

**Joint Master in EU Trade and
Climate Diplomacy**



Statutory Declaration

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Abstract

While academics rush to discuss Global Gateway investments in Africa, very little scholarship analyzes the governance models these initiatives may promote. The study therefore investigates whether the European Union’s “human-centric” model of Digital Partnerships influences democracy promotion processes in African countries. It employs a qualitative analysis approach through a series of semi-structured interviews with European experts on the EU-Nigeria Digital Economy Package. Findings *inter alia* reveal that a long-term engagement through Digital Partnerships may help to establish shared values and governance models, making the European Union a unique geopolitical actor in the African continent.

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INTRODUCTION

“Africa’s prosperity is Europe’s opportunity”

Paul Collier, 2012

Technological advancements have perpetually punctuated the course of human history, critically determining the fate of civilizations. Since the 18th century, such development of new technologies fundamentally altered the way humans operated in the world (Harari, 2015). Digitalization has similarly emerged as a defining global trend in the 21st century, due to its inherent potential to transcend the present and already shape the future (KAS, 2021; van Zeebroeck, 2015). In recent years, it has substantially gained momentum and is now regarded as a major driver of economic growth, social advancement and technological innovation (Harari, 2015). The effects of digitalization can indeed be deeply felt across all sectors, with some world regions embracing it more quickly and effectively than others (European Investment Bank, 2020). Africa and the European Union (hereinafter EU) are particularly engaged in the abovementioned momentum, as they both strive to improve in terms of digitalization-related economic development and competitiveness. The digital sector thus presents a significant prospect for shared prosperity across the African and the European continents (Daniels *et alia*, 2022). African national economies have been growing steadily over the past two decades, despite recent halts connected to the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war in Ukraine (UNDP,

2022; OECD, 2020). Subsequently, digitalization provides African nations with a forward-looking path to overcome the challenges of low-income, rapidly urbanizing populations, offering access to markets, information and services (OECD, 2022). Combined with a continental population projected to gain an additional one billion by 2040, this trend boasts huge potential to boost growth, create jobs and raise the standards of living (UNDP, 2022; Giallourakis, 2020). From the EU perspective, digitalization appears as an innovative opportunity to keep ahead of the competition, striving towards renewed prosperity and technological advancements (European Investment Bank, 2020). Establishing strong Digital Partnerships with African countries thus presents the possibility to enhance productivity, securing a stronger labor market and positioning the EU within the leading digital economies. Digitalization may also address certain challenges facing the European continent, *inter alia* the ageing population, the skills gap in digitalization-related areas, and the constant need to find better use of scarce resources (European Investment Bank, 2020). Moreover, such digitalization interplay touches upon key areas that go well beyond the mere economic benefits. As a result, they may have far-reaching implications for the broader geopolitical landscape. Due to the aforementioned prospects for African economic and demographic growth, key international players have recently focused on African economies as the next frontier of digital competition (Sambuli, 2022). Amongst them, one may recall the United States' 'Build Back Better World' Initiative, as

well as the People's Republic of China 'Digital Silk Road' and India's 'India Stack' Programme. Apart from the concrete implications for African digital economies, these initiatives operate as flagships for political visions of the future of digitalization, setting the stage for further great-power competition leading to technological spheres of external influence (Sambuli, 2022). African leaders are thus increasingly pressured to find the ideal international position, which would allow them to fully exploit the opportunities of digitalization without giving up their digital sovereignty (Teevan *et alia*, 2022). In this broader geopolitical context, the EU purports to engage in Digital Diplomacy with African nations as part of a "Path to the Digital Decade" to actively promote a "human-centric" approach to digital technologies (EU Council, 2022). In comparison to models such as the USA or the People's Republic of China, this third way to digitalization may hold underlying consequences for another area vital to the African continent. Indeed, as pressure on the desirability of the democratic offer grows, the way the EU responds to the prospects of African digitalization could afford it renewed credibility in the region. "Human-centric" Digital Partnerships between African nations and the EU could provide more than mere economic advantages by acting as a clever mechanism to achieve non-coercive kinds of democracy promotion. While at once deeply concerned with uplifting its African counterparts, the EU faces the risk of being regarded as overbearingly condescending by the very partners it seeks to aid – a perception fraught with poisonous political implications. First, they might enable

the EU to positively endorse democratic values and a rights-based strategy to digital technologies. Secondly, it may also constitute a tool to counter the digitalization-related risks in the broader context of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes (Hackenesch, 2019). This research therefore contributes to the present academic debate on African digitalization by analyzing the “human-centric” Africa-EU Digital Partnerships. It does so by questioning whether these Partnerships leverage the EU intervention in African digital economies to promote specific values, norms and governance models, in particular democracy. To provide an answer, the dissertation will unfold in two main parts. The first section will review the contemporary literature on EU democracy promotion efforts in Africa. Accordingly, the work will firstly be embedded in the broader body of literature related to EU-led democratization in Africa. In particular, it will build upon the various kinds of democratization theory, starting from the well-established structuralist ‘modernization theory’. This approach posits a link between socio-economic development and democratic transition, concluding that external developmental aid supporting key sectors such as education, health, financial development, and industrialization leads to democratic transitions, consolidation, or deepening (Gisselquist *et alia*, 2021). While being fairly critiqued throughout the years, this theory remains a core element of democratization debates. Accordingly, democratization appears as a slow process encompassing a multifaceted set of socioeconomic and political developments,

underlying the importance of good governance practices. While Gisselquist, Niño-Zarazúa, and Samarin find that this form of democratization aid can foster long-term democratic transitions (Gisselquist *et alia*, 2021), the unique nature of digital economies requires the analysis of other democratization theories. Moreover, the work will also need to build upon the emerging body of literature related to democratization and digitalization. Parting away from a premature techno-optimism, the threats that reckless digitalization may pose to democracy are becoming increasingly relevant. Whereas digitalization can be an important forward-looking policy goal, reports underline how it may also be a tool leading towards either democratic strengthening or dismay, showing the need for further research on the matter (Hackenesch *et alia*, 2020). As a result, the review builds a bridge between these literature areas, providing the platform to test whether the current form of “human-centric” Africa-EU Digital Partnerships can effectively promote democracy in the African continent. This will be followed by the analysis of a case study revolving around the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The latter has been selected since it recently concluded an important Digital Partnership agreement with the EU, the 2021-2024 EU-Nigeria Digital Economy Package. Moreover, it plays a crucial role within the African continent. Nigeria is the most populous nation in Africa, with the largest economy on the continent and a rapidly growing and innovating digital sector (IMF, 2022). Alongside an increased participation in digitalization-related international forums, these

features have made Nigeria a key African player for digitalization, attracting the interests of geopolitical actors such as the EU (see pages no. 40-43). This case study will provide important primary data collected by the researcher through qualitative interviews with subject-matter experts to add further value to the dissertation.

The first Chapter thus provides an overview of the necessary theoretical foundation. The approach will be based upon Carothers' interpretation of European-style democratization aid (Carothers, 1999). In particular, the author identifies it as a developmental-based form of assistance aiming to include specific values and norms. The focus then switches to a review of the recently emerging literature analyzing the effects of digitalization on democratization efforts. As a result, this Chapter will build a bridge between these literature areas. The second Chapter will then be devoted to the methodology, detailing how the primary data will be obtained. It expands on the type of research, the sampling method, the data processing analysis and the reasons behind such methodological choice. It also addresses any potential bias on the researcher's side. The third Chapter will elaborate on the data collected through the semi-structured interviews. It relates the information collected through primary research with the literature review provided in the first Chapter, pointing out relevant insights thanks to the comparison between secondary and primary data. Finally, it is important to point out the boundaries of this Master Thesis research – in other words, what this

research is not. As the research question revolves around “human-centric” Africa-EU Digital Partnerships and whether the EU employs them as an instrument to promote specific values such as democracy, the analytical focus does not allow to look into the perspective of African stakeholders. Whilst analyzing the latter’s viewpoints on this set of Africa-EU relations would lead to interesting discussions, such objective requires an additional body of research that cannot be covered through this Master Thesis. Instead, the research looks into this kind of EU instruments as conceptualized by Europeans themselves, analyzing *inter alia* their stated goals and whether these goals match the effects on African democratization processes. This focus is reflected throughout the work – for instance, the interviewees are all European professionals working in this field. Another important caveat concerns the theories surrounding democratization. Indeed, the aim of this research is to understand what effects digitalization may have on democracy promotion in African countries. Accordingly, the research will not cover appealing yet unrelated aspects such as the definition of democracy *per se*, or what kind of democracy may be promoted through democratization processes. Instead, this research looks into the way such democratization processes are influenced by digitalization through the Africa-EU Digital Partnerships.

CHAPTER 1 – A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DEMOCRATIZATION AND DIGITALIZATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

This section addresses the academic literature on EU democracy promotion in Africa and how digitalization affects such dynamic. It thus begins by identifying the theoretical frameworks underpinning the notion of democratization. It then contextualizes externally driven democratization processes in Africa to properly analyze EU democratization efforts. Finally, it introduces how the EU's external digital policy can support democracy promotion in African countries.

1.1 The Concept of Democratization

1.1.1 Theories of Democratization

According to the current academic literature, democratization can be described *strictu sensu* as the shift from a non-democratic regime to a democratic one (Gisselquist *et alia*, 2021; Marino *et alia*, 2020; Grugel *et alia*, 2014). A multitude of interpretations flow from this basic tenet, whereby the academic debate focuses on identifying the phases constituting such shift (Marino *et alia*, 2020). The most accredited assessments related thereto often begin from the idea of democratic transition – *id est*, embracing democratic processes en lieu of non-democratic ones – which may be marked by constitutional reforms or the staging of general elections (Gisselquist *et alia*, 2021; Lynch *et alia*, 2019; Grugel *et alia*, 2014). This premise is scholastically followed by a repeated cadence of such embryonal democratic practices over time,

known as democratic survival (Gisselquist *et alia*, 2021; Lynch *et alia*, 2019; Grugel *et alia*, 2014). The final stage is then identified with democratic consolidation, which is primarily described as the scenario whereby there is no political room for any method of governance other than the democratic one (Gisselquist *et alia*, 2021; Lynch *et alia*, 2019; Grugel *et alia*, 2014). Academics frequently correlate this final phase with a solid agreement between civil society and political actors that any attempt resorting to non-electoral pathways to power ultimately prove self-defeating (Fails *et alia*, 2010; Bratton *et alia*, 1997). Despite this academic vigor towards the systematization of the democratization process, it is important to underline that the latter cannot be realistically confined to a linear advancement towards the ultimate form of democracy – a tendency which too often runs the risk of being paternalistically identified with Western-style democracy promotion (Hansen *et alia*, 2014; Grugel *et alia*, 2014). Instead, a significant section of the academic literature illustrates the non-linear nature of democratization (Lebedeva *et alia*, 2022; Anselmi, 2016; Machangana, 2007; Ake, 1992). This approach undertakes a more critical perspective on democratization, accepting that describing it as a teleological movement does not render sufficient justice to the intricacies of reality. Indeed, whereas non-democratic countries might advance towards a more democratic regime, they can backslide too (Dresden *et alia*, 2016). As a result, democratization processes can be more realistically portrayed as a colorful mosaic with regularly unstable pieces. This is a crucial caveat to maintain whilst considering

the different theories of democratization. There are three distinct theoretical categories wherein democratization theories might be broadly located (Gisselquist *et alia*, 2021; Haggard *et alia*, 2016; Stokes, 2013). Whereas they all begin from different premises, it is interesting to notice how their interplay serves to better understand different elements of the ‘human-centric’ Digital Partnerships that will be further analyzed in the Chapters below. A major segment of the scholarly debate stresses the role of structural variables operating on a macro-level scale. Such interpretations define democratization as originating from internal socio-economic development. Notably, Lipsett’s modernization theory is the conventional structuralist instrument to analyze democratization (Gisselquist *et alia*, 2021; Brückner, 2019; Haggard *et alia*, 2016; Moore, 1966; Lipsett, 1959). Its classical core axiom postulates a causal correlation between economic development and political advancement towards democratization (Arat, 1988; Lipsett, 1959). The endgame objective usually concerns the creation of and support towards a local middle class striving for Western-like education and consumerism standards (Lipsett, 1959). The latter would in turn constitute the bedrock for political movements undermining the non-democratic system (Lipsett, 1959). Although this theory has been consistently subject to a great deal of academic criticism (Munck, 2018; Cheibub *et alia*, 2016; Ntini, 2016; Marandici, 2014), its core tenets remain relevant in numerous scholarly arguments analyzing democratization processes (Kuo, 2020; Inglehart *et alia*, 2010; Wucherpfenning *et alia*, 2009; Wolfgang *et alia*,

2003; Fukuyama, 1991). In fact, several re-interpretations of Lipsett's original theory have recently gained ground. Their underpinning feature revolves around the claim that socio-economic development and democratization may not be causally linked, but that the former indirectly influences the latter via various alternative means (Knutsen *et alia*, 2018; Dahlum *et alia*, 2016). This may *inter alia* occur whereby development supports the democratization process when a society already undergoes a democratic transition, therefore legitimizing its overall desirability (Miller, 2012). Alternatively, some authors also advance the idea that a democratic transition may have an indirect and/or nonlinear positive impact on socio-economic development (Coricelli *et alia*, 2022; Libman 2012, 2008). Finally, a number of academics focus on the long-term relationship between socio-economic development and democratization (Coricelli *et alia*, 2022; Diamond, 1999). Their works suggest that whereas developing countries may still pursue a democratic system, higher socio-economic conditions can lead to a complete participation of the citizenship, with important effects on democratic participation and oversight (Coricelli *et alia*, 2022; Doorenspleet, 2018). The debate surrounding modernization theory has guaranteed important grounds to justify development as a means towards democratization (Doorenspleet, 2018; UNDP 2002). A different strand of democratization theories points to the importance of formal and informal institutions. Such interpretations identify the roots of democratization as stemming from a set of institutions whose

qualitative status ultimately determines the likelihood of democratic practices (Cheeseman, 2018; Ristei, 2010; Pérez-Linán, 2007; Lauth, 2000). A significant section of such academic claims stresses the direct link between institutions and democratic elections, arguing that a repeated occurrence of the latter favors the democratization process (Lindberg, 2009). Nevertheless, it has already been pointed out above that too great of a focus on electoral processes may only provide a *prima facie* understanding of democratic regimes. On the other hand, additional theories analyze the role of such institutions in guaranteeing the full representation of stakeholder groups' interests. These interpretations influence the role of consociational governance within democracies (Helms *et alia*, 2019), as well as the quality of media institutions (Sorensen, 2021; Voltmer *et alia*, 2019), the representation of civil society and institutions tasked with legal oversight (Pickney *et alia*, 2022; Youngs, 2020). Finally, a third segment of the academic debate on democratization focuses on the role played by individuals and groups thereof. This set is grounded upon the unpredictability of democratization transitions. Accordingly, the actions of individuals – in particular political elites – can prove crucial in steering democratization processes (Alikhani, 2017). In this sense, academics have pointed out that the predictability afforded through formal arrangements can legitimize democratic means by allowing individuals to pursue a more fulfilling socio-political participation (O'Donnell, 2010; Gourevitch, 2008).

