

EDITORIAL

Africa, center stage of a changing reality

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Photography: "The Strength Of A Woman", by [Derrick Ofosu Boateng](#)

The African continent is in the midst of multiple transformations. The global context marked by the overlapping of crises (democratic, social and ecological) has embraced Africa as the main stage for all these changes, presenting different accents and characteristics in each region. Similarly, many of the major impacts on the international scene, such as the rise of the Asian continent and China, now occupying the centre of worldwide geopolitics, cannot be explained without the central role of the African region. Therefore, it could be argued that Africa today hosts a reciprocity of dynamics. On the one hand, the continent is one of the main world arenas assembling intense multipolar competition for geopolitical and geoeconomic interests. On the other hand, with its own particular features, Africa is a sounding board of the global crises faced by the ensemble of societies. Taking into consideration these two mechanisms at work, the African continent can no longer be conceived as a peripheral region in the framework of international relations, despite being the trend that has recurrently permeated interpretations and discourses on Africa. In the same vein, we have an obligation to understand and reflect on the role of the African continent in the post-pandemic global scenario. To do so, it is crucial to eschew the clichés

and narratives responsible for simplifying the reality of Africa, which is key to comprehending the big picture of modernity and globalization.

The mistake of addressing Africa as a homogenous whole

The African continent displays a diversity and complexity that is very often overlooked. Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie provides the public with preventive tools that facilitate the proper understanding of the continent. In a famous lecture, the author reminds us that the main problem in relation to Africa is of an interpretive nature. According to the writer, the «danger of a sole narrative» about the continent is present in the systematic construction of accounts, analysis and understandings based on partial images that represented a tiny part of region's reality. Wrongfully, these incomplete pictures have become our only access to a deeply complex region. Thus, the first challenge is to explore, understand, and discuss the present and future of Africa from a perspective willing to deconstruct the traditional images of «Afro-pessimism». At the same time, it is crucial to recognise the African context from different angles and encompass the African voices within the discourse.

Old, new and unexpected actors on the African continent

The 21st century in Africa is intensely marked by the arrival and deployment of emerging countries in the continent. China, India and Brazil have become new actors (although some have been discreetly present on the continent for centuries) in the region, intensifying their trade, economic or diplomatic strategies. The last fifteen years, if we consider the 2006 China-Africa Bilateral Summit (FOCAC) as a milestone, have been a real turning point in this reciprocal relationship. On the one hand, countries such as China have found on the African continent an ideal spot, not only for their economic expansion, but also to strengthen their diplomatic and political agenda, cultivating the relationship with a region that, let us not forget, contains 54 countries. On the other hand, the economic leap achieved by countries such as Ethiopia, Angola, Kenya, South Africa and Ghana cannot be understood without the new dynamics of South-South cooperation or Beijing-driven infrastructure construction policies, among others aspects. Yet this multipolar performance is not limited to China. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, the United Arab Emirates and Russia, but also North African countries such as Algeria and Morocco, have in recent years given the continent a preferential position in the unfolding of their foreign agendas.

We intend to delve into the African context from different angles and encompass the continent's voices within the discourse to better understand an often overlooked complex and diverse reality

Yet this set of interactions among countries should not be interpreted unequivocally. It is important to bear in mind that such engagements do not always go in accordance with the goals and perspectives of African countries. Moreover, this new face of foreign interference

is also generating different dynamics of inequality, conflict and injustice that deserve to be properly analysed. For their part, Europe, the United States and the whole of the Western world have witnessed how in a few years their privileged relationship with the African continent has quickly been disputed. In the case of the European Union, in particular, it is necessary to rethink and update the key elements that, in the post-Cotonou context, must define the present and future relationship with an African region that is essential for the old continent.

