Research agenda 2026 - 2027

Meridian17
Corporate Document

Advancing African-European Partnership

Research Agenda 2026 -2027

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Introduction

Africa and Europe need each other more than ever. The global context is shifting rapidly across geopolitics, economics and demography, and the choices both continents make over the next decade will shape the character of their relationship for generations. Meridian17 exists to ensure that those choices are made on the basis of strong research, genuine mutual understanding, and a shared commitment to practical outcomes.

This Research Programme sets out Meridian17's priority topics for the 2026/2027 cycle. The topics have been selected because they address the most critical barriers and opportunities in the African-European relationship today. Together they span the policy, business, cultural, and values dimensions of the partnership, recognising that sustainable cooperation cannot be built on a single dimension alone.

Meridian17's approach is intentionally action-oriented. We are not simply producing analysis for its own sake. Our aim is always to contribute to real-world change:

- applied research that fills knowledge gaps,
- strategic thinking that reorients policy where current approaches fall short,
- coalition building that connects actors who have not yet found each other,
- and practical engagement that moves opportunities from paper to reality.

This programme reflects that philosophy throughout.

The priority topics are grouped into three thematic clusters:

1. Policy and investment frameworks (Topics 1 and 2), which examine the concrete levers available to improve the terms on which African-European economic partnership operates.
2. Understanding the relationship (Topics 3 and 4), which investigate why the partnership between African and European businesses has not grown as fast as it could, analytically and culturally, and what it would take to change that.
3. Shared values and long-term foundations (Topic 5), which looks at how a durable partnership must be grounded in common standards and mutual commitments on the issues that matter most.

Across all topics, outputs are designed to be practical and proportionate. Given Meridian17's current stage of development, deliverables are focused, cost-conscious, and oriented towards maximum policy and business impact rather than volume. Where relevant, we will draw on our network of affiliated academic researchers and business/civil society experts to deepen the work without expanding fixed costs.

Priority topics at a glance

#	Topic	Focus areas
1	The Global Gateway Initiativze	EU-Africa policy alignment; investment infrastructure; mutual benefit frameworks
2	Addressing risk penalties	Financial costs; regulatory barriers; risk mitigation instruments for Africa-EU business
3	What holds us back?	Comparative business flow analysis; growth drivers and blockers; EU-Africa
4	Culture Eats Strategy for Breakfast	Mutual understanding; tourism; exchange programmes; people-to-people ties
5	Ensuring Common Values and Common Practices	Sustainable energy, women's rights, universal healthcare, LGBTQ+ rights, youth employment, education

I. Priority topics

1. The Global Gateway Initiative: Ensuring Success for Both Europe and Africa

Background

The Global Gateway is the European Union's flagship initiative for international infrastructure and investment, with Africa as a central partner. Its stated ambition to mobilise sustainable, rules-based investment at scale, aligns well with the needs of both continents. Yet questions remain about whether the initiative is delivering mutual benefit in practice, and whether its design adequately reflects African priorities and ownership. Answering these questions rigorously, and from both sides of the partnership, is precisely the kind of applied research Meridian17 is positioned to lead.

Key Questions

- Is the Global Gateway as currently designed delivering (or positioned to deliver) genuine mutual benefit for both European and African stakeholders?
- Where are the gaps between the initiative's stated objectives and on-the-ground implementation?
  - What are the main structural, procedural, or political obstacles?

- How do African governments, businesses, and civil society perceive the Global Gateway?
  - Where does it align with African development priorities and where does it fall short?
- What lessons can be drawn from comparable infrastructure and investment partnership models, and how can they inform improvements to the Global Gateway?
- What role can business and civil society on both sides play in ensuring accountability and effectiveness?

Outputs

The research will draw on desk research, expert interviews and focused stakeholder engagement across both continents. Planned outputs include one substantive research paper assessing the initiative's design and delivery, a policy-facing brief aimed at EU and African decision-makers, and at least one stakeholder roundtable to test findings and build coalitions around concrete recommendations. Where academic partnership is established, a co-authored working paper may also be produced.

2. Addressing Risk Penalties: Lowering the Financial Costs and Risks of Doing Business in Africa

Background

European businesses consistently identify risk perception, high financing costs, and regulatory complexity as the principal barriers to deeper engagement with African markets. Many of these barriers are not inherent to African markets themselves. However, they reflect information gaps, outdated risk frameworks, and the absence of instruments that could make investment more attractive and bankable. Addressing them is thus a matter of business interest and a prerequisite for the kind of scaled partnership that both continents say they want. This topic takes a practical, business-first approach: starting from the concrete experience of companies and investors, identifying the specific penalties they face, and developing actionable proposals for reducing them.