1.1.2 Democratization and Digitalization

Despite the lively scholarly debate discussing democratization, academic theories have only recently begun to analyze how digitalization influences democratization processes. Accordingly, the literature research in this field is somewhat limited and still shows a certain level of confusion – for instance, when it comes to choosing between digitization and digitalization (Porter *et alia*, 2023). The main difference between the two concepts lies in their focus. Indeed, digitization describes the process whereby analog data is made available via digital means – this *inter alia* includes scanning a photograph to create a PDF file (Frenzel *et alia*, 2021). On the other hand, digitalization employs the digital data created through digitization to influence virtually all productive processes – with greater impacts on all areas of life. According to contemporary scholarly debates, digitalization can be defined as “...the phenomenon of transforming analogue data into digital language, which, in turn, can improve business relationships between customer and companies, bringing added value to the whole economy and society” (Reis *et alia*, 2021, p. 448). Such definition captures the unique nature of the phenomenon, which strongly affects all areas of life – from environmental to social sciences to economics and finance (European Parliament, 2019) – leading to the formation and growth of digital economies across the world. As a result, digitalization is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, whose effects are yet from being entirely understood. This is shown by the evolution of the

ambivalent approach undertaken by the academic literature in analyzing its effects on democracy and democratization processes. Just a decade ago, digitalization was portrayed as an emancipatory tool beneficial to democracy, especially in the wake of the Arab Spring upheavals (Howard *et alia*, 2013; Khondker, 2011; Diamond, 2010). However, as the decade dragged along, researchers turned more pessimistic, outlining the inherent dangers that digitalization could pose to democracy and democratization processes (Bulovsky, 2019; Deibert, 2019; Shahbaz, 2018; O’Neil, 2016). Some went as far as arguing that digitalization and general technological advancements actually countered democracies and favored authoritarian trends (Cole, 2018). Thus, the more recent academic scholarship is generally prone to highlight the negative features of democratization. While it is useful to point out the risks related to digitalization, relying on absolutes – digitalization being either extremely positive or negative for democratization – shows that the academic debate has still a long way to go before entirely understanding the correlations between digitalization and democratization (Hackenesch *et alia*, 2020). Indeed, certain aspects of digitalization might even prove useful to the abovementioned theories of democratization – whether structuralist, institutionalist or agency-based.

1.1.3 The Role of External Democratization Aid

Scholarly debates discussing democratization processes often highlight the function played by external actors' aid. Indeed, the promotion of Western-like democratic values has been attached to bilateral aid measures for a long time (Evans *et alia*, 2019; Resnick, 2016). Whereas traditional foreign aid had been interlocked in the alignment-based logic of the Cold War years (Evans *et alia*, 2019; Alesina *et alia*, 2000), new understandings have gained grounds amongst foreign donors since the 1990s. This has been often correlated with the emergence of the good governance agenda, regardless of the donor's national origins (UNHRC, 2019, 2017; UN, 2013; USAID, 2013; DFID, 2007). Academics nonetheless noted that in the minds of donors coming from OECD countries, good governance virtually matched democracy (Resnick, 2016). As a result, the academic debate continues to correlate foreign aid with democracy promotion and democratization efforts (Gisselquist *et alia*, 2021). Moreover, recent trends showing worldwide democratic backsliding have provided a solid academic justification for increased aid supporting democratization (Carothers, 2020). From this premises, the relevant literature analysis currently identifies two distinct approaches to external democracy aid. As they undertake different routes in the pursuit of democratization in a given country, their effects can be analytically interlinked with the aforementioned theories of democratization (Gisselquist *et alia*, 2021).

The main contribution to such subdivision came from Carothers (Seng Tan, 2020; Carothers, 2009). The author highlights the emergence of two core methods. Firstly, he identifies the political approach as mainly focusing on political elections and civil rights (Carothers, 2009). In this sense, democratization is understood as a clash between the democratic and the non-democratic factions (Carothers, 2009). Accordingly, aid is specifically conveyed to certain political parties and civil society groups as a support to win over institutions through general elections (Carothers, 2009). This method also purports to foster a political environment whereby media, rule of law institutions and civil society groups can democratically thrive (Carothers, 2009). The approach thus resonates with the abovementioned institutional theory of democratization. This method is conventionally linked to a US-style approach (Carothers, 2009). Conversely, the author considers the developmental approach, whose premises rest on a comprehensive understanding of democracy (Carothers, 2009). This approach conceptualizes democratization as driven by socio-economic developments (Carothers, 2009). Democratization aid is thus directed towards incremental socio-economic growth, while also underlying the importance of a functioning governance system (Carothers, 2009). This approach is strongly linked to the modernization theory of democratization and is usually correlated with European-style aid (Carothers, 2009).

1.2 EU Democracy Promotion in the African Continent

1.2.1 External Democratization Aid in Africa

The African continent has been at the receiving end of foreign democratization aid for a great number of years (Resnick, 2016; van de Walle, 2001). Its channeling had traditionally been bound to the dynamics of the Cold War, as considerations regarding the US-USSR geopolitical competition dominated the first three decades of the African post-independence age (see page no. 18). This meant that external aid towards African countries depended solely on foreign and commercial policy interests, with few – if any – concerns over the receivers' internal politics (Gallego *et alia*, 2019; Gillies, 2005). Such interaction was influenced by the abovementioned modernization theory (see pages no. 13-14). Indeed, if democratization processes are thought to originate exclusively from economic development, local political considerations can hardly rank high on the priority list (Evans *et alia*, 2019). This compounded through academic debates linking rapid economic growth with authoritarian regimes (Khan *et alia*, 2016; Sáez *et alia*, 2009). By 1989 very few African nations could thus be considered as democracies (Evans *et alia*, 2019). Nonetheless, local authoritarian regimes were caught by dire economic crises undermining their local legitimacy (Lynch, 2011). In conjunction with the fall of the USSR, this pushed Western donors to become further interested in potential African regime changes throughout the 1990s (Evans *et alia*, 2019). The decade thus witnessed the so-called 'third democratization wave' in African countries, whilst coinciding with the

zenith of external aid dependency in the continent (Lynch, 2011). Such wave can be analyzed via several concepts identified earlier in this Chapter. In particular, it appears that the scholarly inquiry surrounding 1990s democratization processes in African countries emphasized the evidently increasing number of elections (Agbese *et alia*, 2007; Osaghae, 2006; ‘Nyong’o, 2005; Bratton, 1998). Observing the numbers at face value is actually startling, as the great majority of African countries held one or more elections by 2003 (Lindberg, 2006). It therefore came without surprise that such developments were met with general optimism (Lindberg, 2006; Bratton, 1998). Whereas it is true that democratic elections constitute a defining procedural requirement, their mere presence fails to portray a comprehensive picture of the status of any given democracy. Moreover, the sole repetition of elections can hardly suffice as the driver of a successful democratization process, which is often rather non-linear (see page no. 12). As a result, the focus on electoral processes limited the academics’ attention towards broader perspectives dealing with the numerous facets of democratization (Evans *et alia*, 2019; see page no. 12). This counterargument has been unveiled by the decline of external democratization aid towards African countries in recent years (Evans *et alia*, 2019). In particular, the latter may be justified by several factors. Firstly, it has been pointed out that foreign donors soon realized that the 1990s democratization wave failed to address several local structural issues – e.g. institutional weakness (Mkandawire, 2010). This was further

compounded by the donors' widespread disinterest regarding the actual quality of those electoral processes (Mkandawire, 2010). International attention to African democratization processes was also undermined in the wake of the 9/11 attacks (Dietrich *et alia*, 2013). Other important trends influenced this interplay as well. In particular, the emerge of the People's Republic of China as an alternative to Western-based partners shifted the balance in the continent due to the absence of outright political conditionality (Demiryol, 2022; Ahrens *et alia*, 2021; African Development Bank, 2011). The latter attracted many African nations, which rightly preferred – and continue to – a geopolitical partner that does not impose political strings, in contrast with Western partners' intentions that may be perceived as neocolonial (Tobi Oshodi, 2022). Scholarly debates have also pointed to a counterbalancing trend. In fact, since the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, the so-called 'partnership model' has slowly but steadily emerged (Raimundo, 2020; Haastrup, 2013; Adebajo *et alia*, 2012; Storey, 2006; Hettne, 2005). This approach purports to overcome the age-old donor-recipient method that African nations can be subjected to, whilst striving for equality amongst partners (Adhikari *et alia*, 2021; Keijzer, 2020). As a result, it stresses the importance of local government ownership and mutual cooperation between the parties (Harper-Shipman, 2019). Contemporary academic debates have highlighted the advantages of such approach, which looks beyond mere electoral processes (Evans *et alia*, 2019). It thus comes without a surprise that an international

player like the EU is increasingly more reliant on such a framework, which allows for better cooperation and mutually advantageous agreements. Interestingly, this option is being increasingly employed in the digital domain (EU Council, 2022), with potentially important repercussions on the African nations' democratization processes and the future of African-European relations.

1.2.2 EU Democracy Promotion in Africa

Academic discussions over the EU's democratization efforts centered on whether Europe was successful in striking a proper balance between its democratic governance promotion and other strategic interests, such as security and economic cooperation (Hackenesch *et alia*, 2020, 2015; Koch, 2015; Portela, 2010; Hout, 2010; Hayman, 2009). For many years, the EU regarded democratization as holding a high priority within its foreign policy objectives towards the African continent (Migani, 2020). Such important consideration can be traced back to the early 1990s and were influenced by factors internal and external to the African continent. The critical economic conditions of local African regimes and the fall of the USSR provided the perfect conjuncture for increased EU action in this field (see page no. 20). Indeed, the EU was at the forefront of this process, being amongst the first actors to include provisions referring to human rights and democracy (Hodson *et alia*, 2001; European Commission, 1996). These provisions became increasingly important in the negotiations with African countries (Börzel *et alia*, 2009), occupying more space as

new international agreements were negotiated. Such ideas first emerged in the Preamble of the 1984 Lomé III Convention, which mentioned the principles of the United Nations Charter and fundamental rights (Lomé III Convention Preamble, 1984). It is important to note that such mentions were included in the Preamble despite the opposition of the ACP counterparts, which suspected potential interference from Europe (Migani, 2020). Only five years later, this kind of provisions were moved to the working text of the 1989 Lomé IV Convention, which included a 5-year long financial protocol rendering aid subject to respect for human rights (Lomé IV Convention Financial Protocol, 1989). The Convention also included additional priorities such as the environment (Lomé IV Convention, Articles no. 4, 6, 14, 16, 33-38, 1989). This marked the beginning of political conditionality in African-EU relations (Migani, 2020). Throughout the 1990s, the EU confirmed such trends by employing a mixed strategy increasingly based on developmental aid and negative political conditionality (Hackenesch, 2015; Börzel *et alia*, 2009; Crawford, 2001). It did so even from an internal perspective, as the 1992 Maastricht Treaty subjected EU external aid to principles such as democracy, rule of law and human rights (Maastricht Treaty, Article 130u, 1992). Such direction was also confirmed in a 1996 Green Paper published by the EC, whereby the donor-recipient relationship was further conceptualized as heavily dependent on political conditions set by European countries (EC Green Paper, 1996). The scholarly debates analyzing this set of instruments concur

that their efficacy was widely limited by the EU's strategic and economic interests, which often conflicted with genuine democracy promotion in African countries (Mawdsley, 2012; Carbone, 2006). It is also often underlined how such tools were not adequate from a long-term perspective, as they could only allow the EU to be a reactive player, responding to political crises as they emerged (Hackenesch, 2015; Börzel *et alia*, 2009; Crawford, 2001). Accordingly, the EU's efforts towards democracy promotion in Africa underwent a significant shift with the new century. In particular, the 2000s have witnessed a series of new instruments gradually enabling the EU to become a more proactive player, thus being able not only to respond to crises but also to pursue more ambitious objectives (Molenaers *et alia*, 2015; Koch, 2015). These tools are divided between *ex-ante* and *ex-post* (Koch, 2015), as some are applied before entering in a relationship with a given country, whereas others are employed after. *Ex-ante* tools establish conditions prior to entering into a partnership or agreement, subjecting advantages to the satisfaction of pre-outlined criteria (Schimmelfennig *et alia*, 2004; Fierro, 2003). Conversely, *ex-post* tools view democratic progress as the final objective and render benefits conditional to the progress a country makes towards said objective (Koch, 2015). Whereas their true effectiveness varies (van Cranenburgh, 2019), it is significant to notice that the EU has expanded its toolkit since the early 2000s. This has also occurred through the 2000 Cotonou Agreement with ACP countries, which