Political protest, political transitions and new authoritarianisms

One of the aspects that has suffered the most invisibility in recent years is the so-called «African springs». The wave of political protests that the continent has witnessed since 2011 is extraordinary. Virtually all African contexts have since then encountered protests motivated by a wide range of incentives. In many cases, the urban youth have led the protests, denouncing either political corruption, the lack of social expectations coming from their governments or, even, the attempt of different leaders to perpetuate themselves in power. Precisely, one of the issues that has raised debate and encouraged research has been the instruments and methods involved in these protests. The use of mobile phones and social networks or the involvement of public figures, mainly rap or hip-hop singers, have turned the protests into spaces of enormous social creativity, while at the same time presenting great political and democratic potential.

Aside from the social and political turmoil, African democracies are facing, as in many other places, a delicate and ambivalent moment. Some countries have succeeded in becoming a benchmark in democratic terms, presenting their own specific trajectories and experiences, such as Ghana or Botswana. Yet, other states that had raised huge regional and international expectations have finally seen their political processes thwarted or reversed, such as Sudan or Ethiopia. In addition, several countries, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic or Somalia, continue to suffer from serious governance problems under authoritarian dynamics. In short, Africa presents a complex landscape, in continuous motion and with different rhythms as well as outcomes. Yet, the uneven progress in the consolidation of democracy in Africa, along with the persisting problems posed by coups d'état —of which we have seen a new surge in recent times— could refuel «Afro-pessimistic» approaches towards the continent. For this reason, before the heterogeneous landscape of Africa, we must claim deep and nuanced analysis to avoid both pessimistic and naïve reductionisms.

The social and political challenges of the new era

The effects of COVID-19 on the continent have been diverse. In countries such as South Africa, the pandemic has had a major health, social and political impact, at times comparable to the severe repercussions recorded in other parts of the world. Elsewhere on the continent, however, the health consequences have been mild or moderate, while the

effects on the economic sector (due to the halting of certain key sectors such as tourism) or on the social field (as a result of the asymmetric impact of measures and restrictions negatively affecting the most vulnerable groups) have been much more relevant. Therefore, the pandemic, both in Africa and in other regions of the world, has exacerbated some underlying problems while at the same time posing new challenges to the ensemble of society.

On top of that, Africa continues to witness some of the worst armed conflicts in the world. The violence affecting South Sudan —the last African country to achieve independence in 2011— or the effects of overlapping crises that have conditioned millions of people's lives in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo for decades are, without a doubt, some of the most frightening settings in the continent. We can identify two phenomena that in recent years have worsened the regional stage, exacerbating conflict and violence. On the one hand, the climate crisis is unfolding dramatic impacts that affect many parts of the continent, especially the Sahel. On the other hand, precisely the Sahel, together with the northern part of Nigeria, the Horn of Africa and the Province of Cabo Delgado in northern Mozambique, are witnessing the intensification of terrorism, thus becoming a focus of regional and international security concerns. International responses, no longer exclusively led by international bodies like the UN or Western states but also by countries such as China or Russia, have shown an utter inability to address the effects and causes of the African juncture.

«African springs», pandemics, terrorism and conflicts, but also regional integration, urbanism and artistic creation are some of the main topics addressed in this issue

In addition, two other current challenges are being discussed in the main local and global debates concerning the region. The first has to do with the continent's intense process of urbanization and the consolidation of large urban centres in countries such as Nigeria, Ethiopia and Egypt. The growth of these major African cities has sparked much debate on issues such as inequality, health or governance. Second, the continent's population growth, which according to some forecasts will double by 2050, has become a main topic of research, analysing the phenomenon's implications as well as the possible strategies to be considered.

The promise of African regionalism

The year 2022 marks the 20th anniversary of the historic reestablishment of the African Union (AU) built on the idea of «African solutions to African problems». Two decades after the statement of intent, the balance is rather positive. In the first place, during this period the AU has managed to articulate and deploy a security architecture (the so-called APSA) that has at least been present in the debates and responses of some African conflicts such as Somalia. However, dependence on external funds along with internal rivalries between members have been two of the main drawbacks. Secondly, in a global context characterized by the crisis of regional projects, such as the EU, Africa has expressed the will and capacity

to continue its regional aspirations, also present at the commercial and economic level, with the implementation of the Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), in force since January 2021. Similarly, the remarkable role of the AU, and in particular the so-called African Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), when dealing with the pandemic, especially during the first wave, has been globally acknowledged.