Key Questions

- What are the principal financial costs and risk factors that discourage European investment in African markets?
  - How do these vary by sector, country and investor type?
- How do current risk-rating methodologies and perceptions compare with actual investment performance data?
  - Is there a systemic overpricing of African investment risk?

- What existing instruments (guarantees, blended finance mechanisms, insurance products, bilateral frameworks) are available to mitigate these costs, and how effectively are they used?
- What concrete policy or regulatory changes, at EU, member state, or African level, could most meaningfully reduce these penalties in the short to medium term?
- What role can business associations, chambers of commerce, and sector platforms play in advocating for and implementing change?

Outputs

Given the centrality of business perspectives to this topic, the research process will include structured interviews with companies, investors, and financial institutions active in the Africa-EU corridor, supplemented by a targeted review of existing literature and data. Planned outputs include a research paper mapping the penalty landscape and evaluating available solutions, a concise action-oriented brief for policymakers, and engagement with relevant business communities to validate and disseminate findings. An initial output will consist of the publication of a multi-year research project in collaboration with the University of Tilburg.

3. What Holds us Back? Analysing Business Flows Between the EU and Africa

Background

Trade and investment flows between the EU and Africa remain well below their potential, even when compared with EU flows to other regions with comparable economic fundamentals. Understanding why is essential to designing policies that can actually change this trajectory. This topic approaches that question analytically: mapping what the data shows, comparing the African corridor with others, and then investigating the specific drivers that explain the gap.

The comparison with other continental relationships is deliberate. It allows us to separate structural factors that are inherent to the relationship from those that are contingent and therefore changeable. This also allows us to identify where policy intervention is most likely to make a difference.

Key Questions

- How do current EU-Africa trade and investment flows compare, sector by sector, with EU flows to other major partner regions?
  - Where is the underperformance most pronounced?

- What does the data suggest about the trajectory of the relationship?
  - Is the gap widening or narrowing, and in which areas?
- What are the key drivers holding back growth in the EU-Africa corridor?
  - How do regulatory, logistics, informational, and political barriers rank in importance?
- Where are the areas of greatest untapped potential, in terms of sectors, geographies, or investment types?
  - What conditions would need to change to unlock them?
- What can be learned from EU partnerships with other regions that have grown more quickly, and how transferable are those lessons to the African context?

Outputs

This topic is primarily analytical and will draw on existing data sources, including EU trade statistics, investment databases, and World Bank and African Union datasets. The aim is to produce a solid, evidence-based research paper that establishes a clear comparative picture and derives policy conclusions from it. A shorter, accessible summary of findings will be prepared for business and policy audiences. Where possible, data analysis will be made available in a reusable format to support future Meridian17 research.

4. Culture Eats Strategy for Breakfast: Building Mutual Understanding as the Foundation of Partnership

Background

The old management adage, that culture determines whether strategy succeeds or fails, applies with full force to the African-European relationship. Policy frameworks, investment incentives, and trade agreements can create the conditions for partnership, but they cannot by themselves generate the trust, familiarity, and goodwill that sustain it over time. That requires people to know each other: to have travelled, worked, studied, or simply spent time in each other's countries and communities. At present, people-to-people ties between Africa and Europe are thinner than they could be. Tourism flows are asymmetric; exchange programmes are limited in scale and often one-directional; cultural narratives on both sides are shaped more by stereotype than by genuine encounter. Changing this is central to the partnership agenda.

Key Questions

- What are current levels of tourism, student and professional exchange, cultural programming, and people-to-people contact between Africa and Europe and do they reflect countries economic and political weight and ambitions?
- What are the main barriers to deeper people-to-people engagement?
  - How significant are visa regimes, cost, awareness, and infrastructure as limiting factors?
- What initiatives, public or private, large or small, have successfully built mutual understanding and trust between African and European communities? What can be learned from them?
- How can tourism between the continents be better developed as a vehicle for mutual understanding, economic benefit, and partnership? What policy or business changes would most help?
- What role can universities, cultural institutions, diaspora networks, and the private sector play in broadening and deepening the people-to-people dimension of the relationship?

Outputs

This topic lends itself to a research approach that combines quantitative mapping with qualitative insight from practitioners and community voices. Planned outputs include a research paper that assesses the current state of people-to-people relations and identifies priority areas for development, and a policy-facing brief with practical recommendations. In addition, Meridian17 will use this topic as an opportunity to convene a diverse group of stakeholders - tourism, education, culture, and civil society - around a shared agenda, helping to build the kind of coalition that can move this issue forward beyond the research cycle.