allowed for progress on democratic reforms to become a crucial yardstick for aid allocation (Hackenesch, 2015). Furthermore, Article 8 of the Cotonou Agreement enabled the EU to rely more solidly on political dialogues as an additional tool beyond democracy aid (Beck *et alia*, 2004). Additional tools include the EU's electoral observation and assistance missions, which the EU deployed to several African countries, such as Nigeria, Kenya and Zimbabwe (Ronceray, 2017). Such renewed plethora of instruments has been severely critiqued by the academic analysis. Indeed, it has been often underlined that these initiatives lacked coherence and maintained a strong donor-recipient perspective, with unsatisfactory results as to concrete democracy promotion advancements across African countries (Hackenesch *et alia*, 2020; Miyandazi *et alia*, 2018; Fioramonti *et alia*, 2016). Moreover, while there has been general appraisal for the EU's engagement with civil society organizations (Carbone, 2012; Mehler, 2009), academics often point out that the EU was unable to focus entirely on organizations operating for democracy reforms, instead scattering the attention over those working for internal market or migration policy reforms (Johansson-Nogués, 2017; Axyonova *et alia*, 2016). Finally, the EU electoral observation missions have been criticized as lacking a real understanding of the local political realities, as well as carrying forward a donor-recipient relationship through electoral systems mentoring (Vandeputte *et alia*, 2018). Due to all these issues, in recent years the EU has attempted to expand its toolkit and move on from a donor-recipient dynamic, rather preferring to treat its African

counterparts as partners (Rein, 2015). This shift is first found in the 2007 Joint Africa-EU Strategy, which set a long-term framework for African-EU cooperation (Joint Africa-EU Strategy, 2007). The ideas contained in the Strategy increasingly took over the EU foreign policy towards the African continent and could be found in virtually all recent instances of interaction between Africa and the EU (European Commission, 2023). Thus, the notion of partnership played a fundamental role in all the AU-EU Summits, as well as the more recent EU strategies towards Africa (European Commission, 2020). Although limited by a number of trends – *inter alia* unclear meaning of partnership and colonial legacy (Kotsopoulos *et alia*, 2018) – this model is being currently pursued by the EU to overcome the previous inefficient donor-recipient relationship and address new challenges such as climate change and digitalization (European Commission, 2020). Indeed, EU external digital policy objectives are well-suited for such model and are increasingly geared towards the establishment of Digital Partnerships with African countries (European Commission 2023, 2022).

1.3 Digitalization and Democracy in African countries

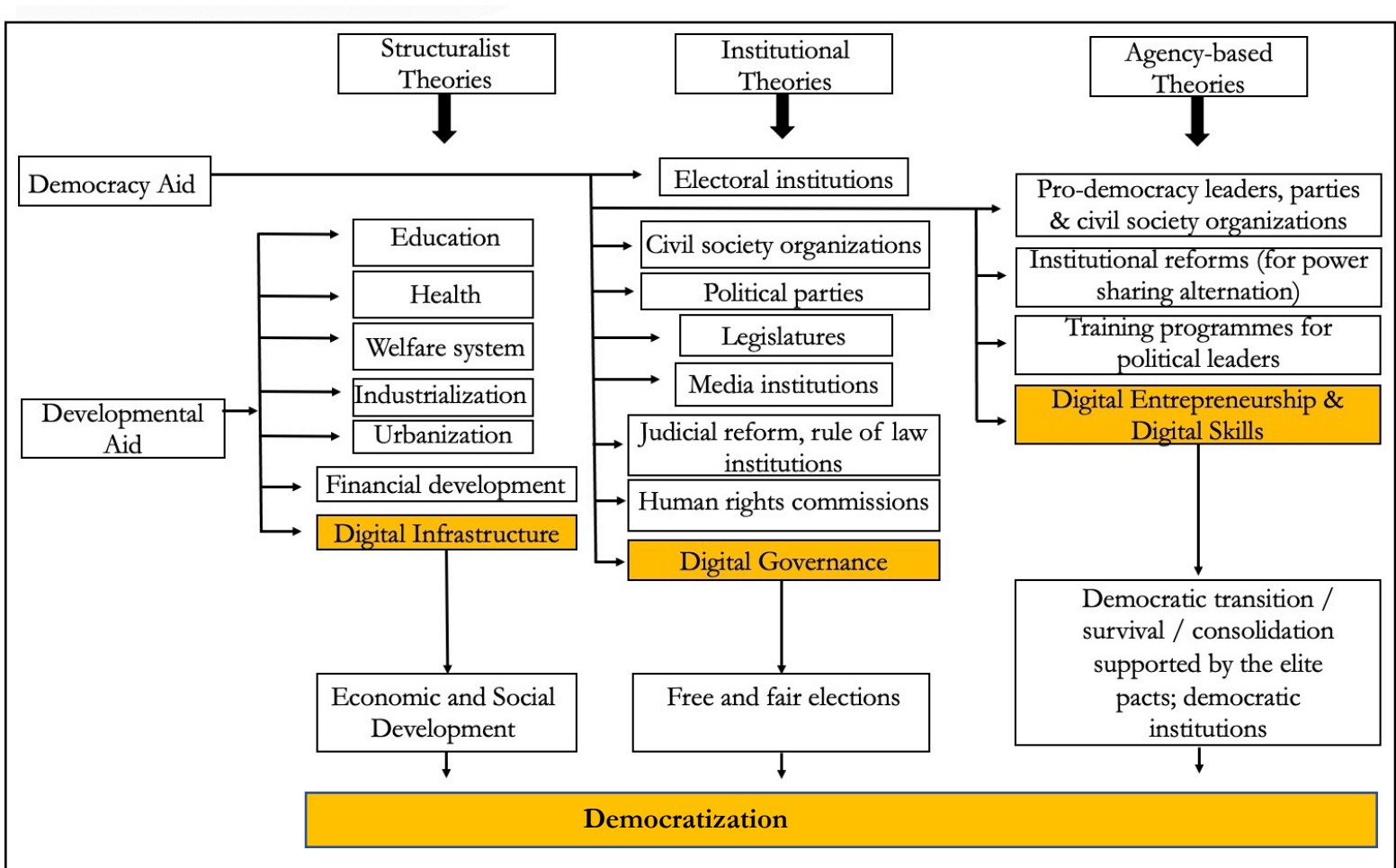
1.3.1 A new frontier for African countries and Europe

The picture portrayed so far holds far-reaching implications for a field that has revolutionized global geopolitics: digital policy. Indeed, due to its intrinsic capacity to revolutionize the present and influence the future, digitalization has become a key policy issue of the 21st century (KAS, 2019; van Zeebroeck, 2015). Many African countries have thus adopted digital strategies and policies, whether at national or regional level through the African Union (Teevan *et alia*, 2022). However, whereas digitalization can be an important forward-looking policy goal, reports underline how it may also be a tool leading towards either democratic strengthening or dismay, underlying the need for further research on the matter (Hackenesch *et alia*, 2020). Due to the vast growth potential of their digital economies, several external actors have sought to interact with African nations, with no shortage of concerns regarding new forms of neocolonialism through digitalization (Teevan *et alia*, 2022). Within this context, the EU has become considerably more active, developing several instruments to cooperate with African countries and the African Union in the digital policy domain (EEAS, 2023). In particular, this interplay has taken the shape of Digital Partnerships, which aim to invest in and collaborate with African countries' digital economies through a "human-centric" approach (Teevan *et alia*, 2022). In comparison to models such as the USA or the People's Republic of China, this third way to digitalization may hold underlying consequences for an area

vital to the African continent. Indeed, through investments on African digital economies, the EU may once again wear the mantle of ‘Normative Power Europe’ (Manners, 2002) and forcibly promote specific principles and values in African countries. The fields covered by such Digital Partnerships generally include investments in digital infrastructure and digital entrepreneurship and skills, as well as cooperation on digital governance matters. Interestingly, these areas can be linked with the abovementioned theories of democratization, as they may fall under the conceptual categories of structuralist, institutionalist and agency-based. For instance, fostering digital entrepreneurship and skills amongst the citizenry may be linked to agency-based theories of democratization, as they can enable individuals to pursue a more fulfilling socio-political participation in a given society (Ovcharuk, *et alia*, 2020; Aloulou, 2019). Whereas the present scholarly debates analyze the risks and potentials of Digital Partnerships between the EU and African countries, there are still many uncertainties regarding the nature of the “human-centric” method (Teevan *et alia*, 2022; Akuetteh *et alia*, 2022; Teevan *et alia*, 2020; Cheeseman *et alia*, 2020). Accordingly, the following Chapters attempt to fill the current literature gap on the implications of the EU “human-centric” Digital Partnership for African countries. It does so by considering whether these partnerships leverage the EU intervention in African digital economies to foster specific norms, values and governance forms, in particular democracy. Such considerations will be approached via the analytical framework

hitherto developed, which can be visualized through the following Table.

Table No. 1 – A Theoretical Framework¹ (Revisited)



1. The original structure of this table is found in the work of Gisselquist *et alia*, 2021. However, the parts in yellow were added by the author of this Master Thesis.

CHAPTER 2 - METHODOLOGY

This research has thus far depended on secondary data – *id est*, the analysis of the existing academic literature – to offer insights on the research issue at its core. The theoretical framework developed above may serve to clarify the correlations between EU-driven democratization and digitalization processes in African countries. Nevertheless, it proves inadequate to gather satisfactory information regarding “human-centric” Africa-EU Digital Partnerships and whether they leverage EU intervention in African digital economies to promote specific values, norms and governance models. Though the academic literature has pointed at the links between democratization and digitalization, as of today there is very little research assessing the current situation, particularly in the light of the new Digital Economy Packages brokered between the EU and African nations. Therefore, in addition to secondary data research, the study harnesses primary data to explore the EU Digital Economy Packages in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This section thus tackles the methodology used to conduct such research. It defends the use of qualitative analysis methods, explaining the methodological reasons behind the choice of semi-structured interviews. Finally, it justifies the methods regarding data collection and data analysis, addressing the potential bias of the researcher.

2.1 Qualitative Research

***Bartender:** What can I get y'all?*

***Editor:** Gin, splash of tonic, lime.*

***Associate Editor (AE):** Make it two. [Turning to Editor] So, that manuscript you sent me this morning, what's it all about?*

***Editor:** Oh you know, another "qualitative exploration" in a fairly interesting leisure context, where they interviewed a bunch of folks and developed some themes.*

***AE:** And?*

***Editor:** And what?*

***AE:** And ... how good is it? Is it really ready for review? Some of the stuff I've been getting lately doesn't look as sophisticated as qualitative research should in our field in 2020. Did they engage deeply with the data? Is the connection theory robust? Is it persuasive? Did they position themselves in the context of the research? Do you get the sense that the whole thing is trustworthy?*

***Editor:** Hmm. Honestly, not usually, but seriously thanks for your service?"*

Jeff Rose & Corey W. Johnson, 2020, p. 1

This study relied on primary qualitative data to substantiate its findings. As Rose and Johnson ironically portray through the punchlines above, qualitative research is often depicted as suffering from unspoken envy towards more objective forms of knowledge production such as quantitative ones (Rose *et alia*, 2020). The roots of such dynamic can be traced back to several decades ago. Indeed, already in the 1970s Michel Foucault had addressed the ways whereby several sciences differ in their legitimacy of knowledge production

(Foucault, 1970). The philosopher thus observed that modern research trends prefer the rock-solid objectivity of scientific knowledge production over the more subtle interpretative knowledge techniques (Foucault, 1970). Such scientism infatuation nevertheless does not entail that the curtains should be closed on qualitative research. Indeed, Foucault himself envisioned social sciences as possessing a specific valuable role within the knowledge landscape, placed between the “...quantitatively calculable and the subjectivity-laden philosophical” (Rose *et alia*, 2020, p. 433). Such “cloudy distribution” (Foucault, 1970, p. 347) enables qualitative research to emancipate itself from general hard-science envy and contribute thoroughly to the production of knowledge (Rose *et alia*, 2020). Although current academic debates struggle to find a one-size-fits-all definition (Aspers *et alia*, 2021), the lowest common denominator of qualitative research generally agreed upon involves “...any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (Strauss *et alia*, 1998, pp. 10-11). This basic definition stresses the non-quantitative character of the data employed in such *modus operandi*, which is used to search for understanding and meaning (Fischer *et alia*, 2022). This kind of research is most useful when a theory is lacking and requires the researcher to follow inductive reasoning as s/he collects data to build hypotheses, concepts and – in the best scenarios – theories (White *et alia*, 2022; Merriam *et alia*, 2019). It has often been described as explaining phenomena through an inside-out approach (Flick, 2007)

and through individuals' viewpoints (Kelle, 2006). While it maintains several limits – as all research methods do – related *inter alia* to greater difficulty in demonstrating scientific causality, one major strength concerns its uniquely flexible and open nature (Fischer *et alia*, 2022). Qualitative data may indeed be collected and analyzed via numerous alternatives: by observing the experiences of single individuals or groups and their interactions, or through the analysis of documents (Fischer *et alia*, 2022; Strauss *et alia*, 2015; Flick, 2007; Kelle, 2006). This in turn allows for many practical alternatives, such as interviews, focus groups and open-ended surveys (Strauss *et alia*, 2015). For the purposes of this study, interviews are deemed the most appropriate choice. Focus groups were discarded as their core aim is to stimulate an informal discussion amongst a group of people to assess targets' perceptions and group dynamics – they are in fact very useful for market research (Strauss *et alia*, 2015). Open-ended surveys could constitute a solid alternative to interview. Nevertheless, they naturally lack flexibility and are too often regarded by audiences as particularly time-consuming, undermining the chances of getting in-depth and thorough answers (Strauss *et alia*, 2015). Because of all these reasons, as well as the research question this Thesis addresses, qualitative research through interviews is regarded as the best approach to be employed. Indeed, using such qualitative research method opened the door to in-depth insights of “human-centric” Africa-EU Digital Partnerships, providing a greater comprehension of the issue through professional experts' perspectives.

