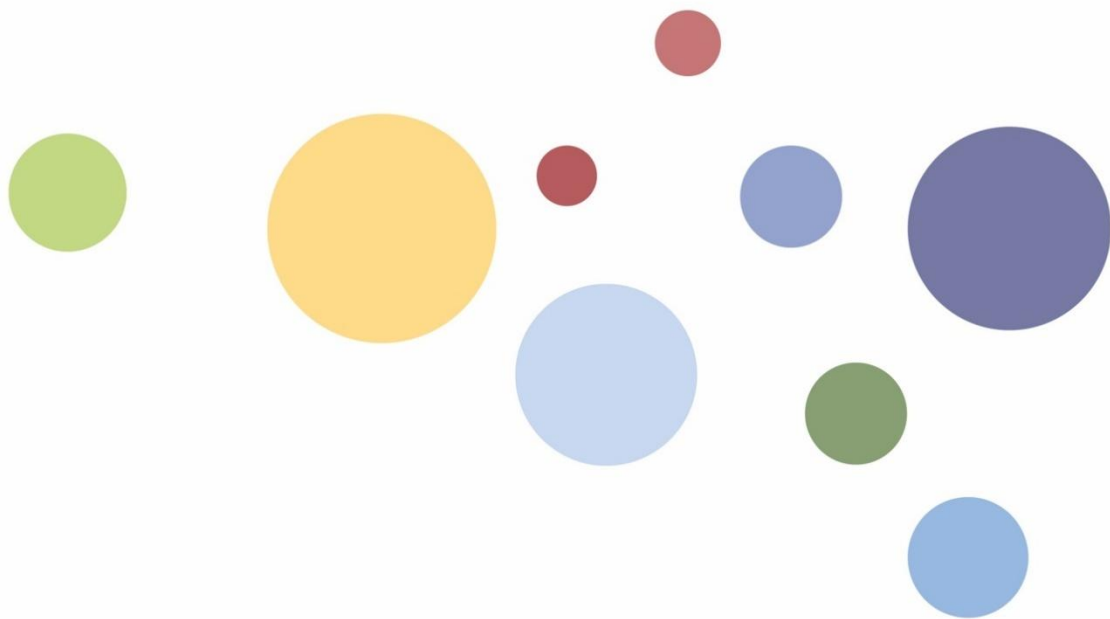


Fostering instead of Feeding: Realignment of Euro-African Cooperation

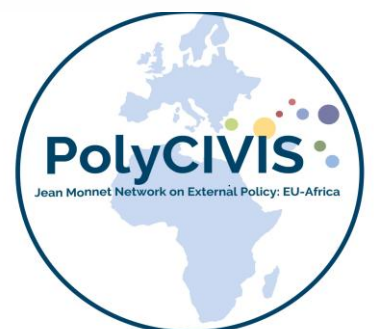
*A systemic framework for SME empowerment and
demographic resilience in Euro-African relations*

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Executive Summary

This policy brief addresses the urgent need to realign Euro-African cooperation from paternalistic aid ("feeding") toward the strategic empowerment ("fostering") of African small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).ⁱ

Using the global polycrisis as a diagnostic foundation,ⁱⁱ the demographic divergence between Europe and Africa is identified as a strategic opportunity to build a Euro-African circular repair economy. In response, the African Scorecard Framework (ASF) is introduced as a proposed operational tool. Frameworks like the ASF equip policymakers and SMEs to embed sustainability and local knowledge directly into market-entry decisions.ⁱⁱⁱ By systematically mitigating "epistemic dissonance"—the fundamental mismatch between imported Western business models and local African realities—and leveraging the Ubuntu paradigm, the model ensures social embeddedness.^{iv} To maintain investor attractiveness, rigid regulations are replaced by flexibly calibrated indicative benchmark targets.