5. Ensuring Common Values and Common Practices

Background

A durable African-European partnership cannot rest on interests alone. It must also be grounded in shared values and converging standards. This should stem from genuine dialogue and mutual commitment. This is both a principled and a practical position as partnerships built on shared values are more resilient, more trusted, and more likely to generate the long-term goodwill that sustains cooperation through difficult moments.

Six areas are particularly important for the current cycle: the sustainable energy transition, women's rights and gender equity, LGBTQ+ rights, universal healthcare delivery, youth

employment, and education. These reflect areas where both continents face pressing challenges and shared interests, and where the gap between stated commitment and practical reality is often large enough to create friction in the partnership.

On LGBTQ+ rights, we recognise this is a sensitive area where legal frameworks, social norms, and cultural contexts differ significantly across and within both continents. Meridian17 approaches this not as a platform for imposing a European frame on African partners, but as an area where open, evidence-based dialogue - grounded in universal human rights principles - can help identify shared ground and advance practical protections.

On universal healthcare, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed fundamental gaps in health system resilience and cross-continental cooperation. The question of how Africa and Europe can develop stronger, more equitable health systems - including the financing, supply chains, and governance structures that underpin them - is directly relevant to the stability and productivity of both regions, and to the credibility of their partnership commitments.

Key Questions

- Where do shared values and commitments on sustainable energy, gender equity, LGBTQ+ rights, universal healthcare, youth employment, and education currently align between the EU and African partners?
  - Where do significant gaps or tensions remain?
- How do European policy requirements in these areas (for instance, EU green standards, due diligence legislation, or development conditionalities) interact with African policy realities and priorities?
  - Are current approaches experienced as collaborative or as impositions?
- What models exist for developing common practices and standards through genuine dialogue rather than unilateral standard-setting?
  - How can these be scaled?
- In the specific areas of youth employment and education, what does the evidence show about the kinds of partnership that actually deliver results?
  - For example, are these skills programmes, vocational training, academic exchange, or other models?
- How can the sustainable energy transition be developed in a way that serves the development interests of African countries, rather than primarily the decarbonisation objectives of European partners?

- On LGBTQ+ rights, what approaches to dialogue and practical policy have proven effective in contexts where legal and social frameworks differ significantly?
  - What can be learned from cases where incremental progress has been made through sustained engagement?
- What does equitable healthcare partnership look like in practice?
  - How can Africa-EU cooperation on health systems, pharmaceutical access, and pandemic preparedness move from aspiration to implementation?

Outputs

Given the breadth of this topic, the research will be focused rather than comprehensive, favouring depth in selected areas over superficial coverage of all six. Planned outputs include a thematic research paper examining convergence and divergence across the focus areas, and a practical brief oriented towards policymakers and civil society organisations working at the African-European interface. The LGBTQ+ rights and universal healthcare dimensions will each be addressed in a dedicated section within the thematic paper, drawing on existing literature, stakeholder interviews, and comparative policy analysis. Meridian17 will also explore whether this topic can serve as the basis for a structured dialogue event bringing together African and European voices, which would serve both as a research input and as a coalition-building activity

II. Overarching Projects

Alongside the five priority research topics, Meridian17 develops a number of overarching, recurring projects that cut across multiple research areas and serve as a consistent foundation for our evidence base, our network, and our dissemination strategy. These projects are designed to be replicable and to grow in depth and impact over time.

The Beat of Business: Annual Business Sentiment Report

Background and Purpose

One of the persistent gaps in the policy debate around African-European economic partnership is the voice of business itself. European think tanks and policy institutions tend to focus either on improving existing development cooperation models or on rethinking

top-down strategy. What Meridian17 believes is consistently missing is a strong, data-driven focus on the real experiences, perceptions, and priorities of African businesses. This is what we call the 'Missing Middle', and it is precisely what the Beat of Business sets out to address.

The Beat of Business is Meridian17's annual report on the perceived barriers, opportunities, and sentiments of the broader African business community on doing business with Europe and its member states. In a dual approach - a questionnaire distributed to Chambers of Commerce across selected African anchor economies, followed by in-depth interviews with a geographic, industry, and organisation-size spread - we seek to answer the questions: What is going well, and what needs improvement? What can be learned from best and worst practices? How could Europe and its member states adjust to advance business ties between the continents?