2.2 Semi-structured interviews

As mentioned above, this Thesis has availed of interviews to collect the necessary data. For the purposes of the study, conducting semi-structured interviews has been deemed the best choice. This kind of interview employs different types of questions, including open- and closed-ended, as well as follow-up ones (Adams, 2015). The use of semi-structured interview affords much-needed flexibility, as they provide more maneuvering room than structured interviews while remaining more systematic than unstructured ones (Kangasniemi *et alia*, 2016). Accordingly, they allow the researcher to move beyond the pre-determined questions, enabling new queries to emerge as the conversation develops (Galletta, 2012). As a result, there is enhanced reciprocity between the interlocutors (Kangasniemi *et alia*, 2016), which encourages and rewards in-depth understanding as new ideas flow throughout the interview. For the purposes of this Thesis, pre-determined questions were all based on the theoretical framework forged in Chapter 1. However, the researcher developed different sets of questions, each tailor-made to the specific interviewee. Since democratization and digitalization are influenced by a multifaceted plethora of issues, the pre-determined questions were constructed according to the particular expert's field of knowledge. To clearly set the appropriate grounds for discussion, some questions were included regardless of the expert's profile. Interviews were consequently conducted through questions that ranged from the broad to the specific.

In order to collect a satisfactory interview sample, the researcher relied on non-probability, purposive sampling. This technique entails that interviewees are purposefully chosen via personal judgement and not randomly selected. This enables the researcher to pick interview samples that were best placed to provide insights relevant to the research question and thus meet research objectives (Berndt, 2020; Etikan *et alia*, 2017). This is a rather important aspect of the research methodology, as “human-centric” EU Digital Partnerships and the correlations between democratization and digitalization related thereto are an emerging yet much under-pursued field of discussion, meaning that few experts bear the relevant knowledge and expertise to properly answer the questions. Consequently, this study has contributions only from the experts deemed fit to partake, leading to a natural narrowing down of the respondents’ sample. An additional feature accompanied the non-probability, purposive sampling technique, *id est* the snowball sampling. The latter is a non-probability method whereby interviewees are asked to recommend a potential research participant (Berndt, 2020). Though not all interviewees were in the position to provide a recommendation, this method definitely sped up the selection process. The combination of these techniques allowed the researcher to reach the so-called ‘theoretical saturation’, whereby qualitative data collection cannot provide new insights as concepts and ideas keep resurfacing throughout additional interviews (Hennink *et alia*, 2016). Reaching such moment allows the researcher to grasp the desired limits of his/her data collection and analysis.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The semi-structured interviews were held during the months of April and May 2023, either through videocalls (using Zoom and/or Google Teams) or phone calls. All participants were contacted via email in advance to establish a first contact, informing them about the study and asking for their availability to participate in the interview. The overall process went generally smoothly, although it was at first hard to find candidates both fitting and available. All interviews were conducted in English, except for one that was held in Italian and all lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. All interviews were recorded and *verbatim* transcribed thereafter. With regard to the interview held in Italian, it was first translated in English and then transcribed. One interview includes on average 1350 words. The full transcripts of the interviews can be found in Annex B. All interlocutors were informed about the nature and the objective of their interviews and signed an informative consent form regarding the protection of their data. A copy of the consent form provided to interview participants can be found in Annex C. All interviewees were therefore fully aware of their right to stop the interview at any given moment, as well as skip any question they did not wish to respond to. To preserve the anonymity of the participants and ensure confidentiality, interviews are referred to in Annex B as “Interview no. XYZ”, while interviewees are referenced as P1 to P6. Nonetheless, a bird’s eye overview providing a general description of each participant’s professional role, as well as the execution date of each interview, can be found in Annex A. The

researcher is grateful to all interviewees, as it was his first time conducting this kind of interviews. Contrary to quantitative analysis, which is mainly statistics-driven and dependent upon the researcher's analytical and integrative abilities, qualitative analysis strongly relies on the researcher's understanding of the context whereby the data is collected (Bhattacharjee, 2019). Accordingly, this kind of analysis poses the accent on making sense of the data collected, interpreting it to discover insightful information and draw conclusions on a given research question (Bhattacharjee, 2019). The method known as thematic analysis has been employed to analyze the data collected through the interviews. This technique requires deep involvement by the researcher, who strives to understand and map recurrent patterns of meaning – *id est*, themes – in the interviews (Braun *et alia*, 2021). Most importantly, the researcher's task is to recognize and analyze the themes that are relevant to the research question (Braun *et alia*, 2021). Moreover, the researcher relied on a systemic procedure of coding to complement the thematic analysis. Elliott defines coding as “...indexing or mapping data to provide an overview of disparate data that allows the researcher to make use of them in relation to their research questions” (Elliott, 2018, p. 2851). Practically speaking, the process begins with the generation of phrases conveying the same concepts – the ‘codes’ – culminating in the definition of themes and their interplays (Elliott, 2018). Complementing the thematic analysis with coding accelerated the analysis process. In turn, this allowed the researcher to recognize those recurring themes containing the same

concepts and ideas, leading to the identification of meaningful patterns. Despite its strengths, thematic analysis may often be influenced by the researcher's bias. Indeed, this analysis method is highly subjective in spite of its reliance on concrete, informative data (Braun *et alia*, 2021). Whether consciously or unconsciously, researchers may fall prey to cherry-picking, selecting only the information that strengthens their already-present bias, while ignoring data that rebuts it. In order to guarantee a high-level research standard, the researcher strived to consider all available data, considering even the information that may have refuted his prior beliefs. The researcher thus committed to conduct all the interviews and the whole research process in a way that minimizes any possible bias, maintaining a level of academic rigor and consistency appropriate to a Master Thesis.

CHAPTER 3 – UNDERSTANDING CURRENT EU DIGITAL PARTNERSHIPS WITHIN THE AFRICAN DEMOCRATIZATION CONTEXTS

This section addresses the primary data collected through the semi-structured interviews. After outlining the necessary contextual information regarding the case study, it provides an analysis of the qualitative data collected. The concepts and ideas expressed by the interviewees are cited as P, with a number indicating the specific participant. The results are then contrasted with the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 1. The juxtaposition of these elements provides key insights informing the case study – for the purposes of this research, the EU Digital Partnership with the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Findings reveal valuable details regarding the main limitations of such “human-centric” Partnership, as well as its concrete effects on Nigerian democratization processes. As a result, the conversations with experts in this field enabled the researcher to provide an answer to the overarching research question.

3.1 Case Study: Nigeria

Over the years, the Federal Republic of Nigeria has become an increasingly important West Sub-Saharan African actor in digital-related domains. Following an economic rebasing process held in 2014, the country surpassed South Africa to become the largest economy in the continent (IMF, 2023; Suberu *et alia*, 2015; Masetti *et*

alia, 2015; Awojobi *et alia*, 2014). The technology and digital industries critically bolstered the 2014 GDP change, supporting it for up to 25% (Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics, 2014). The technology industry alone is the second-largest contributor to the Nigerian GDP, making up no less than a substantial 15% (Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The country is also host to a robust technology and digital innovation ecosystem, comprising a wide variety of advanced businesses and start-ups operating in a number of economic areas (Maciel *et alia*, 2023). In particular, industries such as financial technology, e-commerce and services house some of the most edge-cutting firms (Maciel *et alia*, 2023). Such growth is driven by a number of factors. First, the youthful and burgeoning population of Nigeria ranks amongst the most significant elements to be considered. With over 200 million inhabitants, Nigeria has the largest population in the African continent (World Bank, 2021). The bulk of the citizenry is under 35 years of age and increasingly embraces technology, influencing the fast development of the country's digital sector (International Telecommunications Union, 2021; Kemp, 2021). A second element to be considered concerns the Nigerian emergent middle class. As this demographic sector expands, more individuals have access to the disposable income allowing them to purchase electronic devices such as smartphones and computers (Begazo *et alia*, 2023). Alongside rapid population growth and economic-related aspects, the Nigerian digital and technology sectors have been substantially backed by national politics. After decades of mostly

military ruling since its independence in 1960, Nigeria transitioned to a democratic system in 1999 (Lucky *et alia*, 2017; Obi, 2011; Omotola, 2010). This change had a relevant impact on the country's technological and digital sectors, as the latter greatly benefitted from more open and participatory policies in this field (Maciel *et alia*, 2023). The current Nigerian government is also particularly supportive of digitalization and digital innovation, having established a number of crucial initiatives to bolster these industries (Maciel *et alia*, 2023). Notably, the 2020-2030 National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy aims to make the country a leading digital economy (Nigerian Federal Ministry of Communications and Digital Economy, 2019). Finally, Nigeria's growing role as a prominent digital power in the African continent has met appraisal also at the international level. The country has indeed been recently re-elected as 2023-2026 Member of the International Telecommunications Union Council (ITU, 2022). Moreover, it maintains an active presence on the multilateral relations level, having joined the Digital Cooperation Organization in 2021 whilst participating in international digital policy fora within the African Union and the United Nations (Maciel *et alia*, 2023). As a result, Nigeria is amongst the better-positioned African countries to establish flourishing digital-related agreements with third actors, which are increasingly interested in its digital economy (Maciel *et alia*, 2023). Given this context, it comes without surprise that the EU has established significant ties with Nigeria in the digital realm. As it upscaled its internal digital policy commitments, the EU gradually

integrated such objectives with its external relations activities (Zaiotti, 2022). Indeed, the March 2021 Digital Compass focus on digital infrastructures, digital governance and digital entrepreneurship and skills is integrally reflected in the various projects of the December 2021 Global Gateway Initiative, through which the EU purports to promote *inter alia* digitalization partnerships worldwide (European Commission, 2021). It is precisely under the sway of this Initiative that the EU announced the EU-Nigeria 2021-2024 Digital Economy Package, with an investment budget of €820 million (Zaiotti, 2022; European Commission, 2021). The research now moves onto analyzing the qualitative data collected through the lenses of the three dimensions outlined in the 2021 Digital Compass (European Commission, 2021) – namely, digital infrastructure, digital governance and digital entrepreneurship and skills. These three features indeed constitute the main elements of the 2021-2024 Digital Economy Package.

3.1.1 Digital Infrastructure

The first core of the Digital Economy Package investments is geared towards building crucial Nigerian digital infrastructure (European Commission, 2021). The latter is generally defined as the totality of physical and software-based infrastructures that are necessary to sustain the usage of computerized devices, systems and processes (Nagle, 2021; Greenstein, 2019). This may *inter alia* include broadband, mobile networks, data centers, and integration of software interfaces (Nagle, 2021). In particular, through the Digital Economy Package the EU invests in the construction of fiber optic cables and data centers in Nigeria, as well as the expansion of 4G connectivity in specific Nigerian regions whilst increasing the overall national connectivity capacity (European Commission, 2021). This kind of investments is aimed at capitalizing on the ongoing growth of the Nigerian digital sector (P2). Indeed, all interviewees pointed out the clear link between increased national digital capacity and overall GDP growth (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6). For instance, one interviewee pointed out the added value of the so-called “international capacity” fostered by digitalization (P2). The concept describes a country’s capacity to have international digital connections, which P2 linked with a beneficial 1% increase to a country’s GDP (P2). This strongly correlates to P3’s additional argument that EU-driven digitalization investments do not only aim to increase African nations’ economic development, but also allow them to “...open up...” and have access to international digital connections (P3, see page no. 97). Another

important benefit indicated by several interviewees includes increased jobs growth, as expanded access to digital connections may enable more people to partake in the digital economy (P1, P2, P3, P4). After having underlined the importance of digital infrastructures for overall economic development, it is interesting to observe how interviewees pointed to non-economic ripple effects that digital infrastructure might have. In particular, it recurrently emerged that by fostering economic development, this kind of projects might influence local democratization processes (P2, P3, P4). Interviewees' answers focused on different ways such influence may occur. For instance, P2 argued in favour of the idea that fostering GDP growth through digitalization eases internal stabilization, as the local middle class expands due to jobs growth (P2). According to P2 and P4, this in turn would help reverse the high-number migratory trends from countries such as Nigeria towards Europe (P2; P4). However, this must be considered in conjunction with the current shift away from donor-recipient relations (P2). On the other hand, P3 contrasted such view by pointing out more indirect trends. According to this interviewee, EU investments in Nigerian digital infrastructures do not have a direct or semi-direct connection (P3) – as the previous interviewee's answer implies. Conversely, this expert evidenced how fostering GDP growth in an already formally democratic country such as Nigeria may have a long-term positive impact by legitimizing democratization and increasing its overall desirability (P3). Nonetheless, all interviewees suggested that indirect links of more

reliable access to digital infrastructure also relate to social development (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6). For instance, P4 advanced the instance whereby providing young people with broadband or 4G connection would provide alternative access to education (P4). Additionally, P4 identified the possibility of higher participation rates in national democratic life due to increased internet access (P4). These perspectives are not unanimously agreed upon, as P3 stressed the idea that in order to have any realistic influence on democratization processes, digital infrastructure ultimately cannot be separated from the other cores of the Digital Economy Package (P3). According to this interviewee, digital infrastructure is indeed a mostly neutral tool at face value (P3). It thus appears from the primary data relating to digital infrastructures that providing reliable access to the latter might influence democratization trends in a country such as Nigeria. Nonetheless, except for one instance (P2), the data collected does not open the door to a causal relation between providing digital infrastructures and democratization. Instead, it appears that there are several levels whereby digital infrastructures may influence digitalization – some being more indirect than others, with varying outcomes. Moreover, the extent to which this influence may be effective appears to be dependent on the other sections of the Digital Economy Package (P3), which will be analyzed below.