Theory of change: If EU and African Union (AU) actors adopt SME investment models guided by tools like the ASF, the Euro-African partnership will successfully shift from "feeding" to "fostering". This is because such frameworks tackle the structural root causes of the polycrisis by creating local jobs, empowering women to lower demographic pressure,^v and respecting local knowledge.^{vi}

Key messages

- ❖ **Polycrisis as a Diagnostic Foundation:** Understanding entangled demographic and economic shocks necessitates a shift to strategic SME empowerment.
- ❖ **Evaluative Frameworks as Operational Tools:** Tools like the ASF integrate local context into market-entry decisions, actively overcoming the mismatch between Western business models and African realities.
- ❖ **Indicative Benchmark Targets:** Flexible targets, such as scalable female leadership quotas and local value-addition thresholds, ensure political feasibility and investor attractiveness.
- ❖ **Systemic Resilience via the Gender-Total Fertility Rate (TFR) Nexus:** Empowering female labour-force participation activates the demographic dividend, building long-term resilience against systemic shocks.

(1) Introduction: the macroeconomic imperative for realignment

To fundamentally realign Euro-African cooperation, this policy brief utilises the global polycrisis as its primary diagnostic foundation. The polycrisis is defined as the non-linear convergence and entanglement of demographic, ecological, and economic shocks.¹ Evaluated from this perspective, the demographic divergence between the two continents is both a challenge and a unique strategic opportunity.²

Europe is experiencing severe demographic shrinkage, facing a TFR of roughly 1.4. This decline causes chronic labour shortages and prohibitive labour costs.³ Conversely, Africa is defined by a massive "youth bulge" expecting approximately 20 million young people to enter the labour market annually in the coming decades.⁴ If unmanaged, this demographic pressure exacerbates the risks of poverty and unmanaged migration.

However, if strategically harnessed, it provides the exact workforce Europe lacks.

This demographic dynamic lays the ideal foundation for a Euro-African circular repair economy. In Europe's high-cost environment, the industrial repair of machinery frequently exceeds its replacement value, driving resource depletion. In contrast, Africa's competitive labour costs make labour-intensive refurbishment highly viable. Establishing such a repair loop allows European SMEs to preserve resources, while African economies benefit from technology transfer and mass employment. Ultimately, this creates an "autocatalytic ecosystem"—a self-sustaining economic network where local job creation, resource preservation, and sustainable supply chains mutually reinforce each other to build systemic resilience.⁵

✳ **The Total Fertility Rate (TFR):** is a synthetic measure of the statistical number of children a woman will bear during her reproductive life. The replacement level, at which a population remains stable long-term without migration, is approximately 2.1 children per woman.⁶

The African Context: Despite economic progress, the TFR averaged 4.5 in 2023, resulting in a high dependency ratio: one worker must statistically support two non-working individuals (children/elderly), which hampers productive investment.⁷

The Systemic Lever: Women's education and labour-force participation (SDG 5) correlate directly with a reduction in TFR. This enables the transition to a demographic dividend; eases pressure on natural resources and provides the foundation for sustainable growth.⁸

¹ Morin & Kern, 1998

² United Nations, 2024; International Monetary Fund, 2025

³ Asche, 2023a

⁴ Tetzlaff, 2023

⁵ Alonso-Almeida & Borrajo-Millán, 2025

⁶ Asche, 2023a; United Nations, 2024

⁷ Chillers, 2020, as cited in Tetzlaff, 2023

⁸ Adeola et al., 2024; Jesgarz, 2026

To operationalise these macroeconomic synergies, European SMEs and policymakers require practical instruments. Traditional Western risk models often fail in African markets due to epistemic dissonance, such as hybrid governance structures and communal values.⁹ Therefore, this brief proposes the ASF as operational tool. The ASF navigates polycrisis conditions by embedding local knowledge and sustainability targets directly into market-entry decisions. Specifically, the ASF operates on the principle of "impact-conditionality"—a funding and investment model where access to capital is strictly linked to achieving context-sensitive sustainability and equity targets, rather than just financial returns.¹⁰ By clearly distinguishing the polycrisis as the diagnostic foundation from evaluative frameworks like the ASF as therapeutic tools, this brief provides an actionable pathway for SMEs to overcome systemic barriers and foster mutual prosperity.

