



Opening statement by President von der Leyen at the 10th EU-AU Commission-to-Commission meeting plenary session

Addis Ababa, 27 February 2020

Merci beaucoup M. le Président, cher Moussa, de nous recevoir ici au sein de l'Union africaine.

Commissioners,

Dear colleagues and friends,

Thank you very much for the warm welcome to the African Union and hosting this session here. It is wonderful to be back.

Indeed, when I came into office, I chose for the very first trip abroad, outside the European Union, to visit the African Union, and it was a natural choice. It was a natural choice and it was a clear message, because we are natural partners. And listening to you, I once again realised how similar our challenges and our opportunities are and how natural it is to work together in the mutual interest.

Africa is home to the fastest growing economies of the world. And your nations and community of nations are becoming more and more united – if you look at the African peacekeeping missions to the new Free Trade Area, I am very interested in them.

And just like Europe, you want to be the master of your future. So there are a lot of common points we have to discuss and where we can find common paths towards the future. I truly believe that the stronger Africa will be, the stronger we will be too.

So I am pleased to be back here with the College, the Commissioners. And indeed, this is the largest delegation of Commissioners as College ever. We never had so many Commissioners on a trip abroad, outside the European Union, so many Commissioners to visit. And therefore, this too is a very strong sign of the interest we have in each other.

You mentioned many topics we have to discuss, be it peace and security or jobs and skills. But, of course, also climate action, the transition to a digital society and economy, human mobility, trade, and many other topics.

It is our 10th College-to-College meeting, we have already come a long way. And we have worked together on security and development from the Horn of Africa to the Sahel, you mentioned it. We have started to invest in good jobs for youth across the continent.

It has become a partnership of equals, where both sides have something to win and both sides have a lot of responsibilities. So we are aware of the challenges, but we are also aware of the common perspective and the common opportunities we want to grasp.

Dear Moussa, when I first came to Addis, I told you that I came first of all to listen. And this is why we are all here today. After our first meeting, we have put together topics, a set of proposals – these will be the round tables today – the four main themes that we have chosen together.

It is first of all peace, security and good governance. Your initiative to silence the guns in Africa is

something we are deeply impressed of, we want to support you as much as we can. It is a huge challenge, it is absolutely the right idea to silence the guns. So you have us at your side because this is of utmost importance for the development of this continent. And you rightly mentioned that Libya shows how natural it should be to join forces – we have met indeed in Berlin – but we know how difficult it is to implement afterwards. To keep everybody on board. But this is the essence of multilateralism. It is not only to sit down together to discuss things but it is also to implement them, to stay true to what you have accepted or what you have promised. So there is still a lot to do – we know it – and we count on you and your expertise to improve things knowing how hard this will be. So let us discuss how to best link your initiatives and our initiatives.

Second, on trade and investment. We all know the questions we have in front of us. How to make the most of your new Free Trade Area. How to bring investment to Africa. Indeed, as you mentioned, Europe is the largest investor in Africa and the largest trade partner to Africa. So there is a lot we have to share – a lot of technologies and expertise we can share. We would like to hear what you expect from our partnership, and how far you are willing to go.

Third, on the transition towards a cleaner, carbon-neutral and digital economy. I think no one understands climate change better than you. I just have to mention the growing desert. And all of us, in our continents, in Africa and in Europe, we see already and fear the consequences of climate change – the floodings, the draughts, the grief over losing species – we call it biodiversity. The knowledge that we have to profoundly change the way we produce and consume into a circular economy with respect to nature, live in harmony with nature. There is a lot we have to change, but also a lot of opportunities ahead of us we want to grasp – with new technologies and new opportunities. And the same goes, of course, for the digital age – I know that there is a thirst for digital skills in young Africans and young Europeans – let us join forces there, let us give them the technologies, let us give them the skills and, of course, frame the whole thing, because technology is neutral. So it is depending of us what we make out of it – whether it is going to be more positive or more difficult for our societies. And if I may say so, Africa does not have to repeat that same mistakes Europe did in the past. So you can take the fast track towards a more modern and more sustainable economy. Let us walk this path together, in our mutual interest.

Finally, on migration, human mobility and skills. I commend you for your initiatives on giving women full access to finance, full access to entrepreneurship, to create your own business – rightly so, I can only say. It is something where Europe also fights for, struggles with. We are still not where we want to be, we know these topics, but [and] we have improved and still, there is a lot to do. So I commend you on that. I commend you on your initiatives in investing in youth. We have achieved a lot in recent years, also on the topic of fighting smuggling and human trafficking, which disrespects the human dignity. So there, we join forces. And on the topic of voluntary returns: There is still a long way to go, yes. We must invest in what has worked over the years – so we have some experience. Over the last decades, we worked a lot together, we made mistakes, we had successes. So let us take this experience and move it forward. That what worked, we should extend, we should emphasise and intensify. And we must do more so that African youth can find a place within their own societies – through investment to education, health – these are the main topics we want to tackle.

We have come with proposals, but we want to hear from you, too. This is the fourth round table, I am very curious to hear the results. All this is based on the conversation that we will work on our contributions to a new Strategy with Africa. This is the starting point today. This is the very first step we take. It is a big step in taking our partnership – a long lasting partnership – to the next level. I am looking forward to that.

Thank you for your attention.