3.1.2 Digital Governance

The second core of the Digital Economy Package is geared towards fostering the adoption of digital governance in Nigeria (European Commission, 2021). Despite the complex academic debate surrounding the concept, which cannot be covered by this research, Engvall and Flak provide a concise definition encompassing its foundational elements, describing digital governance as “...digital technology ingrained in structures or processes of governance and their reciprocal relationships with governance objectives and normative values. [It] includes the utilization of digital capabilities and involves a transformation of structures, processes and/or normative values” (Engvall *et alia*, 2022, p. 44). This definition adequately illustrates the ways whereby digital governance can be promoted in a given country. Integrating digitalization processes in national governance may severely influence key areas such as public administration, healthcare and taxation authorities (Charalabidis *et alia*, 2020). General benefits correlated with digital governance include increased efficiency – *inter alia* lower operational costs and improved allocation of public resources – as well as enhanced government responsiveness (Charalabidis *et alia*, 2020). Another set of benefits is related to a governance qualitative shift, introducing enhanced legitimacy, transparency and accountability (Manoharan *et alia*, 2023). In particular, the Digital Economy Package envisages fostering the digitalization of Nigerian public administration, with investments to strengthen the country’s digital identity services

(European Commission, 2021). Moreover, further EU investments include supporting the development of regulatory frameworks concerning data privacy and safety, as well as cybersecurity (European Commission, 2021). This *inter alia* occurs through policy dialogue engagement and technical assistance facilities, sharing expertise between the EU and Nigeria's public administration and building up local administrative capacity (European Commission, 2021). These kinds of investments are aimed at helping to create a solid national governance ecosystem that can support a growing digital economy like Nigeria's on a long-term scale (P5). Besides the immediate economic links, all interviewees recognized the impact such digital governance can have on local democratization processes (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6). The participants' answers evidenced several layers of such influence. First, P5 asserted that by maintaining a policy dialogue with an actor like the EU on digital governance matters, a country inevitably engages with a non-neutral set of governance norms and values (P5). This constitutes an important element to consider within the abovementioned geopolitical competition in the African digital sector investments (see page no. 28), as it differentiates the EU from other actors (Reiterer, 2022). The values mentioned by P5 can be identified in political communication instruments, such as the Declaration for the Future of the Internet, which affirms core democratic principles, fundamental freedoms and human rights (P5; European Commission, 2022). Other interviewees reaffirmed this perspective (P3, P6). P3 also underlined how this digital governance

engagement is fundamental in qualifying the influence of other digital investments (P3). According to this interviewee, digital governance ensures that mostly neutral tools such as digital infrastructure are employed in a way that upholds specific values, such as democracy and rule of law (P3). Moreover, P3 and P6 pointed out that digital governance is also strongly connected to digital entrepreneurship and digital skills, since the relative presence of the latter affects its quantity and quality (P3, P6). P6 went so far as asserting that there is a proportional relation between the two (P6). However, a common thread present in all interviewees' opinions indicates that the EU does not necessarily intend to explicitly impose those values when engaging in Digital Partnerships with a country like Nigeria (P3, P4, P5, P6) – as one interviewee put it, “...we cannot feed them democracy” (P3, see page no. 98). It therefore emerges a conscious shift from previous dynamics, whereby conditionality dominated Africa-EU relations (see pages no. 23-27). Accordingly, it appears that such Digital Partnerships aim to provide partner countries with the tools necessary to create their own digital governance (P5). Nonetheless, since these tools come from an actor like the EU, they obviously reflect EU values – such as transparency and accountability (P5). The nuanced narrative of empowering partners with digital governance tools seems particularly important, as several interviewees evidenced how the EU is attempting to embrace an approach different from prior donor-recipient relations (P1, P3, P5, P6). For instance, P3 described how the EU does not aim to simply spread

copies of the GDPR across African countries (P3). Instead, the interviewee argued that the objective is to provide African partners with all the necessary expertise and know-how – including the technicalities related to instruments like the GDPR – to allow them to independently mold their own digital governance system (P3). P1 supported this example by arguing that this process may allow the EU to achieve long-term sustainable Digital Partnerships whereby partners retain ownership of local governance models (P1). Another important element of this nuanced process concerns the so-called “...demand-driven approach...” (P5, see page no. 104). According to this idea, the substantial content of Digital Partnerships is determined by the needs of the partner country, with the aim of opening the door to a more effective relationship based on dialogue between the partners (P5). Several interviewees pointed out that this approach allows the EU to be more effective and precise as to what it can offer to African countries, as it occurred in the Nigerian case (P3, P5, P6). According to P3, this approach can noticeably increase the desirability of EU-like digital governance as partners retain much more ownership throughout the process (P3). However, this method does not amount to a panacea, as it may be subject to political turmoil in the partner country – sometimes ruining year-long operations (P5). Moreover, several interviewees outlined how the EU still has some way to go in this direction, for instance by engaging in dialogues with partners at earlier stages (P1, P3, P6). Overall, all interviewees mentioned how this includes an important step towards a better-

rounded and more effective approach towards Digital Partnerships with African countries (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6). An additional element to be considered concerns the participatory nature of EU-sponsored digital governance. Indeed, the digital governance investments of the Digital Economy Package include ensuring the participation of civil society organizations in local policy dialogues (P5). This allows for increased citizen engagement and participation in decision-making processes (P5). Fostering such communication channels may reduce the information gap amongst citizens and between citizens and government, promoting accountability in local governance processes (P1). According to several interviewees, fostering such participatory models directly influences the democratization process in a country like Nigeria (P3, P5, P6). It can thus be surmised from the primary data relating to digital governance that the latter can substantially influence democratization trends in African countries. While this influence may not lead to a time-wise immediate acceleration of democratization trends in a given country, the data collected suggests a solid relation between digitalization in governance processes and democratization in African countries. Nevertheless, it also appears that such relation can be affected by a section of the Digital Economy Package that goes beyond the scope of digital governance *per se*. The section will be thus analyzed below.

3.1.3. Digital Entrepreneurship and Digital Skills

The third core of the Digital Economy Package is geared towards supporting the development of digital skills and digital entrepreneurship in Nigeria (European Commission, 2021). The former covers the scope of one's abilities to use digital devices, communication software and networks (van Laar *et alia*, 2020). These far-reaching abilities have become increasingly important in virtually all workplaces and comprise the professional skills needed to operate in a growing digital economy (Livingstone *et alia*, 2023). Their nature may range from technical – how to operate a given device or software – to collaboration – how to digitally share knowledge and cooperate to reach a common goal – to critical thinking – how to process digital information and make informed decisions based thereof (van Laar *et alia*, 2020). On the other hand, digital entrepreneurship can be defined as integrating digital technologies into the creation and development of new economic ventures (Sahut *et alia*, 2019). In this sense, digitalization can be conceptualized both as an enabler of economic ventures that could not be created before, or as the output of new businesses that produce in the digital domain – such as social media or big data companies (Sahut *et alia*, 2019). These two sub-categories are crucially important for every digital economy, as they enable the professionals working therein to properly operate (Sahut *et alia*, 2019). In the case of Nigeria, fostering digital entrepreneurship and digital skills is particularly important, as the country is characterized by a widespread digital skills gap (World Bank, 2021). Accordingly, the

Digital Economy Package tackles these two areas with two main sets of investments. With regards to digital entrepreneurship, the Partnership foresees the scaling up of local digital start-ups through grants to the Nigeria Innovation Programme, which supports entrepreneurial innovation in Nigerian technology and digital industries (European Commission, 2021). On the other hand, the Partnership envisages the development of digital skills amongst the Nigerian population through further grants to the Nigeria Jubilee Fellowship, which provides digital skills programs to local graduates (European Commission, 2021). This second grant has a particular focus on empowering youth and women with the skills necessary to operate in the Nigerian digital economy (European Commission, 2021). The interviewees' answers related to this domain cover two main areas. First, interviewees tended to point to the economic benefits that these investments may lead to and their effects on democratization. However, they advanced two different types of benefit. In particular, P2 and P3 argued that fostering digital skills and digital entrepreneurship can upscale the volume of a country's digital economy, therefore boosting GDP growth (P2, P3). According to P2, such GDP growth through digitalization ties back to the abovementioned idea of internal stabilization through economic advancement (P2, see pages no. 93-95). Conversely, P6 underlined a more subtle impact on the digital economy. Indeed, they identified digital entrepreneurship and digital skills as the enablers for the growth of a country's digital economy (P6). According to this

interviewee, other categories such as digital infrastructure become relevant only when a large enough section of the population has sufficient digital skills and can thus embark upon digital entrepreneurial projects (P6). In turn, this dynamic feeds back into the indirect influence on democratization processes through internal stabilization, jobs growth and middle-class expansion (P2, P6). A second area covered by some interviewees involves a non-economic perspective, with important effects on democratization. According to P6, providing citizens with access to digital entrepreneurship and digital skills in an already formally democratic country like Nigeria can help legitimize democratic governance by allowing individuals to pursue better socio-political participation (P6). In this sense, investments in this area can empower not only an expanding middle-class, but also civil society and non-governmental organizations to participate in their country's political life (P6). This is an important innovative aspect, as engaging with such organizations constitutes an area wherein the EU has at times struggled, especially in contexts such as the Middle East and North African countries during the Arab Spring Movements (Grand, 2019). P6 also stressed that EU Digital Partnerships aim at allowing this kind of organizations to better participate in their country's governance processes, and that digital skills are crucial in this sense (P6). Moreover, the investments' focus on often marginalized sectors of society – such as women and youth – are meant to provide the latter with opportunities to enjoy more inclusive socio-political participation (P6). Finally, some interviewees

advanced the idea that digital entrepreneurship and digital skills should only be considered in conjunction with the level of digital governance present in a given country (P3, P5). According to this view, investments in a digital economy must always include both, as if there is a directly proportional relation between the two domains (P3, P5, P6). In particular, P3 asserted that a country with solid digital governance but low digital skills rates cannot reap all the former's benefits, while a country with high digital skills rates will almost automatically look for digital governance models to capitalize on (P3). Accordingly, a country like Nigeria must necessarily strive towards high digital entrepreneurship and digital skills rates amongst its population, with important effects on its democratization (P3, P6). As a result, the primary data collected on digital entrepreneurship and digital skills indicate varying degrees of correlation with democratization processes. It appears that at a superficially economic level, this domain can indirectly affect democratization similarly to what observed above with digital infrastructure investments (see page no. 46). Conversely, a more nuanced observation suggests a strong link with digital governance, which in turn allows for more direct impacts on democratization processes.

3.2 Digitalization and Democratization: Between Aspiration and Reality

This Chapter has so far analyzed the insights found in the qualitative data collected through the semi-structured interviews. Several initial observations can thus be made regarding the three main cores of the Digital Partnership between the EU and the Federal Republic of Nigeria and their effects on Nigerian democratization. First, it appears that providing digital infrastructure as foreseen by the Digital Economy Package cannot be considered a main driver of democracy promotion – in other words, digital infrastructure does not causally lead to democratization (see page no. 46). Despite the lack of direct causality, it can be nonetheless observed a certain level of indirect influence, especially in an already formally democratic country like Nigeria. However, the level of such influence seems to depend on the presence of the other two categories, as digital infrastructure is often conceptualized as a mostly neutral tool. Second, the data collected shows that fostering digital governance as envisioned by the Digital Economy Package can be considered as a driver of democracy promotion. This process is highly shaped by important concepts such as demand-driven approach, local ownership retainment and engaging in policy dialogue between the partners (see page no. 51). Time is also an important factor, as digital governance does not immediately drive democratization. Additionally, digital governance appears to be influencing one sector – digital infrastructure – whilst

affecting and being affected by the other. Thirdly, digital skills and digital entrepreneurship appear to affect democratization on two levels, one being more direct than the other depending on the connection to the domain of digital governance. Fourthly, the three domains are strongly interconnected, to the extent that there cannot be one driving democratization processes by itself. Instead, it appears that their influence is highly dependent on their conjunct presence. Finally, a common thread pervading these domains relates to the pursuit of moving away from the Africa-EU donor-recipient relations model towards a more sustainable one. In order to further interpret the data collected, they must also be observed through the lenses of the theoretical framework developed before. The juxtaposition of these two elements provides a better understanding of the empirical information gathered, whilst expanding the reach of the theoretical frame of reference. As explained in Chapter 1, there are three main theories that can explain the processes of externally driven democratization (see pages no. 11-15). The structuralist theory of democratization – accompanied by Carothers’ external developmental aid approach (see page no. 19) – can be employed to interpret the observations regarding digital infrastructure. At its core, this theory postulates a causal relation between economic development and political advancement towards democratization (see page no. 13). However, the observations acquired through the data collected on digital infrastructure refute this theoretical proposition. Indeed, while the data confirm that providing digital infrastructure