2.1. Background and Analysis: Operationalising the ASF

With 90% of all businesses and 80% of employment, SMEs constitute the actual powerhouse of African transformation.¹¹ For European SMEs, however, successful market entry into Africa requires a strategic toolkit that transcends conventional risk parameters and decolonially reflects the continent's structural complexity.¹²

2.1.1. The "Liability of Outsidership" and Systemic Market Barriers

According to the "Revised Uppsala model of internationalisation by Johanson and Vahlne, foreign enterprises primarily face the "liability of outsidership"—a critical competitive

disadvantage stemming from a lack of integration into local, relationship-specific business networks.¹³ Conventional Western market-entry models often fail to overcome this barrier, as they unreflectively transfer universalised assumptions and interpret Africa's vast heterogeneity merely as a deficit.

Crucially, in a polycrisis context, traditional market entry barriers—such as inadequate infrastructure, limited access to finance, and weak government systems—do not act in isolation. Instead, they trigger cascading failure mechanisms where, for instance, infrastructure gaps constrain local supply chains, which in turn exacerbates economic instability and social grievances.¹⁴

Conceptual models like the ASF aim to address these systemic interconnections by replacing universal risk categories with context-sensitive indicators that treat social embeddedness as a quantifiable mechanism for resilience.¹⁵

2.2. Relational Governance and the "Social License to Operate"

To effectively navigate these cascading failures and overcome the liability of outsidership, European SMEs must understand that acquiring formal legal permits from state authorities is insufficient. In environments often characterised by institutional voids, sustainable engagement is inextricably linked to obtaining a "Social License to Operate" (SLO)—the ongoing approval and broad acceptance of business activities by the local community.¹⁶

Gaining an SLO is the most effective operational mechanism to overcome the liability of outsidership: It transforms a foreign SME from an isolated actor into a legitimate network insider, facilitating access to crucial local resources and mitigating operational

⁹ Sibanda & Hove-Sibanda, 2024; Magocha & Matashu, 2024

¹⁰ 16 Schreiber et al., 2025

¹¹ Iheanachor & Etim, 2022; Jagun, 2022

¹² Ogbechie & Ogah, 2024

¹³ Johanson & Vahlne, 2009

¹⁴ Lawrence et al., 2024

¹⁵ Jesgarz, 2026

¹⁶ Sibanda & Hove-Sibanda, 2024

risks.¹⁷ Block I of the ASF assesses precisely this capacity to integrate into the local socio-cultural fabric through the Ubuntu paradigm. Translated as "I am because we are", Ubuntu prioritises communal welfare, solidarity, and ethical responsibility over individualistic profit maximisation.¹⁸ Empirical evidence shows that SMEs that embed their operations within this philosophy build deep relational trust. This trust acts as a crucial buffer, granting

businesses significantly higher operational resilience against political or economic shocks.

To provide a structured overview, *Figure 1*, visualizes how the four core blocks of the ASF translate directly into actionable Corporate Citizenship measures designed for system-level interventions.¹⁹

Figure 1: African Scorecard Action-Matrix

ASF Block	Strategic Focus	Corporate Citizenship Action
I: LEGITIMACY 	Relational Governance & Social License	 Ubuntu Stakeholder Boards Prioritize communal welfare ("I am because we are") over individualistic profit. Secure communal agreements with local authorities and NGOs.
II: EPISTEMIC CORRECTION & PCB 	Decolonial Integration & Structural Asymmetry	 Care-Infrastructure Investment Revising HR to include flexible care measures and context-sensitive gender quotas (>45%) to address structural asymmetries and the gender-TFR nexus.
III: ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION 	SME Productivity & Value Addition	 Digital Leapfrogging & Local Sourcing Utilizing FinTech/AgrarTech platforms to bypass traditional infrastructure gaps. Prioritize local sourcing to achieve a targeted local value-addition quota of >60%.
IV: SYSTEMIC RESILIENCE 	External Shocks & Ecological Limits	 Integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems Co-creating climate-adapted solutions based on traditional ecological knowledge. Integrate circular repair models to protect value chains from climate shocks.

