. It also goes further, offering actionable strategies that progressive African leaders can champion within their parties and governments.

In the next three sections, the paper unpacks these imperatives in detail. It examines the impact on aid flows, showing how right-wing populism has transformed aid into a transactional tool tied to migration control, social conservatism, and shifting geopolitical priorities. It then analyses the impact on trade relations, tracing the rise of tariffs, non-tariff barriers, and market volatility that have undermined Africa's export competitiveness and economic predictability. Finally, it explores African responses and diversification strategies, detailing how governments and regional bodies are advancing domestic resource mobilisation, regional integration, and innovation. It also outlines ways – for example, a number of fora, such as the G20 and AU-EU summits, as well as the World Economic Forum – where African leaders can engage with reform-minded actors in the Global North to forge partnerships grounded in mutual respect and shared prosperity. Together, these parts provide a roadmap for countering the negative spillovers of right-wing populism while advancing a progressive African vision that is resilient, self-determined, and globally influential.

2. The Politicisation Of Development Assistance

Right-wing populism in the Global North has redefined the purpose of development assistance to Africa, shifting from a moral commitment to poverty alleviation towards advancing domestic political agendas. The OECD Development Co-operation Report 2023 highlights this shift, characterised by reprioritised aid budgets, tightened conditionalities, and ideological positions that are often at odds with African priorities. The politicisation of aid is exacerbated by pressures on domestic resources in donor countries, like the UK and Germany, where development assistance has become an “easy target” for budget cuts.

a) Aid flows as political leverage

Recent policies in the U.S., UK, and EU illustrate this trend. The Trump administration’s reinstatement of the Global Gag Rule has led to significant funding losses for critical health services across Africa. In the UK, ODA cuts from 0.7% to 0.5% of Gross National Income from 2021 resulted in a £1.5 billion reduction in aid, severely impacting humanitarian efforts. Meanwhile, Germany’s opposition party (AfD) has pushed for drastic cuts, but actual reductions have been implemented by mainstream governments under budget pressures, which threatens international ODA commitments.

b) The rise of transactional aid

The most visible manifestation of right-wing populism is the rise of transactional aid, where financing is increasingly tied to donor domestic policy priorities. Migration control has become a crucial conditionality in EU-Africa aid relations, exemplified by the EU-Tunisia memorandum of understanding centred on intercepting irregular migrants. Additionally, the Global Gag Rule showcases how domestic culture wars shape foreign aid policies, with the WHO warning that such conditionalities restrict access to essential services for women and girls.

c) Long-term implications for African development

AU’s Agenda 2063 stresses that predictable, needs-based financing is essential for structural transformation. Politicised aid disrupts essential services, erodes policy autonomy, weakens civil society, and entrenches vulnerability. Sudden cuts destabilise critical programmes, as seen in Nigeria, where USAID’s withdrawal jeopardised health in-

itiatives. Conditionalities force governments to align policies with donor priorities, as demonstrated by Malawi’s stalled abortion law reform. The recent closure of USAID has further deepened the crisis, disrupting health, education, and humanitarian programmes in many African countries that relied on its extensive network.

d) Strategic implications for progressive African leadership

For progressive African politicians, the politicisation of aid is both a challenge and a rallying point. The UN Economic Commission for Africa emphasises the need to expand domestic resource mobilisation and strengthen public financial management systems. In Southern Africa, there is a growing discourse on organic funding and local capital to reduce donor dependency.

Defending policy autonomy is crucial, with mechanisms like the African Peer Review Mechanism offering platforms for unified resistance against donor pressure. Progressive leaders must confront ideological conditionalities through instruments like the Maputo Protocol to uphold women’s rights.

Finally, diversifying partnerships is essential. The African Development Bank advocates for engagement with reform-minded actors in the Global North and promotes South-South cooperation to ensure that financing is aligned with Africa’s long-term democratic priorities. The politicisation of aid reflects a structural shift in global engagement with Africa, necessitating a coordinated response from progressive African politicians anchored in African agency.