Catalonia and the Africa Plan

Recognizing the relevant and growing role of Africa on the global and regional stage, and taking into account the multiple links of Catalonia with the region, in 2020 the Generalitat approved, for the first time, the *Africa Plan* aimed at guiding the strategies of collaboration with the continent and boosting relations with African countries. The Catalan project acknowledges that solutions to the continent's challenges must be developed in Africa and that official development aid cannot be the only engine that defines Catalan interactions with the African continent. Therefore, the Africa Plan aims at the configuration of a future model of relations based on the principles of solidarity and cooperation between equals.

The monograph plunges into this global and regional context of changes that make Africa a international actor through the analysis of reputed experts

To this effect, the *Plan* seeks to intensify Catalonia's presence on the African continent by fostering mutual relations. Thus, strengthening shared interests is by means of promoting a coordinated and harmonized action strategy between Government and civil society. In addition, the *Plan* explores the potentials and initiatives that can encourage a political incidence aimed at the protection and promotion of the Catalan values and signs of identity. For this reason, the Plan is an extension of the Government's commitment to implement the 2030 Agenda of the UN. In other words, foreign policy towards Africa should be in accordance with the SDGs and provide coherence in the policies for development, but it should also embrace a transversal approach based on gender considerations and human rights. At the same time, in order to respect the diversity and sovereignty of African peoples, the *Plan* bears in mind the AU's 2063 Agenda as a roadmap to ensure the implementation of «African solutions to African problems».

Africa today and tomorrow

The monograph prepared by IDEES, plunges into this global and regional context of changes that make Africa a leading international actor. The more than twenty articles collected along with the different interviews seek to capture the political, social, institutional, economic or geopolitical turmoil that is currently taking place in the whole of the African continent. Based on the views and analyses of experts with diverse backgrounds, the monograph aims at addressing in a rich and dense way the set of elements laid out in this text: the evolution of democracies and political transitions in a regional context marked by

constant change; the meanings of political protests and the new instruments used by different social movements; the obstacles and challenges facing African regionalism; the impacts of certain social challenges such as COVID-19, population and urban growth or armed conflict and terrorism, as well as the local, regional and international responses offered; the agendas of emerging countries on the continent and the aspects that characterize this growing and intense interaction; the role of women and feminist movements in many of these processes; or the dynamics, perspectives and developments in some areas such as literature or artificial intelligence.

In the process of conceptualizing and coordinating all these articles and interviews, the Centre for Contemporary Studies has counted on the expert leadership of Oscar Mateos, principal investigator of the research group GLOBALCODES and professor at the Blanquerna Faculty of Communication and International Relations (Universitat Ramon Llull). Moreover, with the aim of broadening the understanding on the multiple African realities, this monographic dossier has also received advice of Idayat Hassan, director of the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) of Nigeria. Africa is now, more than ever, a key global region, and for this reason, it is crucial to understand in-depth and with rigour, from inside and outside the continent, the perspectives that inhabit the different countries, as well as the underlying causes and implications of the events they witness.



Oscar Mateos

Oscar Mateos is coordinator of the research group on Globalization, Conflict, Development and Security (GLOBALCODES) at the Faculty of Communication and International Relations of Blanquerna - Ramon Llull University, where he is an Associate Professor of International Relations. Since 2019, he has been the Rector's Delegate for the 2030 Agenda. Mateos is a member of the governing board of the International Catalan Institute for Peace (ICIP) and an associate researcher at CIDOB. He has a degree in Political Science and Administration, a postgraduate degree in Culture of Peace and a PhD in International Relations with a European degree from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB). His research focuses on the analysis of armed conflicts and post-war peacebuilding processes on the African continent, especially in the West African region. He has worked at the UAB School of Peace Culture and has collaborated with organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières in South Sudan and Conciliation Resources in Sierra Leone. He was a visiting professor at the University of Sierra Leone (Fourah Bay College) between 2006 and 2008, and a visiting researcher at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London.

**Manuel Manonelles**

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