¹⁷ Johanson & Vahlne, 2009

¹⁸ Magocha & Matashu, 2024

¹⁹ Jesgarz, 2026

2.3. The Macroeconomic Logic of the Circular Repair Economy

The most innovative approach to strengthening systemic resilience lies in exploiting the economic gradients between Europe and Africa through a circular repair economy.²⁰ As illustrated in Table 1, the structural differences between the two continents provide a compelling macroeconomic logic for this shift.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of the Repair Economy

Cost Factor	Europe (High-Cost Environment) ²¹	Africa (Resource-Constrained)	Strategic Implication for Circularity
<i>Labour Costs</i>	Prohibitive; industrial repair frequently exceeds replacement value.	Competitive; significant capacity for labour-intensive refurbishment & remanufacturing	African Comparative Advantage: Repair emerges as a competitive, high-skill technical sector. ²²
<i>Logistics & Material Costs</i>	Low due to mature, globalized mass production supply chains	Prohibitively high; regional transport costs can be 4.5 times higher than in developed markets.	Economic Imperative: Resource preservation and life-cycle extension are essential for financial viability.
<i>Environmental Impact</i>	Linear consumption patterns lead to excessive resource depletion and e-waste.	Carbon mitigation through the systemic extension of technical component life-cycles	Green Finance: Quantified sustainability outcomes facilitate access to the global ESG capital market.

2.4. Theoretical Recommendation

To illustrate the ASF's mechanisms, a theoretical recommendation for the German SME *Welte Cardan-Service GmbH* is outlined. Welte produces robust industrial driveshafts.²³ In Europe, high labour costs render reconditioning economically unviable, causing premium material waste. Conversely, Africa's demanding roads create a massive need for affordable spare parts.

Following a withdrawal from an ad-hoc export attempt in West Africa due to a lacking SLO, the "Mombasa-Model" is proposed for a

more promising market entry. Derived directly from the implications of the ASF, it must be emphasized that this model is theoretical and has not yet been implemented.

Functioning as a "third-country strategy", the model establishes a central production hub in a country that serves multiple neighbouring markets rather than just its domestic base.²⁴ By locating the master hub in Kenya, Welte strategically capitalizes on transport infrastructure recently financed under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), such as the *Standard Gauge Railway*.²⁵ Furthermore, this hub-and-spoke network is highly

²⁰ Jesgarz, 2026

²¹ Morschett et al., 2025

²² Johnson, 2024

²³ Welte Group, 2026

²⁴ Morschett, 2024

²⁵ Robinson, 2023

efficient because landlocked countries like Uganda and Rwanda—which channels 85% of its foreign trade via Kenya—already route the vast majority of their goods traffic through the Port of Mombasa.²⁶

Theoretically, *Welte* applies this model across the four core blocks:

- 1. Ubuntu Governance (Block I):** A Mombasa "Master Hub" replaces rigid subsidiaries, transferring "German Engineering" to local "Social Franchise" workshops to secure a robust SLO. Outstanding training graduates gain network career pathways: managing an African franchise, instructing at the Hub, or joining one of *Welte*'s 16 branches across seven European countries.²⁷
- 2. Gender Quotas & Care Infrastructure (Block II):** To systematically operationalise the Gender-TFR nexus without complexity overload, *Welte* integrates women into the technical teams of its franchise workshops. By co-investing in targeted care-infrastructure for its own female employees, the SME makes an indicative target of a >20% female quota realistically actionable.²⁸
- 3. Local Value-Addition & Digital Leapfrogging (Block III):** To overcome logistical bottlenecks, the SME leverages digital leapfrogging. A diagnostic app allows local mechanics to identify needed parts, while mobile payment integration (e.g., M-Pesa) secures transactions across the franchise network.²⁹ This pan-African franchise expansion receives a strong tailwind from the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), fundamentally facilitating the formation of regional value chains.³⁰
- 4. Circular Repair (Block IV):** By

remanufacturing European old parts at the Mombasa Master Hub, the SME reduces global resource depletion and CO₂ emissions. This transition to a circular repair economy acts as a high "moat" against cheap, low-quality competitors.