3. The Looming and Drooping Repercussions for African Trade

Protectionist policies driven by populist right-wing regimes are reshaping international trade and disrupting Africa's export economies, thereby presenting multifaceted challenges across the continent. Far-right populism has leveraged protectionist policies to gain dominance across the Global North, eroding longstanding preferences for African exports through tariff hikes and reciprocal trade policies. Recent U.S. tariff increases led some African countries, like Zimbabwe, to cut their own tariffs on American imports as a diplomatic gesture, while Uganda and others intensified domestic economic self-reliance. Meanwhile, in Europe, populist parties have resisted free trade agreements, recasting trade as a threat to national interests and industry.

a) U.S. protectionism and the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA)

The "America First" doctrine of the Trump administration sharply shifted the terms of economic and political engagement between the United States and African nations, with South Africa serving as a particularly illustrative case. While AGOA ostensibly provided African countries with enhanced trade access to the U.S. market, Trump's approach entangled trade liberalisation with overtly political conditions, often signalled through public and administrative actions linking supposed U.S. interests with compliance on migration, trade, and even identity politics.

→ South Africa: From trade friction to political target

South Africa's eligibility under AGOA was placed at risk due to disputes over poultry tariffs and market access for U.S. agricultural products. The Trump administration escalated tensions by politicising SA's land reform, framing it as racial persecution and instability to rally far-right networks. This narrative provided cover for punitive tariffs and aid withdrawals, including sharp reductions to PEPFAR support that had channelled approximately \$453 million to South Africa's HIV/AIDS programmes in 2024, resulting in clinic closures and severe public health disruptions.

→ Weaponising human rights narratives: Far-reaching populist paranoia

Employing the language of human rights violations and "racial persecution", Trump issued a sweeping executive order that slashed financial assistance, targeting in particular a number of vital South African sectors. These included public health, notably resulting in

the closure of clinics and severe disruptions to HIV/AIDS funding through the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), which provided approximately \$453 million to South Africa's HIV/AIDS programmes in 2024.

South African authorities and independent observers repeatedly refuted claims of white "genocide," but these rebuttals were disregarded in favour of a strategy meant to appeal to both a domestic political base and far-right, transnational networks. This manoeuvre elevated the issue from a technical trade dispute to a highly politicised pretext for economic sanctions and broader diplomatic marginalisation.

The Trump administration's punitive measures went beyond tariffs and aid cuts. In practice, U.S.-financed programmes increasingly excluded South African nationals, regardless of how apolitical or technical the projects were, indicating a deliberate effort to isolate the country on the global stage and send a cautionary signal to others perceived as "non-cooperative". This climate of exclusion extended to exchanges, research partnerships, and seed funding opportunities, effectively politicising access in fields ranging from health to clean technology.

→ Trade conditionality and policy capture

South Africa's predicament reveals how U.S. policy under Trump merged economic interests with political demands, using trade frameworks as levers to elicit compliance, not just with narrow market preferences, but broader alignments on sensitive social and geopolitical questions. The constant invocation of alleged abuses, often amplified through transnational far-right discourse, became a strategic tool for justifying not only trade aggression but wider exclusionary policies.

This blend of trade conditionality, human rights rhetoric, and political signalling not only undermined Africa's negotiating position but also deepened South-South and North-South divides, with traditionally non-political domains stamped with the imprimatur of U.S. ideological interests. Ultimately, the South African case underscores the emergence of a new transactionalism - one that binds market access, foreign aid, and routine partnerships to shifting and often punitive criteria determined less by the needs of mutual development than by the vagaries of U.S. domestic politics and far-right global activism.

b) European right-wing influence and its disruptive impact on EU-Africa trade relations

Right-wing populists in Europe increasingly drive the EU's trade agenda toward transactionalism and securitisation. For various European countries, populist ideals and consequential fascist tendencies continue to shape trade narratives of the right with outright propagandist agendas.

Across Europe, actors such as Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni (currently in government) and Geert Wilders (head of former governing party PVV in the Netherlands), as well as opposition figures like Marine Le Pen in France, have advanced protectionist narratives with varying influence, linking trade and aid to migration and security concerns.