leads to solid economic development – especially in a rising digital economy like Nigeria’s – there is no evident causal correlation between such development and political advancement, let alone democratization. Nevertheless, the observations can still be reconciled with further reassessments of the structuralist theory such as Miller’s, according to which economic development supports democratization when a society already undergoes a democratic transition, therefore legitimizing its desirability (see page no. 14). Still, it must be stressed that this is valid only for countries such as Nigeria, which is already a formally democratic state, and may not explain the causes of democratization trends in African countries that do not respect such condition. Overall, the influence of digital infrastructure as a driver of economic development causing democratization remains indirect at best. On the other hand, the strand of democratization theories known as institutionalist can be employed to understand the observations on digital governance. Whereas a relevant section of institutional theories focuses on the role played by democratic elections, the strand supported by authors such as Sorensen, Helms and Youngs (see page no. 15), which focus on the quality of institutions and on the stakeholders represented within them, appear more promising. The data collected indeed confirms that fostering digital governance has beneficial effects on the institutions – for instance, by promoting efficiency, transparency and accountability – and allows for better and more representation across the board, with important effects on democratization. However, an

important caveat to be maintained concerns the involvement of local stakeholders, both from the public and private sectors. Indeed, the data demonstrates that guaranteeing local ownership retainment and a demand-driven approach maximizes the investments' effectiveness. This aspect is not to be found in any scholarly institutional theory of democratization, yet it appears to be particularly relevant for its practical success. On the basis of the theoretical framework, the agency-based strand of democratization theories could be employed to interpret the category of digital entrepreneurship and digital skills (see page no. 15). According to these theories, the actions of key stakeholders such as political elites can steer democratization processes (see page no. 15). However, the data collected shows that this theory can only partially explain the ways whereby digital entrepreneurship and digital skills can influence democratization processes. It appears that the theoretical proposition and the data results can only be reconciled to the extent that these investments grant a more fulfilling socio-political participation to stakeholders such as individuals in civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations. Such reconciliation stops there, as digital entrepreneurship and digital skills do not aim to form the political elites of countries such as Nigeria. Furthermore, the data collected shows that the category of digital entrepreneurship and digital skills can be better interpreted via a mix of structuralist and institutionalist theories. Indeed, this category has indirect influence on democratization, as it fosters economic development and supports

investments such as digital infrastructure by providing professionals that can operate within a growing digital economy. However, as argued above, this kind of influence on democratization can only be valid in instances such as Nigeria. Conversely, this category relates to institutional theories insofar as it is connected to digital governance. As the data above shows, this link supports digital governance by providing citizens with the necessary skills to partake in participatory and more inclusive decisions-making processes. As a result, it can be asserted that this category has a mixed influence on democratization processes – one being more indirect and linked to structuralist theories, the other being more direct and connected to institutional theories. Another important aspect to be considered is that the theoretical framework falls short of explaining the interconnection amongst the categories of the Digital Economy Package. Indeed, the data shows that, for the purposes of democracy promotion, investments in one area reinforce and are reinforced by those in other areas. As a result, these investments cut across theories of democratization, which in should not be scrutinized separately in a ‘silo-like’ manner, but rather through a holistic approach. The latter allows to better understand the nature of these investments, the ways they feed into each other and their ultimate effect on democratization processes. Finally, it must be pointed out that the pursuit of shifting away from a donor-recipient relationship qualifies the theoretical differentiation between development aid and democracy aid (see page no. 19) in a somewhat different way. While it can still be argued the

digital investments contained in the Digital Economy Package can be categorized as aid – to the extent that they aim to support and boost a country’s economy and governance system – it can be observed a gradual but noticeable change in the way the EU frames them (P1). All these considerations beg the final question: can “human-centric” digitalization Partnerships between African countries and the EU be employed for democracy promotion? As portrayed by the data analysis and observations construed above, the answer can be positive only to a certain extent. Whereas the focus of such Partnerships is not to promote democracy *per se*, they can certainly influence long-term democratization processes in a given country. This influence operates at various levels, with direct or indirect impacts depending on the type of investments considered and the ways these investments engage with the local system. Accordingly, while digitalization may not directly foster democratization, long-term Africa-EU engagement in the digital realm can enable the establishment of shared norms and values – such as democracy – or strengthen an already present values-based partnership. This answer helps to advance one’s understanding of the EU’s “human-centric” model. For the purposes of our research, the latter can be thus conceptualized as a gradually renewed approach towards Africa-EU relations through which the EU promotes certain values – such as democracy – whilst stepping away from a donor-recipient dynamic and pursuing a partnership-based relationship with African counterparts. In turn, this model has significant impacts on long-term democratization processes, which

can be influenced through new frontiers of external relations policy such as digitalization. Nevertheless, this may only serve to explain one of the many facets related to the EU's "human-centric" model.

CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Final Considerations

The purpose of this research was to address “human-centric” Digital Partnerships between African countries and the EU to understand whether this instrument leverages EU intervention in African economies to promote specific values, norms and governance models, in particular democracy. By addressing the academic literature on EU democracy promotion in Africa and how digitalization affects such dynamic, Chapter 1 provided a theoretical framework to bridge the concepts of digitalization and democratization. Most significantly, the primary data obtained through the semi-structured interviews unveiled an important set of insights which could not be inferred from the literature review alone. This has enabled a deeper and more informed understanding of “human-centric” Africa-EU Digital Partnerships, their role and their implications for African democratization processes. Three main conclusions can be derived after a careful juxtaposition and examination of the theoretical framework and the data collected. First and foremost, despite the many ambiguities surrounding the “human-centric” model, this research has found that EU Digital Partnerships based on it can be employed as an instrument of democracy promotion in African countries. In particular, a long-term engagement between African countries and the EU may enable the establishment of shared norms and values – such as democracy – or

strengthen an already present values-based partnership. This finding qualifies the EU action within the field of digital diplomacy as critically unique amongst other geopolitical competitors. Additionally, it can be concluded that there are substantial differences within the Digital Partnership with regards to the various kinds of possible investments in the digital sector. The effectiveness of such investments for the purposes of democracy promotion varies, as some may be direct while others more indirect. Without prejudice to considerations on their effectiveness, the research has also shown the importance of the interconnection amongst the investments, as it maximizes the influence they may have on democratization. This also entails that the EU employs an instrument that is more holistic than its predecessors, touching upon all the dimensions of digitalization. Secondly, this research confirms that there is a meaningful relation between democratization and digitalization. In spite of the uncertainties related to the concept of digitalization, the theoretical framework developed through the literature review illustrated how this phenomenon can influence democratization. However, a certain degree of reliance on absolutes can be detected throughout the academic literature – digitalization as extremely beneficial or extremely negative for democratization (see pages no. 16-17). Thirdly, the research evidenced the increasing importance of policy dialogue and overall engagement between the EU and the given African counterpart. Such an engagement greatly enhances the possibility of accelerating democratization processes, and may take the form of

capacity building, technical assistance support, expertise sharing and governance reform investments. As indicated by the data collected, these aspects are particularly crucial to establish a sustainable long-term Digital Partnership. This is also an important aspect to point out if the EU is to finally discard the infamous donor-recipient dynamic that has taunted its relations with African countries for decades.

4.2 Research Limitations and Further Research

Notwithstanding the fact that it was possible to provide an answer to the overarching question, the results must ultimately be analyzed in light of certain limitations. A first limit concerns the sample size and the sample profiles. Due to the focus and scope of the research question, interviewees have been selected based on their current professional position in public or private sector related areas. While their expertise enabled the researcher to grasp a broader perspective, the topic of Digital Partnerships opens the door to non-European perspectives. Considering the relatively small sample analyzed, it is highly probable that further academic investigations that include a broader and more diverse sampling could identify new perspectives that could not be covered by this Thesis. Ideally, further research in this area would provide a comparison between the perspectives of African and European interviewees on digitalization and democratization by also considering the opinions of African stakeholders. A second limit concerns the nature of the phenomenon analyzed. Indeed, whilst it is possible to observe and discern valuable

insights from Africa-EU Digital Partnerships, it must also be pointed out that these projects are very recent and a complete assessment of their effects can only be construed over time. This limitation is linked to the fact that the EU has only recently developed a more mature digital diplomacy under the Global Gateway Initiative. Accordingly, further research ought to evaluate the effects of these projects on democratization processes over a longer time span. It might also be interesting to analyze potential Digital Partnerships between EU and Latin American countries – as there will soon be EU-CELAC Summit covering Global Gateway Initiative projects on digitalization – and provide a comparative analysis of CELAC-EU and Africa-EU Partnerships and their effects on democratization processes. A third limitation is related to the general difficulty to find experts available for an interview. Due to time constraints and general low response rate, the researcher could not include a number of interviewees proportionate to potentially relevant professional fields. This is demonstrated by the high number of European Commission professionals and the low number of civil society organizations or private sector stakeholders interviewed. Finally, as the concept of an EU’s “human-centric” approach is still evolving, further research could address related angles other than democratization – for instance, by considering its geopolitical importance in the African continent.

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ANNEX A: PARTICIPANTS' PROFILES AND INTERVIEW DATES

Interview No.	Professional Profile	Date
P1	ECDPM Digital Economy Researcher	24th April, 2023
P2	VP for African Region - TIM SPARKLE	28th April, 2023
P3	European Commission Programme Manager - DG INTPA	5th May, 2023
P4	Head of EIB Regional Representation in Africa	10th May, 2023
P5	Policy Officer for Digital Policy - DG INTPA	12th May, 2023
P6	Digital For Development (D4D) Hub Expert	23rd May, 2023

ANNEX B: INTERVIEWS TRANSCRIPTS

Interview no. 1 Transcript

Researcher: Thank you very much. How are you today?

P1: Good, good, excited for our chat. That is a very timely topic! The EU started two-three years ago to properly expand and export its model to Africa, so I think it is a very interesting topic.

Researcher: Great! Dr. Teevan suggested you as expert to interview for my research. The aim of the interviews is to gather primary qualitative data. Let's get into it. The first question would be the following: "In your opinion, what are the roots of the EU's "human-centric" approach to digital policy/diplomacy?"

P1: So, the roots. I mean, it is super tricky, as you know we are a think-tank focused on EU-Africa relations. We have been following digitalization in Africa since 2019, because the new European Commission started to become more global and wants to become a more global digital actor. We saw that there was a demand in terms of research on African digitalization processes, that's why we started to build our expertise. When it comes to human-centric approaches, as you know, it is a very distinct mark of the EU digital policies. It aims to differentiate itself from China and from the US, but it has not found a stable definition yet. We know that the EU uses the "human-centric" concept in all of their policies, especially in Global Gateway and Team Europe initiative. There is a Team Europe initiative on human-centric digitalization in Nigeria for instance, but when it comes to what human-centric exactly means, the EU has not decided yet. What we know is that it aims to ground policies on the needs of the people, the needs of businesses. Therefore, it purports to make digitalization and digital technologies work for people. This is what the term used generally concerns. Of course, it is a term not found in China, but other actors like India have started to employ it in their relations with Africa. It also concerns data protection. You look at Data protection and why it is developed. It's often around this question that human-centric topic came about. When you look at African digital policy strategies, we see that instead of using human-centric digitalization, they use people-centric digitalization, pointing more towards ownership of digitalization processes and that the data collected in an African country benefits the locals. It's really about who benefits from this data collected, as we create great value from this data. I think the term is very broad, and the EU is trying to build international partnerships by using this term as a

connector, or something that is appealing to countries that really want to grow their own domestic digital sector. Also, these countries are very centered in economic development, and that is why it might work within African-EU relations.

Researcher: Thank you. It is very interesting. Beyond the EU rhetoric over human-centric concept, what can the EU realistically achieve through this approach? What can it actually get from it, beyond the catchy and nice-sounding publications.

P1: Yes! As you said, there is a lot of rhetoric in the EU over its international partnerships with developing countries. I think the EU can gain a lot from this approach, mostly because it centers around human rights, which are basically the values the EU wants to promote. On the other hand, we see that you cannot only have a preach on human-centric digitalization if, in fact, you do not have any transformative impact on the local projects of developing countries. The example of Nigeria is really clear because we have a Team Europe initiative on human-centric digitalization, but when it comes to what does that mean in practical terms, it is not always very clear to African counterparts. Where does the EU want to center its efforts, on “hard” infrastructure areas like energy, finance, infrastructure, or “soft” infrastructure like digital skills and regulations? In a way, to distinguish itself from China and the US, it is a very smart term, but when it comes to making a real impact – which the EU definitely needs to build stronger partnerships in the world – it is not very clear yet. I was in a panel today, and there was a discussion between the Estonian representatives, and the European Commission, and while they were both discussing about their experience and successes in “human-centric” digitalization, they were using the term interchangeably. It felt like even they were not totally harmonized – even though they were using the same word. That is also what we often see when it comes to the use of this concept. It is a new idea, and even policy documents reflect this problem – the first one was published in 2016. However, in my opinion we will see the results only in the long term.

Researcher: Thank you for your input. What I get from what you are saying is that the EU is trying to develop a new concept. However, how is this concept perceived by the counterparts?

P1: Yeah, I guess that is a quite complex question, as we are only now starting to look how the EU’s new geopolitical approach is perceived in Africa. For instance, when we look at the EU digital governance approach, of course the Europeans think that through human-centric approaches they will have a greater impact. Africa is a continent full of different contexts, and different

African governments have different reactions. Nevertheless, a common thread amongst all African governments is the focus on economic development and security interests, and human rights come in second. African countries are trying to create a balance between economic development and human rights – though the EU does not take this effort into account. It can keep promoting a human-centric approach, but perhaps the GDPR model will not be fully exported to those countries because they do not feel economically ready to focus on other things. While human-centric sounds really good, they are more immediately impacted by digital infrastructure and digital entrepreneurship and skills – which allows people to participate in the economy by creating new jobs in the digital sector and increases economic growth, GDP and the like – and access to finance, and in the end that may trump basic digital rights of citizens in some African countries. However, the example of the GDPR is quite interesting, because there is demand for the process but not the end result. Tying back to my previous long-term point, I think that this kind of policy engagement based on local ownership retention has a really good chance of making the Digital Partnerships more sustainable in the long run.