Methodology

We put the questionnaire to members of Chambers of Commerce in our African anchor economies, deliberately not limiting the scope to businesses already engaged with Europe. The typical membership structure of Chambers of Commerce, ranging from multinational members to SMEs, allows for broad coverage of each economy. We focus on Chambers of Commerce as the primary source because limiting ourselves to one reliable source allows for a manageable and replicable research process. The questionnaire is structured around four focus areas:

- Objectives: the short, medium, and long-term business objectives of respondents.
- Understanding: what business understands about its own context in relation to Europe.
- Challenges: the key barriers and friction points identified by businesses.
- Opportunities: where African business sees the greatest potential, now and in the future.

In-depth interviews follow the survey, providing topical interpretation and sensemaking within each report chapter, which is organised by industry sector and, within each sector, by geography.

Anchor Economies

In the current research cycle, the Beat of Business focuses on the following ten African anchor economies, selected for their economic stability, growth trajectory, and relevance to European business: Botswana, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Morocco, Nigeria, Rwanda, and South Africa. In future cycles, we aim to progressively widen the scope to cover additional African economies.

Building Toward an Index

A core feature of the Beat of Business is its replicability. By maintaining a consistent research structure across annual cycles, we will progressively build a multi-year dataset from which an index system for monitoring European-African business sentiment can be derived. This will give policy makers, investors, and business communities a reliable, comparable instrument for tracking progress over time.

Outputs

Each annual iteration of the Beat of Business produces the following outputs:

- A comprehensive report, structured by industry, cross-referenced by geography and firm size.
- An infographic summarising key findings per sector and geography, and comparing large business with SMEs.
- A summary brief directed at EU-based companies, highlighting the specific opportunities and challenges in each anchor economy.
- A dedicated podcast episode (as part of our media ecosystem, see Section III) presenting and discussing the key findings.
- Social media content based on the podcast and report, distributed across Meridian17's channels.
- A series of events - at minimum in South Africa, Germany, and Brussels - to discuss findings with relevant stakeholders (scope and funding to be confirmed separately).

III. A Strong Focus on Dissemination

Research that does not reach the right people does not change anything. Meridian17 is committed to ensuring that our work has real-world impact, and that means investing seriously in dissemination as an integral part of the research process. From the outset, every project is designed with a clear sense of audience and a concrete dissemination plan.

Our dissemination approach is built around a podcast-centred media ecosystem that allows us to translate research outputs into accessible, engaging content and distribute them at scale across both continents.

The Meridian17 Podcast Ecosystem

Why a Podcast-Centred Approach

Meridian17 has made a deliberate choice to build its dissemination strategy around a podcast-centred media ecosystem. We developed this approach for two main reasons.

First, impact sustained over time. The ecosystem provides a means to have in-depth conversations and to distribute the outcome of those conversations efficiently over a wide audience and across an extended time horizon. Podcast content, supplemented by short-form social media derivatives, continues to reach and engage audiences long after initial publication.

Second, cost-effectiveness. The online-first approach allows us to reach both a targeted, specialist audience (policy makers, business leaders, journalists) and a significant segment of the wider public, at a fraction of the cost of traditional publishing and event models. We believe it is important for think tanks to innovate their dissemination approaches, and to meet people where they are.

Structure of the Ecosystem

At the centre of the ecosystem is the podcast itself, produced in both audio and video format to facilitate distribution across all relevant platforms. The podcast features in-depth conversations with practitioners, researchers, policy makers, and community voices, grounded in Meridian17's research agenda. Podcast episodes are distributed via all major audio and video platforms (including Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Amazon Music, Pandora, YouTube, and others available via RSS distribution). Each episode is also edited into short-form content appropriate for the dominant social media platforms in both African and European markets, including LinkedIn, Instagram, TikTok, Bluesky, X, and WhatsApp.

Crucially, the podcast does not sit alongside the research - it feeds into and out of it. Research findings generate podcast conversations; podcast conversations generate new research questions and connections. The ecosystem is designed to be self-reinforcing over time, with a growing audience and a progressively expanding network of contributors and followers.

Our Host

The podcast is hosted by Georja Calvin-Smith, the lead anchor of France 24's 'Eye on Africa'

and presenter of the weekly 'Across Africa' magazine show. With over two decades of experience in international current affairs broadcasting, and an extensive network across African and European media and policy circles, Georja brings credibility, reach, and genuine enthusiasm to the role. Her deep familiarity with the issues at the heart of Meridian17's research agenda makes her uniquely positioned to translate complex policy and business topics into accessible, engaging conversations.