In Germany, the AfD, although not in power, has managed to propagate anti-immigration rhetoric, pressuring former Chancellor Olaf Scholz's coalition to allow migration rhetoric to indirectly influence debates on trade and aid, despite mainstream leaders such as Olaf Scholz rejecting a direct linkage, which has reduced support for African exporters. France's National Rally, led by Marine Le Pen, advocates protectionist tariffs, complicating trade talks with Francophone nations like Mali and Côte d'Ivoire. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders' PVV has pushed for tighter EU borders, indirectly stalling trade agreements by prioritising domestic concerns, while Sweden's Democrats, with their growing influence, echo these calls, delaying EU-Africa summits that are critical for trade progress.

These dynamics create an inconsistent EU trade policy, leaving African nations like Mozambique and Ethiopia uncertain about long-term market access. If the long-term goals for the African market are faced with such uncertainties, then there will be no security to hold on to in the global market. Economic insecurity then deals a heavy blow at the African market, as economic security is vital for the success of the African market in all negotiations.

Elsewhere, Russia's assertive engagement in Africa, especially in the Sahel, leverages anti-Western sentiment and authoritarian solidarity. Demonstrations supporting Russian involvement and criticising Western actors underscore shifting allegiances and the erosion of confidence in Western democratic norms.

c) The unintended consequences of anti-Western rhetorics and authoritarian sentiments

An immediate concern is the perception among many African leaders – and among populist leaders and political parties in the Global North – that projecting strength is paramount. This has fuelled growing admiration for the “strongman” leadership style championed by figures such

as US President Trump, Austria's Freedom Party (FPÖ), Vox in Spain, Germany's AfD, and others, contributing to the normalisation of authoritarianism across Africa. Many leaders in countries like Rwanda, Uganda, and Kenya, as well as new regimes in the Sahel, now openly echo the rhetoric and posture of Northern populists, equating “power” and “authority” with the ability to silence dissent, control state institutions, and resist perceived foreign interference. This trend is particularly concerning as it reinforces the perception that only centralised, unyielding leadership can deliver stability or earn global respect, at the expense of democratic principles.

Authoritarian consolidation in Africa, as with recent events in the Sahel, often mirrors populist tactics in the North, manifesting as the politicisation of public institutions, the repression of political opposition, and the use of nationalist and security rhetoric to justify undemocratic governance. In a rapidly shifting trade space, these developments are linked to a transactional approach in international relations, where African governments, in their pursuit of “favourable” deals, risk succumbing to the arm-twisting of protectionist leaders. For example, facing pressure on tariffs or aid, African governments may, out of desperation, compromise the continent's collective bargaining power, “selling out” long-term interests for short-term gain.

A notable pitfall of these extreme contradictions for heterogeneous Africa is the other far right's strategy of assumed counterbalancing, as demonstrated by Russia's leverage on the rising anti-West agendas backed by equally authoritarian regimes in the Sahel region. Avoiding such pitfalls will require strategic and deliberate efforts on the part of African states, as this paper explains in Section 4: “Africa's Responses and Diversification Strategies”.

Russia has leveraged anti-Western sentiment in the Sahel, combining military collaboration and grain support with narratives that portray Western actors as destabilising forces.

4. African Responses and Diversification Strategies

As outlined in the preceding section, Brexit's tariff shocks, AGOA uncertainty, and EU right-wing protectionism have eroded Africa's market access, reduced export revenues, and deepened structural vulnerabilities. Africa's share of global exports dropped to 2.2% in 2023, a decline of 0.4 percentage points from a decade earlier, underscoring persistent marginalisation in world trade. In 2024, Africa's total exports to the EU exceeded \$150 billion. New safeguard duties on agricultural and processed goods championed by EU nationalist parties are projected to slash export revenue from these sectors by up to 12% for some countries (Federal Ministry, Republic of Austria, Labour and Economy- Policy Brief No. 65, January 2025). Between 2018 and 2020, AGOA exports from Africa to the U.S. fell by 15%, from \$8.9 billion to \$7.6 billion.

a) Widening structural vulnerabilities

Due to commodity dependence, Africa's exports remain heavily skewed toward primary goods, which are prone to price volatility. In 2023, for example, manufactured goods made up a small fraction of export value. The state of intra-African trade is also concerning, as only 14.8% of Africa's trade is intra-continental, compared with 54.5% for Asia and 68.4% for Europe, heightening vulnerability to external shocks.