Researcher: When it comes to Digital Partnerships, is the EU trying to drive democratization in those countries? If so, is it something that it is doing consciously or unconsciously? Is it an attached objective of the Digital Partnerships? Do you see any space for cooperation in that sense?

P1: I would say that yes, the EU is trying to promote democratization in African countries. I would even say it is not as explicit as the USA in this regard. Nigeria is a very good example in this sense. The relationship between the EU and Nigeria has shifted a lot, especially since Nigeria has become economically stronger and more independent – it does not fundamentally depend on EU help funding. I think that what the EU is doing in Nigeria through these Partnerships is to accelerate democratization – helping them with the tax collection system to make it more transparent, the e-governance systems and the like. All that contributes making the country less, corrupt, more democratic and more Western-like. In the end, we see that the EU is doing this also to become the main provider of global digital-related cooperation – that is why they set up the Global Gateway. In a way, they want to be the main international partner for those countries. The term human-centric again comes here as an umbrella concept describing what countries like Nigeria are going through at the moment. However, the EU is going alone in this initiative, and it often does not communicate well with African counterparts. Indeed, Global Gateway projects – including Digital Partnerships – were already decided upon often before consulting African governments. In terms of expertise, the EU has clearly more than African governments, so that also affects a lot how the EU

relates to those countries. So yes, they are trying to influence governments to democratize their countries, but it is not as smooth as it might appear. At the end of the day, it is clear that the EU is struggling to maintain its relevance in the African continent.

Researcher: Thank you. Alright, I have some more questions for you. The first one would be “In these Digital Partnerships, is the EU trying to drive democratization processes by empowering individuals with digital skills and digital entrepreneurship opportunities? Do you see a connection between the two?”

P1: Yes, I do see the connection, and we see that even from the phrasing the goal is to promote grass-roots democratic spaces in African countries. Many recurring ideas are also Open Data, Open Internet, and they all contribute to the same ambition. In a way, I would not see a direct causality between promoting innovation and democratization, as the EU is not directly exchanging something with local citizens. However, I would say that this approach fits well with the ‘reactive mode’ the EU has undertaken – given the current geopolitical landscape – and so the EU is trying to foster a counter-narrative amongst African people. In this sense, the support to Nigeria is particularly strategic – the EU cannot communicate to all African countries; therefore, it chooses the nations that allow it to make most noise internationally.

Researcher: Thank you very much. Last ‘cookie’ question: What policy recommendations would you give to the EU at this moment?

P1: Based on the research that we have undertaken in our think tank on how the EU rhetoric lands in African countries, I would say that the EU needs to focus on local impact. It should try to understand what the actual needs of African countries are, their interests. When we speak about human-centric digitalization, African governments often do not understand it the same way. African governments may not agree on its definition, yet the EU wants to export it – even though it is still a work in progress. Communication is key, yet local civil society organizations often do not know what the EU wants to do in their countries. This is why its new approach can help because it reduces the information gap amongst citizens and strives to promote accountability. This however means that the EU should refigure the timing of its communication, and I believe it would be better to always speak with the partner first during earlier stages, instead of locking yourself in a position and then forcing it onto others.

Researcher: Thank you very much! Questions over.

Interview no. 2 Transcript

Researcher: Thank you very much. How are you today?

P2: Very good thank you. How about you?

Researcher: Good thanks, let's get started. As a private sector expert, how do you see Nigeria?

P2: Nigeria are the countries that offer the most potential from an economic viewpoint. We often work with the European Union to provide digitalization in African countries. If I had ten euros, I would certainly bet on those two nations, as I am pretty sure to get a faster return on investment than other African countries. I see them as pragmatically convenient both from a digitalization and democratization viewpoint, as they have access to sea. Geography plays a big role in this field. As the African continent provides the biggest growth promises when it comes to digitalization, Nigeria and are the major players in this process.

Researcher: You mentioned that you work with the European Union. What are your most important initiatives and contracts with it?

P2: We have opened two operational fronts with the European Union. The first one concerns the support towards digitalization in third countries. It started with Northern African countries, but it is not anymore limited to that region. The Union is particularly involved on this front because digitalization fosters GDP growth – several studies demonstrate how the so-called “international capacity”, the capacity to have international connections, brings an additional benefit of 1% to a country's GDP. This also creates jobs and allows more people to participate in the digital economy. Accordingly, there is a strong correlation between economic development and digitalization. However, while the European Union is certainly interested in creating growth, new jobs and middle-class expansion in those countries to foster economic development, it also tries to foster such conditions in order to control migration flows. This is because migration has been particularly thorny for the Union, which is unable to control and positively integrate them in its own economy. Digitalization thus serves a double-sided objective. The second front concerns training and expertise exchange. The European Union works with our company to create local digital know-how and cooperation projects with African countries.

Researcher: Thank you. What can the European Union then practically gain from these efforts? Apart from the nice-sounding rhetoric.

P2: A first objective is to create economic added value in other countries in order to stabilize them. The European Union is very interested in creating better living conditions in, for instance, Nigeria to make sure that those regions are more stable – benefitting aspects such as security and migration. This is done for instance by digital infrastructure or by providing locals with the necessary digital skills – I believe that Digital Partnerships cover this as well – and their connection with GDP and internal stabilization as I said before. A second objective is to enable these countries to thrive in digital-related areas. One main aspect is telemedicine, which allowed to save many lives during COVID. Furthermore, given the direct causal link between digitalization and democratization – through economic development – the European Union attempts to influence those countries to maintain some sort of geopolitical balance. In this sense, the European Union wants to be at the forefront to show that it was the main contributor – and thus “ally” – to those countries.

Researcher: From a local perspective, how is the European Union’s message received? Is it welcomed? Is it only used to have more alternatives and not just the Americans and the Chinese?

P2: Europe is fairly strong in the African continent. However, it is certainly lacking when it comes to current investments – for instance, if compared to China. Even though we invest more in sheer numbers, our money does not have the same return on investment than the Chinese’s. One main issue is also that the European Union does not have a voice as strong as the single European states. This means that the single countries – France, Germany, Italy, etc – have a bigger voice than the 27 countries as a whole. This creates many internal issues that slow us down. All in all, this weakens our message as a human-centric actor in the African continent.

Researcher: And does this also affect how African countries sees the European Union?

P2: They might want the Chinese because they are faster. However, they trust the European Union because it still excels when it comes to expertise, know-how and security. The European Union – and the USA from some extent – has standardized procedures that make it more trust-worthy than the Chinese. In this sense, having the GDPR on our side is a great advantage, and this has some effect when we sit down with African stakeholders.

Researcher: Thus, can the European Union portray itself as a credible alternative to the Chinese one? Is this alternative locally welcomed?

P2: The European Union brings great added value to the African continent. We are closer and have a longer history with African countries. So yes, I would say that the European Union provides a credible alternative.

Researcher: Last 'cookie' question. If you had to give one recommendation to the European Union in this field. What would it be?

P2: I come from the private sector, so I of course have to say that it should work on making investments more agile and approachable. This is not just my bias, however. Since we already said that the European Union's digitalization offer brings GDP growth, jobs creation, and democratization and political stabilization, we only need to make our action faster and more agile to obtain those results at a proper pace. In this sense, I see nowadays the European Union as playing a positive and well-rounded partnership role in the African continent than before.

Interview no. 3 Transcript

Researcher: Thank you very much for your time today. How are you?

P3: Very good thank you. How about you?

Researcher: Good thanks, let's get started. In your opinion, what are the roots of the “human-centric” approach to EU Digital Policy and Diplomacy towards African countries?

P3: As you know, it is a concept born within the European borders and that is primarily employed by the EU institutions here at home. This means that each one of our digital policies revolve around the needs of the people – this is why it is called human-centric. So, this “human-centricness” is not just about increasing material well-being and fostering socioeconomic development in our borders, but it naturally spills over our international partnerships with third countries. In a way, it reflects what we do here at home. I would say that this is the basis of our international cooperation – we have a model here at home and we simply gravitate towards it when dealing with third countries. As you might know, we are very good at setting standards and regulations, especially in such a fast-paced digital environment which is often hard to catch up with, creating issues for the people themselves. So, the “human-centric” approach outside of Europe is to project our principles and values and ideals. However, we must also consider that what happens outside of Europe does not occur in a geopolitical vacuum, indeed there is a huge competition. This competition addresses both the relevance of our values – whether they are well-taken by third countries – and our relevance vis-à-vis other players in the African continent. I believe these are the roots of the “human-centric” approach.

Researcher: So, it is something that has grown inside the European Union and it spills over other policy areas – it is in our DNA.

P3: Yes.

Researcher: And when it comes to projecting our action externally, what can the European Union realistically obtain using this approach? Particularly referring to the instances of the African continent.

P3: As you may know, the state of development of African countries is very different from ours. When you look outwards, from an International Partnerships viewpoint, we primarily seek to help these countries develop economically. This is due to a number of reasons, some of them are geopolitical

and related to other players, but others aim to advance the European interests in the region. These interests are served through a handful of layers: digital infrastructure, digital governance and regulations, and digital skills. These are naturally interconnected. When it comes to digital infrastructure, we must realize that from a superficial perspective, it is a neutral tool. Other actors may decide to provide quick digital infrastructure. However, when you build a digital infrastructure, you at first do not know what it will be used for. Providing digital infrastructure is therefore only one aspect of EU action in this field and does not explain the full picture. This is why it must all go hand in hand with digital governance and regulations, which provide qualitative depth to what would otherwise be bare-bone infrastructures or digital skills courses. The latter is particularly important, because if you have skills and entrepreneurship, you will go look for governance in the digital domain and viceversa, because they need one another in order to be effective. This is also because countries like Nigeria need to have high digital skills rate and that in turns affects the state of local democracy etc. It is this entire bundle of aspects that allows the EU to have a competitive advantage in the region. So I would summarize by saying that the EU obtains international partnerships based on comprehensive transparency and clarity.

Researcher: So when it comes to providing this infrastructure, do we also foster economic development? Would you say this is the case?

P3: Yes, of course. There are many reasons for us to invest in digital. Economic development is just one of them. The idea is to help those digital economies open up and connect. This is why we also invest in regional fiber backbones and marine cables – first and middle level connectivity. This allows us to bring modern necessities to those countries that still do not have them, boosting their e-markets. Another important reason is related to the expansion of the available job market. If you foster economic development, you also want to have more people working to participate in the national economy, in this case in digital-related sectors. I would also mention digital entrepreneurship and skills, which definitely enlarge the scope of a given digital economy, leading to general economic development and GDP growth.

Researcher: Thank you. Another aspect that I am interested in is understanding whether this EU-driven digital economic development is associated with specific values – democratization, rule of law, human rights. Do you see them as going hand in hand when it comes to Digital Partnerships with African countries?

P3: That is a very good question, because the lines are very subtle. I would not say that Digital Partnerships expressly aim to foster democracy or the rule of law – it is not specifically written there. This is especially true for digital infrastructures – I do not see a direct or even semi-direct link with African democratization. However, there are a lot of links that help in that direction. While we cannot and should not force countries to adopt our policy and regulatory standards – we cannot forcibly feed them democracy – but we definitely incentivize them at each step of the way. This is why our Digital Economy Package with Nigeria includes digital infrastructure investments and digital governance and skills aspects. In other words, we offer them investments and link to those investments a number of regulatory and governance standards. It is important to say that digital governance is related to democratization, I would say even in a direct way. It is a contentious topic, because when dealing with Digital Diplomacy you cannot take the stance of “I will not provide you with anything until your government becomes democratic”, there has to be a really good balance between the two aspects. For instance, we still invest in countries that are not particularly democratic, because our Digital Economy Packages can be used as leverage to incentivize a particular position. This does not mean that we support completely autocratic governments, we will never do that, but you certainly understand that it is not just black and white. As for infrastructure, my best guess would be that if you already have a democratic country – on the surface at least – like Nigeria, then we can see an again indirect impact on democratization. This is because if the country is democratic and is doing well in the digital economy, then you give legitimacy to the whole system and the citizens are more willing to support it.

Researcher: Of course. I wanted to ask you why the EU chose countries such as Nigeria to broker Digital Economy Packages?

P3: There are multiple factors. One is certainly strategic. Given the increased geopolitical competition, the European Union picks those countries where it can make the most noise and biggest impact. We also need a somewhat enabling environment to conclude these partnerships, without forcing it through conditionality, which was rather worse than what we have now. Without that, we would not be able to make it so far. For instance, Nigeria has had an economic and demographic boom, a lot of start-ups are coming up and the innovation hubs are multiplying. Therefore, we are dealing with governments that are favoring digitalization and are open to adopting regulatory frameworks that allow us to operate more easily. These are all enablers for EU action in these specific countries. It does not mean that we only support them, but it certainly makes our life easier, since we are also not apolitical. Finally, the EU is also guided by its demand-driven approach, which I am sure you have heard

before. This last bit is very useful because it allows us to be more precise as to what we can offer to others and increases the chances of successfully completing EU projects by providing partners with ownership during the whole project.

Researcher: In this sense, since this kind of new Digital Diplomacy has been going on for some years, what lessons have we learned from it?

