

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to join you today, albeit from afar. This conference on the Joint EU-Africa Strategy takes place almost two years after European and African heads of state came together in Lisbon to deepen and re-orientate their relationship. The coherent strategy which they formulated had been long overdue.

The Joint Strategy recognizes that the countries of Europe and Africa and their intergovernmental organizations must work closely together, if they are to have any chance at protecting the poor and most vulnerable, achieve the Millennium Development Goals, and realize the vast potential for economic and social progress that the African continent holds.

The events of the last year have underlined the need for strong partnership between Africa and Europe by showing how closely related their fortunes have become. While one may be more responsible than the other for challenges like the economic crisis or climate change, they are both in this together. In today's globalized world it is no longer possible to separate the fate of one continent from that of others.

While Africa and Europe share the challenges of our times, they also share its opportunities, and there are many. Investments in Africa's vast human and economic potential, particularly in the fields of sustainable agriculture, infrastructure and renewable energy, for example, can benefit not just Africa, but Europe and the world, by contributing to global recovery.

The joint strategy is an important and welcome step towards a strong partnership based on equality and mutual benefit. However, many more steps must follow and civil society actors like you have a crucial role to play in driving the debate and highlighting the risks and opportunities. I am glad that you will be discussing such critical issues as women's empowerment, governance, infrastructure, trade and regional integration. Only through sustained dialogue on all levels can we hope to overcome today's challenges and seize tomorrow's opportunities.

I applaud your efforts and wish you fruitful discussions and a constructive meeting.