African states and regional blocs are not standing still. They are actively restructuring external partnerships and recalibrating internal strategies to protect economic sovereignty, reassert bargaining power, and reduce over-dependence on the volatile markets of the Global North. Two core countermeasures stand out: deepening regional integration through AfCFTA and strategically diversifying toward the Global South.

b) Regional integration through AfCFTA

Regional integration and economic blocs are not optional: they are the decisive levers for building economic interdependence, dismantling intra-regional trade barriers, and securing Africa's position in the global economy. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), with 54 signatories, is Africa's most ambitious economic integration initiative to date, designed to neutralise external market volatility through strong internal cohesion.

Trade unions have cautioned that without safeguards, AfCFTA risks privileging larger economies at the expense of smaller states and workers' rights.

The current framework of the AfCFTA makes it possible for the "big fishes" to swallow the smaller ones. Smaller countries such as Botswana and Zimbabwe are worried about being crushed by larger economies like Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa. The bigger economies possess the wherewithal to dominate their markets with varying standards of products. It is instructive for progressive politicians to work towards making AfCFTA fair for smaller states and for the working people.

If reviewed and implemented with equity and precision, at variance with its internalised imperial connotations, the AfCFTA would represent not only a dispensable trade agreement but a mechanism for continental economic empowerment.

c) Strategic diversification: the turn to the South

Confronted with the unpredictability of interactions with a right-wing-dominated Global North, African nations are accelerating strategic alignment with the Global South, specifically China, India, Russia, Turkey, and the BRICS bloc. These partnerships, arguably not the most wholesome or best examples of a diversified alignment or of radical departure from right-wing encumbrances, are regarded by African governments – some of which are desperate and would rather take the hand of a "willing foe" than drown – as a possibility for escape. After all, they offer alternative markets, infrastructure financing, and commodity-based trade without the ideological conditions often embedded in Western agreements.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), despite its inherent risks, has delivered critical infrastructure, ports, roads, and industrial zones that facilitate South-South trade. Under the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China has pledged \$50.7 billion in infrastructure investment in 2024 for the next three years, directly supporting AfCFTA's objective of raising intra-African trade to 50% of total trade by 2030. China has currently entrenched itself as Africa's largest trade partner and creditor, with \$170 billion in loans extended to 49 African countries since its inception, targeting key sectors such as energy, mining, and infrastructure.

Brazil, led by state-owned Petrobras, is expanding hydrocarbon exploration in South Africa, Namibia, and Angola, including a 40% stake in Namibia's Mopane field. The country seeks to raise trade volumes with Africa beyond the current \$22 billion, opening new avenues for cooperation. India is also deepening its African footprint, with Tanzania and India committing to grow bilateral trade from \$7 billion to \$10 billion in the near term.

India and Russia have both leveraged scholarship programmes as vital instruments of soft power to consolidate their engagement with Africa, cultivating enduring cultural and professional ties that extend through academia and beyond.

India and Russia have expanded scholarship programmes for African students, deepening cultural and professional ties while strengthening long-term trade and diplomatic cooperation.

These programmes instrumentalise education as a conduit for long-term influence and partnership within Africa's rising generation of professionals and policymakers while advancing diplomatic and economic cooperation between the strategising countries and African states.

The BRICS-established New Development Bank (NDB) has emerged as a key financier of African infrastructure. In 2024, it approved a \$1 billion loan to South Africa for infrastructure, \$200 million to Egypt for sustainable projects, and a ZAR 18.5 billion loan to South Africa's Transnet to restore critical rail networks. Many African economies are now positioning their energy and mining sectors for accelerated development, leveraging BRICS partnerships not only for capital inflows but also for alternative international payment systems. This includes strategies to reduce reliance on the US dollar, a core objective of BRICS, to mitigate currency risk and strengthen Africa's bargaining position in global trade.

5. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The rise of right-wing populism in the Global North has profoundly impacted Africa's development trajectory, extending far beyond conventional aid and trade statistics. This paper has demonstrated how these movements have led to the politicisation of development assistance, protectionist trade policies, and the instrumentalisation of global financial frameworks. However, these external pressures can be met with a dynamic African response. Nations are increasingly prioritising strategic autonomy through the diversification of economic partnerships, acceleration of regional integration, and increased domestic resource mobilisation. This complex interplay underscores the notion that Africa is not merely a recipient of Global North policies but can be a more active agent in shaping its development path.

To navigate this evolving global landscape, progressive African governments should adopt a multi-pronged strategic approach. We propose below an integrated policy playbook for mitigating populism's destabilising effects while advancing inclusive development and peace on the continent, with the goal of turning global headwinds into tailwinds for a self-determined, resilient, and influential Africa.

a) A progressive playbook for African governments

The rise of right-wing populism in the Global North demands that Africa pursues a deliberate counter-strategy rooted in self-determination and resilience. The following playbook sets out four interconnected priorities that progressive African leaders can operationalise. Each is designed not merely as a principle, but as a practical lever for policy and governance, drawing on tested African innovations and regional frameworks.

i. Mobilise domestic resources and achieve fiscal independence

Progressive governments should strengthen their tax bases and reduce aid dependency by adopting innovative financing models. Rwanda's e-tax system, Nigeria's diaspora bonds, and Kenya's digital services levy illustrate scalable pathways for raising revenue. Coordinated regional efforts, such as an AU-wide fiscal compact to harmonise tax regimes and curb illicit financial flows, can reinforce these gains. The objective is clear: by 2030, external aid should be reduced to less than 20%

of national budgets in at least half of AU member states.

Key Steps

- Expand tax bases by establishing digital tax registries and automating compliance using models like Rwanda's e-tax by 2027.
- Leverage diaspora resources by issuing annual diaspora bonds (following Nigeria's model), targeting at least USD 500 million in aggregate inflows by 2030.
- Combat illicit financial flows by establishing an AU-wide fiscal compact with annual peer review mechanisms by 2026.

Milestones

- By 2030, reduce external aid to below 20% of national budgets in at least half of AU member states.
- Achieve a 10% increase in domestic revenue-to-GDP ratios across AU member states within the next decade.

ii. Accelerate and equalise AfCFTA

AfCFTA is the continent's most powerful tool for economic resilience, but it must be implemented equitably. Safeguards for smaller economies and workers' rights are vital, ensuring that integration does not privilege the largest players. Progressive leaders should push for the faster removal of non-tariff barriers, the expansion of cross-border infrastructure, and the activation of AfCFTA's dispute settlement body to protect weaker economies. A measurable goal is to raise intra-African trade from the current 15% to at least 25% within the next decade.

Key Steps

- Remove non-tariff barriers by launching a continent-wide digital platform by the end of 2026 to report, track, and resolve intra-African trade barriers.
- Safeguard smaller economies by activating AfCFTA's dispute settlement body by 2027 to ensure fair competition.
- Invest in infrastructure by building at least three cross-border transport corridors annually (rail, road, energy interconnectors) with AU coordination.

Milestones

- Raise intra-African trade from the current 15% to at least 25% by 2035.
- Ensure that every AU member state has access to at least one cross-border transport corridor by 2030.

iii. Invest in people and innovation

Africa's growth must be fuelled by robust education, health-care, and technological innovation. African governments should prioritise universal primary healthcare financing, expand progressive education that equips young people with digital and civic skills, and support innovation ecosystems. Kenya's M-Pesa shows how local ingenuity can scale globally, while Ghana's agricultural reforms demonstrate the power of targeted investment. By 2030, Africa should aim for 50% of young people to have access to digital skills training, and for every member state to establish at least one national innovation hub linked to AfCFTA markets.

Key Steps

- a) Dedicate 15% of national budgets to healthcare by 2030 in line with the Abuja Declaration.
- b) Expand education for the digital age by introducing compulsory digital and civic literacy curricula in all AU states by 2028.
- c) Support innovation ecosystems by establishing at least one national innovation hub per member state, connected to AfCFTA value chains by 2030.

