

## Future of Development Cooperation Coalition Rabat Consultation April 2026

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*On April 27, 2026, the Future of Development Cooperation Coalition held a public consultation in Rabat, Morocco that brought together over 90 African and other regional stakeholders from the public, private and civil society sectors, including youth, with expertise in policy, finance, research, and development to gather insights about how best to improve development cooperation. This consultation was convened by the African Center for Economic Transformation and the Coalition Secretariat in partnership with the Policy Center for the New South. Across a high-level roundtable and interactive workshop, participants focused on the practical ways in which cooperation can best help countries across the region achieve economic and social transformation. These notes are shared here not as a comprehensive record of the far-reaching dialogue, but to highlight key areas of concern, agreement, and divergence.*

*Note: All quotes in text boxes are from participants in the consultation.*

### Recurrent Themes – A Summary

The Rabat consultation reflected growing recognition that the global development cooperation system is entering a period of significant transition. Participants acknowledged the continuing importance of international cooperation while arguing that the system must evolve to reflect changing realities, shifting power dynamics, declining concessional finance, and the urgency of economic transformation. In particular, the following themes recurred across the discussions:

- The importance of African agenda setting and country leadership;
- An openness to development cooperation as long as it is clearly defined and of direct benefit to national priorities;
- A sense that capital deployment, affordability, and risk matter more than volumes;
- A preference for accountability based on outcomes and impact, not amounts spent;
- A pragmatic approach to regionalism;
- A recognition of the growing importance of industrial policy;
- Appreciation for the deeply intertwined nature of climate and development;
- An understanding that avoiding a growing digital and tech divide is a crucial and difficult challenge; and,
- A clear sense that gender remains a deeply structural challenge on the continent.

## Recurrent Themes - A Deeper Dive

### Africa must set the agenda

There was clear agreement that Africa needs to lead its own development journey. Development cooperation must be locally-led and context-specific. Basic needs (water, food, energy, healthcare) remain foundational and not fully met, domestic resource mobilization is critical to reducing dependency, and institutional capacity and leadership are as important as financing. In this sense, several participants noted that knowledge sharing is one of the most effective forms of cooperation.

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*“Poor governance has led to a generation of Africans building wealth in raw material exports, insurance, and banking. How can you enable a new generation of business leaders in Africa who pay tax and support their own continent’s development?”*

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Country ownership should not simply be at the project implementation level. Countries need control most critically over priority setting and strategic planning, and also stronger African-led data systems,

research institutions, universities, policy analysis, and cross-country learning to underpin choices and trade-offs. Ownership should also extend beyond central governments to greater civic leadership and investment in leadership capabilities including through education and youth leadership. This was described by some as the need to move from “symbolic sovereignty” to “operational sovereignty,” with development efforts built around a clear national vision, strong political will, implementation capability, and meaningful participation that can meet the opportunities and challenges of a rapidly growing youth population. A recurring concern was the sense that African priorities are often filtered through external evidence systems, external language, and external metrics. Brain drain and the erosion of public-minded leadership were identified as deeper constraints on long-term transformation, underscoring the importance of engaging diaspora communities in investment, skills development, and knowledge transfer.

There were a range of views expressed on whether reform should primarily strengthen public institutions or open more space for private sector leadership. The strongest middle position was that capable states must set strategy and rules, while private actors, SMEs, entrepreneurs, universities, and civil society must be better integrated into delivery ecosystems. The strong call for African agenda setting was one of the main messages of the consultation, but questions were left open about who defines “country ownership” (state vs society) and how power is redistributed in practice, underscoring the important political economy dimensions of development.

## Trust but verify: what it takes for development cooperation to be a positive force

There was both openness and some wariness expressed toward development cooperation. Participants questioned whether cooperation is primarily about influence and strategic interests, with a history of extraction, or whether it can be about solidarity, business, trade and economic partnerships, and transformation.

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*“Development cooperation cannot be trusted if its purpose remains ambiguous.”*

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Some participants questioned whether partner priorities can fully align with African priorities when geopolitical interests, conditionalities, and procurement rules play such an important role in shaping financing decisions. Some participants suggested that too often financing reflects donor interests rather than local needs – overlooking areas like energy access or water security that are critical for Africa’s development, while imposing conditions that constrain long-term transformation.

In terms of external aid, project cycles, procurement restrictions, short-term staffing, and externally designed frameworks often undermine sustainability and knowledge transfer and also create an innovation trap where countries are sometimes left with obsolete technology.

Looking forward, there was a sense that a reimagined development cooperation system would place national institutions at the center as orchestrators, with cooperation supporting strategy, capability, negotiation strength, and implementation systems that endure beyond funding cycles. All agreed that development cooperation should be tailored to local contexts, reflect different stages of development, and be grounded in strong country ownership to ensure relevance and impact. Success should be measured by whether projects continue to benefit communities beyond their funding cycle.

## Financing +: deployment, affordability, risk, and fit matter more than volumes

Several participants noted that more money alone will not solve the continent’s development problem. They distinguished sharply between mobilizing capital and deploying it well. In essence, participants argued, chasing money will not make much of a difference unless the fundamentals for sustainable growth are in place. Several argued that the system should focus less on headline financing volumes and more on the alignment of instruments with sector returns, country risk, institutional capacity, and transformation potential across sectors and countries.