ASF Assessment and Policy Support:

Evaluated hypothetically through the ASF, the *Welte* Mombasa-Model achieves exceptionally high scores across systemic resilience dimensions. Because the proposed model visibly tackles the root causes of the polycrisis, this score would qualify the SME for "impact-conditionality" support, granting preferential access to EU risk-mitigation guarantees and global Green Finance.

(3) Policy recommendations

To successfully facilitate the paradigm shift from paternalistic "feeding" to strategic "fostering," evaluative frameworks like the ASF should be embedded into a coordinated multi-level policy approach. To maximise operational impact, the following recommendations are grouped according to target actors.

Crucially, to ensure political feasibility, maintain investor attractiveness, and avoid prohibitive rigid regulations, the numerical thresholds outlined in the ASF—such as the female leadership quota of >45% or the local value-addition threshold of >60%—must be implemented as indicative benchmark targets. These percentages are illustrative and should be flexibly calibrated according to sector, enterprise size, and specific national contexts in close consultation with the respective SME actors and local stakeholders.

²⁶ Bagalwadi, 2024

²⁷ *Welte* Group, 2026

²⁸ Jesgarz, 2026

²⁹ Ajadi & Bayen, 2018

³⁰ Asche, 2023b

For EU Institutions

- (i) **Implement Impact-Conditionality:** EU policymakers should link European SME support instruments (such as export credit guarantees and Global Gateway Initiative funding) to sustainability compliance. Preferential access to risk-mitigation guarantees and subsidised credit lines should be conditionally tied to measurable achievements in local value addition and ecological preservation.³¹
- (ii) **Promote Mutual Talent Security:** Actively co-fund dual vocational training and digital educational partnerships to build a resilient talent pipeline. To prevent an exploitative "brain drain," it is crucial to emphasise that only the "surplus" of trained professionals should be offered a simplified, strictly voluntary migration model into the European Economic Area. The primary goal must always remain equipping the African youth for local industrialisation, thus creating mutual talent security.³²

For AU Institutions and Member States

- (i) **Promote Non-Extractive Business Models via the AfCFTA:** AU member states should leverage the AfCFTA to harmonise sustainability requirements. Integrating evaluation models like the ASF would systematically promote non-extractive foreign business models and foreign direct investments (FDI). Consequently, a higher share of value creation would remain on the continent to directly increase local prosperity.³³
- (ii) **Implement Tax Exemptions for Circular Economies:** To actively foster systemic resilience and resource preservation, AU member states should introduce targeted tax exemptions for repairable, industrial used and old parts. This incentivises the establishment of local remanufacturing hubs and reduces dependency on new imports.³⁴
- (iii) **Facilitate Digital Leapfrogging:** Governments must prioritise the expansion of digital infrastructure and mobile payment systems to enable SMEs to bypass traditional infrastructure gaps and directly integrate local suppliers into the formal economy.

For SMEs and Business Associations

- (i) **Secure the SLO:** SMEs must treat corporate citizenship not as peripheral public relations, but as an indispensable survival strategy. By actively establishing Ubuntu-based stakeholder boards and sharing decision-making power with local communities, SMEs can proactively earn and maintain their SLO.³⁵
- (ii) **Operationalise the Gender-TFR Nexus:** European and African SMEs should proactively pursue the indicative benchmark targets for female empowerment. To make this actionable, SMEs must direct corporate investments into local care infrastructure—such as company-supported childcare and fresh-water access—to effectively relieve women of unpaid care burdens and activate the demographic dividend.³⁶

³¹ Jesgarz, 2026; Schreiber et al., 2025

³² Månsson, 2022

³³ African Union, 2022

³⁴ Alonso-Almeida & Borrajo-Millán, 2025

³⁵ Sibanda & Hove-Sibanda, 2024; Magocha & Matashu, 2024

³⁶ Aseidu et al., 2023

For Development Finance Institutions (DFIs)

- (i) **Provide Context-Sensitive Capital:** DFIs such as the European Investment Bank (EIB) or the African Development Bank (AfDB) should design tailored financing vehicles that specifically reward sustainability-compliant SMEs and offer accessible micro-loans for local suppliers.³⁷
- (ii) **Co-Finance Circular Repair Hubs:** DFIs should offer targeted blended-finance solutions to de-risk the initial capital expenditures required to establish local remanufacturing and circular repair hubs, thereby accelerating the transition from linear sales to sustainable resource loops.