Milestones

- By 2030, ensure 50% of African young people have completed digital skills training.
- By 2035, reduce out-of-pocket health expenditure by 30% in at least 20 AU member states.

iv. Strengthen democratic governance and sovereignty

Right-wing populism thrives on authoritarian emulation. Africa's best defence is resilient democracy and transparent governance. Strengthening the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), protecting judicial independence, and expanding citizen-driven oversight tools (such as open budget portals and civic tech platforms) will help governments negotiate partnerships without conceding sovereignty. By 2030, AU states should commit to constitutional safeguards that entrench media freedom, judicial independence, and the protection of minority rights as non-negotiable principles.

Key Steps

- a) Institutionalise peer review by expanding the APRM to cover all 54 AU member states by 2030, with biennial public reporting.
- b) Constitutional safeguards by enshrining judicial independence and media freedom in at least 70% of AU constitutions by 2030.
- c) Enhance civic participation by launching AU-supported open budget portals and citizen oversight platforms by 2027.

Milestones

- By 2030, establish constitutional guarantees for media freedom and judicial independence in at least 40 AU member states.

- By 2028, ensure all AU states publish annual budget transparency reports, making them accessible to citizens.

In sum, this playbook transforms Africa's vulnerabilities into strategic levers. It ties sovereignty to practical fiscal tools, positions AfCFTA as the anchor of continental resilience, invests in people as the drivers of endogenous growth, and makes democracy the shield against external and internal populist pressures. Far from aspirational rhetoric, these priorities offer a roadmap with measurable milestones, giving Africa a pragmatic way to turn global headwinds into developmental tailwinds.

b) Policy recommendations for Western counterparts

Western governments should move away from transactional aid tied to migration or ideology, reduce protectionist barriers, expand genuine market access, reinforce multilateralism, and ensure that Africa has a stronger voice in global forums. For Western governments and institutions, a re-evaluation of current approaches is necessary to foster more equitable and effective partnerships with Africa. Western governments should move away from transactional aid models that tie assistance to migration control or social conservative agendas. Instead, they should adopt approaches based on mutual interest, shared decision-making, and respect for African sovereignty and human rights, aligning aid with recipient countries' self-identified development priorities.

Revisiting protectionist measures and ensuring preferential market access (e.g., strengthening AGOA or offering duty-free, quota-free access) can genuinely support Africa's export economies and foster local industrialisation, rather than perpetuating raw material extraction. This requires moving beyond short-term gains to long-term sustainable development.

Western nations should reinforce multilateral institutions and advocate for greater African inclusion and a stronger African voice in global forums. Reforming the international system to address global economic disparities and illicit financial outflows, as consistently called for by African leaders, is essential for a more just and stable global order.

Recognising that domestic populist agendas have significant foreign policy consequences, Western governments and civil society should work to address the underlying drivers of populism within their own societies, such as economic anxiety, social discontent, and anti-immigrant sentiment. Fostering more stable, predictable, and cooperative international relations requires internal political stability and a commitment to inclusive domestic policies.

About the authors

Churchill Otieno is the President of The Africa Editors Forum (TAEF) and serves on various boards. He is president of The New Humanitarian, chairs the Steering Committee of the Africa Media Convention, and serves as the Executive Director of the Eastern Africa Editors Society (EAES). He has a scholarly focus on inclusive narratives and epistemic ecosystems.

Aderonke Ige is a lawyer, human rights activist, social and environmental justice crusader, and founder of the Help Initiative for Social Justice and Humanitarian Development, a non-profit advancing social justice through grassroots engagement, policy advocacy and citizen-led actions. As a Chevening alumna of Development Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, she utilises her knowledge of Law and Development to engage with nuanced issues of African advancement. She is a foundational member of the Young African Activists Network (YAAN).

Beyond Aid and Fear: A Progressive Path to Africa's Growth Resurgence

The rise of right-wing populist forces in the Global North is also changing the parameters for development cooperation and trade with Africa—aid is being tied to migration control and culturally conservative agendas, while protectionist barriers are reducing market opportunities. The authors outline a progressive counter-strategy with four levers—fiscal autonomy, a fair and accelerated AfCFTA, investment in people and innovation, and strong, democratic governance. They at the same time advocate for more partnership-based approaches by Western actors to ensure Africa's self-determined, resilient development.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

➔ [**fes.de**](https://fes.de)