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*“Development cooperation must move from a system of financing to a system of enabling with countries at the center.”*

*“We need to move from a system of aid to a system of alignment, explicit in its tensions, systemic in organization, and grounded in trust.”*

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Instruments must match country contexts, reduce the cost of capital, share risk fairly, crowd in domestic and private investment,

and reform procurement rules that exclude local firms and SMEs. This includes reducing the cost of capital, using public and concessional finance to share risks with private investment, strengthening domestic financial systems, and reforming the global financial architecture. There was support for blended finance, guarantees, first-loss structures, national development banks, and a strengthened regional financial architecture that can lower the cost of capital and expand access for African firms, SMEs, and startups.

## Accountability for outcomes and impact, not amounts spent

Participants repeatedly pointed to jobs (particularly for a growing cohort of youth), poverty reduction, energy access, industrialization, enterprise growth, innovation ecosystems, digital capability, and regional value chains as a better measure of success than how much money is committed or disbursed. This framing also suggests a shift in primary focus from short-term project delivery to the productive systems that enable countries to diversify and compete. Participants implicitly challenged cooperation models that reward disbursement, reporting, and project activity more than sustainable outcomes, long-term capability, institutional learning, and implementation effectiveness.

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*“Put countries, not capital, at the center of development.”*

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Participants also advocated for the implementation of a transparent accountability system and mechanism to assess the performance of the current development cooperation and evaluate the effectiveness of the future framework so that the commitments of the diverse actors of development cooperation are met. They also underscored the importance of stronger data and evidence systems on the continent. The unresolved design question is how cooperation can meet urgent needs while also investing in long-term industrial and institutional transformation.

## Pragmatic regionalism is the way to go

Regional integration was repeatedly described as essential for scale – to overcome the small market size of the majority of countries in Africa –especially in energy, logistics, industrial value chains, digital markets, and climate-related manufacturing. They were however also pragmatic about the speed and scope of regionalization efforts. While integration clearly has utility, incentives to do so are weak, due to politics, lack of shared identities, and fragmented institutions.

There was a sense that stronger collaboration between neighboring countries should be prioritized before looking outward, with learning from regional examples as a necessary foundation for stronger continental agency, and that focusing on those areas where interests are well aligned and taking initial steps is more practical than trying to tackle everything at once.

## Industrial policy is key

There was a general consensus that sound industrial policies are an important part of the development picture, including broad agreement that governments must set coherent industrial/energy strategies (e.g., gigawatt targets, NDC-linked goals) and signal them to private sector and financiers. It is vital to include the local private sector and SMEs in this effort, and these groups have often been sidestepped in earlier industrialization efforts.

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*“Existing energy transition solutions are a tribute to confidence Africans have in their own capacity to solve their own problems.”*

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Some suggested that industrial policy and supply chains should make up the core of development cooperation. That said, setting effective industrial policy, all agreed, is a highly complex endeavor.

## Climate and development are intertwined

There was a general recognition that justice-based claims around climate (such as historical responsibility and unmet pledges) remain normatively vital but have stalled, requiring a more pragmatic pivot toward investable, job-creating projects and platforms as the more effective way to move climate money. Participants emphasized industrial policy, regional supply chains, local value addition, and the strategic use of public and concessional finance to de-risk private investment. Morocco’s experience was discussed as an example of how energy, industrial value chains, manufacturing, and regional positioning can be integrated into a broader development strategy.

## The digital challenge: meet it or fall behind (again)

Digital transformation was framed as an institutional challenge before a technology challenge. Technology must be seen as structural enabler, not an add-on.

Participants identified data access regimes, energy reliability, connectivity, fragmented governance, skills, and unclear leadership as binding constraints. The central tension was how to protect sovereignty and privacy while still enabling cross-border data flows, research, investment, and innovation. Several participants suggested that the practical answer was not deregulation but smarter governance: transparent data-access mechanisms, regulatory sandboxes, regional standards, and clear national digital strategies.

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*“If you block data flows in the name of sovereignty, you don’t protect your economy, you isolate it.”*

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## Gender challenges remain structural

There was significant discussion on gender that emphasized that inequality remains structural, with core constraints that include labor market design, unpaid care work, family policy, legal protections, cultural norms, household power relations, and weak communication to the women most likely to be excluded. Participants called for family-aware labor policies, recognition of unpaid care work, targeted outreach to rural and vulnerable women, stronger support for women-led cooperatives, gender-sensitive budgeting, and the deliberate inclusion – and implicit responsibility – of men in conversations on equality. Rural and vulnerable women continue to be particularly underserved.

## Conclusion

The strongest message from the consultation was clear: Africa’s development future will depend not only on financing, but also on leadership, institutions, knowledge systems, regional cooperation, and the ability to align resources with locally defined priorities. There was a sense that reinvigorating a stronger sense of Pan-African identity would help African countries engage with more confidence and collective agency in development cooperation, thereby deriving more value from a system that has to date been lopsided.

Development cooperation must move from a system of financing to a system of enabling that puts countries at the center. Africa does not need more fragmented aid, it needs aligned partnerships that support structural transformation, industrialization, and long-term sovereignty over its own development path.