(4) Limitations of the proposed ASF framework

While a proposed framework like the ASF offers a strategic pathway for navigating the polycrisis, several methodological and operational limitations must be acknowledged.

First, there is an inherent risk of over-generalising "Africa" as a unified entity. The continent comprises 54 highly heterogeneous nations with deeply distinct institutional, cultural, and economic trajectories.³⁸ Although the ASF explicitly demands context-sensitive indicators to counteract Eurocentric universalism, applying a continent-wide framework may inadvertently obscure critical sub-regional variations if not rigorously calibrated by local experts.

Second, the operationalisation of multidimensional models entails significant analytical complexity. The requirement to combine quantitative scoring with qualitative narrative assessments—particularly regarding abstract concepts like the Post-Colonial Burden (PCB)—demands substantial time and contextual knowledge. This poses a potential risk of "complexity overload" for

resource-constrained SMEs, necessitating external institutional mediation.³⁹

Third, the framework currently exhibits empirical limitations. While the integration of the Ubuntu paradigm and the gender-TFR nexus is theoretically sound, the holistic application of all four ASF blocks simultaneously remains a stylized proposition—as illustrated by the Welte Mombasa-Model vignette. Large-scale empirical validation is therefore still outstanding. The exact causal mechanisms—such as how precisely Indigenous Knowledge Systems strengthen ecological adaptation, or how cascading infrastructure failures quantifiably impact long-term market entry under polycrisis conditions—require robust longitudinal field data. Future research must empirically test these causal linkages to definitively verify the framework's practical effectiveness and address potential normative overreach.

Fifth, while SMEs are identified as the engine of the economy, they cannot replace large-scale state infrastructure projects – such as those under the BRI – required for massive economies of scale. The focus on SMEs is a conscious strategic choice to prioritise systemic resilience over debt-intensive mega-projects.⁴⁰

³⁷ African Development Bank, 2021

³⁸ Robinson, 2023; Tetzlaff, 2023

³⁹ Jesgarz, 2026

⁴⁰ Züfle, 2022; Robinson, 2023

(5) Conclusion

To successfully navigate the non-linear dynamics of the global polycrisis, operational instruments must reflect the very complexity of the systemic shocks they seek to address. Tools such as the ASF seek to provide exactly this necessary multidimensionality. By learning to accurately read the hazards and implications of the polycrisis rather than ignoring them, investing European SMEs achieve far more than just economic viability and ecological compliance; above all, they gain profound crisis resilience.

Evaluated and structured through context-sensitive frameworks, a European SME transcends the traditional, often extractive role of a foreign entity and embeds itself firmly into the local community as a genuine "Corporate Citizen". In this capacity, the enterprise functions as a reliable employer and investor. By providing fair wages and sharing decision-making power through the

Ubuntu paradigm, it acts as a direct motor for rising local prosperity. Crucially, through the deliberate operationalisation of the gender-TFR nexus and targeted investments in care infrastructure, the SME becomes an active promoter of the demographic dividend, effectively relieving long-term pressure on both social and ecological systems.

Ultimately, this systemic approach culminates in the fundamental realignment of Euro-African relations. By abandoning the paternalistic logic of "feeding" in favour of the strategic "fostering" of the African private sector, a self-sustaining, autocatalytic ecosystem is created. By acting as responsible corporate citizens, European SMEs overcome their liability of outsidership and the Post-Colonial Burden, establishing an equitable partnership of mutual prosperity that is truly robust enough to withstand the overlapping storms of the 21st century.

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ⁱ Schreiber et al., 2025

ⁱⁱ Lawrence et al., 2024

ⁱⁱⁱ Jesgarz, 2026

^{iv} Matashu, 2024; Magocha & Matashu, 2024

^v Aseidu et al., 2023

^{vi} Sibanda & Hove-Sibanda, 2024