Current Podcast Series

The first series is developed in partnership with the KAS Media Programme Sub-Saharan Africa and focuses on the state of journalism in Africa and European media's portrayal of the continent. The series examines press freedom, the economics of journalism, disinformation and verification, editorial independence, and the relationship between African and European media ecosystems. It aims to elevate evidence-based dialogue on these issues among journalists, editors, media owners, journalism trainers, and policy actors - while also reaching a broad public audience.

All series will follow the same production format: a weekly cadence of 10 episodes per season, each structured around a brief framing segment, an in-depth interview, a practical toolbox segment, and a signals and calls-to-action close. All series are produced in English with French and Arabic captions and translations. They conclude with an end-of-season report distributed to relevant professional networks.

Dissemination Beyond the Podcast

The podcast ecosystem is the backbone of our dissemination strategy, but it operates alongside other channels. Research papers and policy briefs are distributed directly to relevant policy audiences, business networks, and academic institutions. Stakeholder roundtables and dialogue events serve both as research inputs and as dissemination moments. Where relevant, we will seek to co-disseminate through the networks of our funding and research partners, including foundations, chambers of commerce, academic institutions, and civil society organisations. A core principle across all dissemination activity is active rather than passive distribution. We do not simply publish and wait. We proactively identify the individuals and organisations that need to engage with our findings, and we reach out to them directly - through our growing expert network, through our podcast audience, and through targeted outreach to policy and business communities on both continents.

IV. Methodology and Approach

Across all priority topics and overarching projects, Meridian17's research approach reflects the two-pronged model at the heart of our organisation: a combination of academic rigour and real-world grounding, delivered through our networks of affiliated researchers and business and civil society experts.

In practical terms, this means:

- Research is co-developed with practitioners to ensure relevance. Business and civil society experts provide both a sounding board for research design and a reality check on findings and recommendations.
- Outputs are calibrated to real-world use, as each piece of research is accompanied by a clear sense of who it is for, what action it is intended to support, and how it will be disseminated to reach the right audience.
- Coalition-building is part of the research process, and we aim to ensure that where research insights are relevant to specific actors, we pro-actively connect those actors and facilitate dialogue around findings.
- Given Meridian17's current resources, this programme is deliberately focused, and mindful of our ability to scale. We aim to do fewer things well rather than many things superficially.

The primary research methods used across topics will include structured expert interviews, desk-based literature and data review, stakeholder roundtables and focused workshops, and collaborative writing with affiliated researchers. Methods involving significant travel, large-scale surveys, or bespoke data collection will be pursued only where external funding is secured for the purpose.

V. Outputs Overview

The following table summarises the planned outputs across the 2026/2027 research cycle. Outputs marked as confirmed are deliverable within current resource constraints. Those marked as aspirational are planned subject to the securing of additional funding or partnerships.

Priority topics at a glance

Topic	Planned outputs	Status
1. Global Gateway Initiative	Research paper; policy brief; stakeholder roundtable	Self-started (ongoing)
2. Addressing Risk Penalties	Research paper; action-oriented policy brief; business community engagement	Self-started (upcoming)
3. What holds us back?	Analytical research paper; accessible summary; reusable dataset	Seeking funding
4. Culture eats strategy	Research paper; policy brief; multi-stakeholder convening	Seeking funding
5. Common values & practices	Thematic research paper; practitioner brief; structured dialogue event	Aspiration
Beat of Business (overarching)	Annual report; infographics; EU-facing summary brief; podcast episode; social media content	Seeking funding
Podcast series (per series)	10 episodes; 60+ social shorts; episode briefs; end-of-season report	Ongoing & seeking funding

'Partly aspirational' outputs are planned subject to additional funding or confirmed academic/civil society partnerships. Meridian17 will actively pursue these during the research cycle.

VI. A Note on Resources and Growth

Meridian17 is a young organisation with a clear mission and a deliberately lean operating model. This research programme has been designed to be ambitious in its scope and practical in its delivery, as we seek to strike the balance between what is needed and what is achievable at our current stage. We are actively seeking funding partnerships to expand the programme, particularly to support the aspirational outputs noted above, to enable fieldwork and travel, and to grow our network of affiliated academic researchers. We welcome conversations with foundations, bilateral development agencies, private sector partners, and academic institutions who share our commitment to strengthening the African-European relationship.

As resources grow, so too will our capacity to produce the data-driven, long-form research and large-scale convenings that the ambition of this agenda ultimately demands. The topics set out in this programme reflect our 2026/2027 agenda and the long-term research and engagement priorities around which Meridian17 intends to build lasting expertise and impact.

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