P3: These three-four years have been very important for the European Union because we needed to enter this field – before, we were clearly missing on the stage. We are still in the stage of setting up the right frameworks – building partnerships and networking to understand where we can bring added value. I believe we are laying really good grounds in this sense. One main lesson is that digitalization is primarily driven by private sector. Even if we work super hard with the private sector, it is often hard to find the right balance between returns on investment and the needs of the people. The biggest shift was moving away from only African governments to include also private companies.

Researcher: My last question would be how our message is received in African countries. Is it welcomed? Is it rejected? Is it just another alternative between the Americans and the Chinese?

P3: Our main selling point is quality, transparency and trust. However, we know it is not enough, as it takes time for us to fully deliver and we attach many other aspects to our offer. This also impacts our partners, especially if we do not involve them at earlier stages. We need to get better at that. If you are an African government, you might well be tempted to go for the quicker option, because you need development right now. We try to provide Digital Economy Packages to speed up our action – we give investments while offering regulatory and governance points altogether. In any given case, the quality and the transparency are definitely in our favor and it is what makes us different from the rest.

Interview no. 4 Transcript

Researcher: Thank you very much for your time today. How are you?

P4: I'm good, thanks. Let's give it a go.

Researcher: In your opinion, given your position at the EIB, what are the roots of the EU “human-centric” approach to the digital realm?

P4: I would start by saying that digitalization is a good way to lift people out of poverty, enhance governance by fighting corruption and providing transparency. If I put this next to the EU values, such as democracy, fundamental human rights and whatnot, I see digitalization as a tool to further and promote those values in African countries.

Researcher: How does the EIB deal with digital infrastructures?

P4: Digitalization is one of the priority core sectors that we pursue. It also happens to be a priority for the current Nigerian government, as well as the EU. Let me just say that the EIB is not the EU. We are trying to finance this sort of projects throughout Nigeria, such as the Last Mile Connectivity Initiative (basically, bringing connectivity to Nigerian rural zones outside the central urbanized area).

Researcher: You mentioned the Nigerian government. Does the EIB collaborate with Nigerian government representatives? How would you describe this collaboration?

P4: Yes, we do. We speak to them regularly – once or twice per week – but we also communicate at higher level to discuss and compare our priority areas. I think that our proposals to finance projects is well received, but there are two important caveats. First, the Nigerian government happens to be somewhat pro-Western compared to many other countries. Second, they are also very open-minded when it comes to business. This means that while they appreciate our message, they consider all options and cherry-pick what suits them best. Nevertheless, when it comes to political aspirations and guiding values, they clearly follow what the EU offers – democracy, rule of law and the like. You could say that their approach is particularly mercantilist – they grab what they can, as I believe they should – but at the same time they place their heart next to EU values. Another important point to note is that EIB financing comes with so many strings attached, because in order to guarantee the highest quality you have to follow strict and often long procedures and rules – for instance, if

a project negatively impacts a village, those people will be reimbursed in some way by the Europeans. This does not happen with the Chinese, and it makes it hard to work with us. However, it is definitely a better approach than what it used to be with conditionality and whatnot.

Researcher: What other strings attached does the EU bring along?

P4: Procurement is a big one. From their perspective, African governments logically want to retain much of what happens in their countries. This often entails that they only want local companies to complete the project, but this view clashes with EU methods. We are open to anybody. So far this has not caused major issues with the Nigerian government, but after seeing the example of South Africa, they are thinking about increasing the threshold of local companies working on EU-financed projects. This in the future may cause disruptions on the way the EU currently operates. I believe this is caused by differences regarding why these standards are important and by difficulties in thoroughly implementing them – they see them as a wall that is very hard to climb, and often they might choose to just go around it. This however does not mean that the EU wants to impose its values on other since the beginning, it's just part of who we are and how we operate.

Researcher: Is this something that non-EU operators struggle with as well?

P4: Other contractors do not seem to struggle with it at first. We are very open since the beginning, so we have issues upfront. However, other contractors – such as the Chinese – often prefer to have their companies do the work, completely sidelining the African ones. In my view, African countries retain very little ownership of the process with others – they just have the infrastructural result at the end, and that's it. The EU is hard to work with due to all the paperwork, but at least our work is very transparent and high-quality.

Researcher: In this relationship, do you see any added value? Are we achieving something that makes the EU more appealing to Africa?

P4: I think this is a very good question. I have faced this question before when seeing how we operate. There are many entities that are rooted in national authorities – Germans, Dutch, French, Italians, Spanish etc – and it always felt less efficient – too many heads pursuing the same projects. But I arrived at this conclusion: if we decide to not do it, pack our bags and go back to Europe, the void will be soon filled by someone else – not just China, but also the Saudis, the Turks etc. We need to keep engaging on the ground to maintain our voice and influence here, and this has ripple effects in other places – for instance, UN votes. We have observed a clear connection between engagement levels and

voting results in the UN forum. Moreover, if we stop engaging with them, we cannot show what EU values are like – going against our very mission that is spelled out from the Treaties to the smallest policy document. The benefits of good economic ties are invaluable. Finally, if we let everyone else abandon EU values like democracy, it is not going to look good for us in 50 years if we remain the only democratic area of the world. Another relevant aspect of engaging with Africa is that it is very close to Europe, which means that if we can foster economic conditions here, we can have less migratory crises at home.

Researcher: In what ways can European institutions streamline the inefficiency you have mentioned before?

P4: The main issue is the high number of national champions. We all have an army of people here. Ideally, you would need everyone behind one European flag, but that's a huge political issue that I do not have a quick answer to.

Researcher: Final question, is developing digital infrastructure causally linked to economic development, and if so in what ways?

P4: I would say yes, because enabling young people to educate themselves, connect and work together stimulates economic activity and allows people to participate in the digital economy through alternative ways. To me digitalization is a huge economic benefit, whether in the Nairobi urban area or the more rural ones. This would still need to be considered in conjunction with social media misuse and the like. This kind of infrastructure can influence democracy also in other ways, as I said it provides much-needed alternatives in terms of education and political participation. This is more indirect though, and I would not say it is a primary objective of the EU or the EIB.

Interview no. 5 Transcript

Researcher: Thank you very much for your time today. How are you?

P5: I'm good thanks, how are you?

Researcher: I'm fine thank you. In your opinion, what are the roots of the EU “human-centric” approach to digitalization and digital policy/diplomacy?

P5: That's a difficult question. To be totally honest, our Unit is only beginning to look at its practical content. We often use it, but we are having difficulties in explaining it to outsiders. We have given it for granted since the beginning – especially here at DG INTPA – believing that everyone agreed on its meaning. For us, the juice of human-centric approach comes from the UN Declaration of Human Rights. The issue, however, is that I have personally seen this term being challenged by EU Member States themselves. Conversely, these critics would prefer to label it “human-rights-centric” approach because they see it as more specific. This is because non-likeminded States might tweak the “human-centric” approach in a way that helps them – for instance, by having it generally refer to the people, leading to a people-centric approach (this is what the PRC does). But of course, such people-centric approach is very different from our approach, since they put the needs of the “people” (in their sense, the Communist party) against the needs of the “individual” (fundamental human rights accepted at UN and EU level).

Researcher: Is the EU version of human-centric approach linked to specific governance models?

P5: Yes, it is. If you talk with the EU, of course you will promote and interact with some values instead of others – in particular the human-centric approach and democracy. This is a huge term, but of course we define it through several layers. The first one would be free, open and secure Internet. This is specifically linked to another declaration that the EU made with the US and other countries. The second one is the inclusion of all stakeholders involved. This means that alongside the given government, the EU wants to operate with private sector, NGOs, CSOs, and the like. I have to admit that the governance dialogue with the CSOs is much more advanced than with the private sector. For the moment, the private sector only focuses on digital infrastructure – which makes sense, since digital infrastructure fosters GDP and economic growth. I think digital infrastructure is interesting, since it has indirect ways of influencing a society and its development. The third layer would be transparency and accountability, regardless of who you are operating with. This is relevant for states like Nigeria,

as their political situation might be very different, but you still need to provide a clear deal. For instance, an important issue with African countries is the debate around personal data protection and personal data retention. In this sense, we help countries identify a model that works for them – not necessarily our model, but a mix that works for their conditions – and help them throughout the implementation process. This last process is often time-consuming, because a country might have us help them for a very long time but then change their mind at the last minute due to sudden political change.

Researcher: What can the EU realistically achieve through this approach?

P5: It could be two things. On the one hand, you have countries with which we have been engaging but have obtained little political results. This is demonstrated by the voting results in the ITU (International Telecommunications Union), where 12 African countries followed the Chinese proposal – which went completely against our proposal on free, open and secure Internet. This forced the EU to rethink its approach towards those countries, leading to our current human-centric approach. In particular, we have found that a great number of those countries did not understand our free, open and secure Internet proposal. This means that the EU must engage with all countries, regardless of whether they are entirely democratic or authoritarian. We can still spread our message, even though of course we have countries that have more “fertile” ground than others. On the other hand, we can capitalize on the countries we already have good relations with, and this is where countries like Nigeria come along. The good thing about cooperating with these countries is that we were able to communicate that they do not need to align themselves with one bloc or the other – a nuance that it is often lost – but that they need to create their own version. In this sense, the EU is in the best position to provide those tools allowing these countries to mold their own model in light of EU values and norms, such as once again transparency and accountability. This allows us to follow a demand-driven approach, affording much ownership retainment to these countries. For instance, this has played a huge role in showing the added value of the EU in fields such as data sovereignty and data protection. The EU can then use this approach to interconnect the various categories it wants to promote. In the case of digital skills and digital governance, it is clear that you need to consider both and in conjunction with one another.

Researcher: How is the message of the EU received?

P5: I think it really depends on the level of engagement this country has with the EU. If the EU has been able to engage well with this country – showing it

our message without contradictions etc – then it is more likely that this country will understand and maybe even appreciate the message. In this sense, both offices in Brussels and EU Delegations must be aligned to obtain the best results. In this is not the case, then the EU is perceived as a third option between the US and China. This scenario does not allow us to provide the best version of our message – which again is providing African countries with the EU-values inspired tools to create their own reality. It is not full alignment and imposition onto others, but rather remaining true to our values as EU. If you operate with us, this sort of values is going to be relevant. While it may sound a bit vague, this idea is actually quite pragmatic. In fact, if you do not have a good digital governance, then your digital economy is not going to thrive. This is why our investments are often economy-driven – and digital governance is as well. Moreover, digital governance and its human-centric approach – which focuses on participatory models – has also pragmatic and direct effect on the level of democracy in an African country.

Interview no. 6 Transcript

Researcher: Thank you very much for your time today. How are you?

P6: I'm good thanks, how are you?

Researcher: I'm fine thank you. In your opinion, what are the roots of the EU “human-centric” approach to digitalization and digital policy/diplomacy?

P6: I think if we go back to 5-6 years, we start to see some academic research on digital gaps at the international level – to what extent are people able to participate in an increasingly digitalized and interconnected economy. At that moment, the European institutions started to realize that the governance of digitalization is often in the hands of few, private sector stakeholders – at the detriment of everyone else. I think in the more European academic research there was a larger focus on making sure that the public from the onset is informed and plays a role through participatory approaches. This is in my opinion the nucleus of the human-centric approach. It immediately triggered some EU Member States to act on it. In the end, it is about ensuring that having an increasingly digitalized society serves the needs of the public and not necessarily the needs of limited groups of stakeholders which arrived there first. I think a good representation of this is found in the 2022 Declaration for the Future of Internet – you can google it.

Researcher: What can the EU realistically gain from this approach beyond the official communication rhetoric?

P6: It took some time to transform this concept into concrete, tangible actions. But through the digital programs and partnerships we saw that it transferred into concrete actions by focusing mostly on multi-stakeholder participation, such as digital governance and the ways it influences democratization. This means that whenever you engage in discussions or mapping the needs of society in terms of digitalization you make sure to include every member, not just a few, economically or politically useful sections, and you make sure that you follow a demand-driven approach – which I would define as establishing the projects based on what the needs actually are. It is so interesting because this is such a natural way of thinking, and yet it has taken a long time to sink in. Anyway, this makes the projects – for instance, digital governance ones – not just a government-to-government discussion, but it allows for all perspectives to be taken into account in a sustainable, long-term way. It is not just marketing, because it enables the EU to see the whole picture, which sometimes might be rendered opaque by the local government for political reasons. Integrating this

approach in the activities the EU co-designs with its African partners is one of the best tools to show support whilst achieving its goals in the digital area. This does not mean full alignment or copy paste – they do not need to be exactly like us – rather that we co-create a space for our societies to thrive. It is the most responsible way to handle something like digitalization at international level. I believe that long-term, this creates a good partnership with African countries. However, we would need to really scale it up to obtain the best results.

Researcher: So are the values promoted by the EU being translated into its external relations with African countries?

P6: I would not say all of them all the time, it really depends on the topics and the number of Member States involved. But at least it provides the EU with some structure and criteria to decide on where we can move forward and where we can improve – and Europeans do not like to admit it, but we really needed something like that. It is useful because you need a set of values to differentiate yourself, otherwise you do not have any competitive edge. And the EU of course has specific values to offer to its African partners, though I would not say it currently amounts to an imposition of values.

Researcher: What role does the category of digital skills and digital entrepreneurship play for the EU values?

P6: I will start with the digital skills component. It is one thing to have huge digital infrastructures and boast your digital governance. However, if the people you are giving this to cannot operate them – do not have the skills to use them – then it is all a waste of time and money (unless you are the one winning the contracts). This is why the EU approach is the more refined one, because it guarantees a level of local ownership specifically through the focus on digital skills. Digital skills are not just for public sector or middle-class entrepreneurs, but for all – private sector at all levels, academia, civil society and non-governmental organizations. Digital skills for the EU are the cornerstone for the whole digitalization process, as it ensures sustainability to the whole project. You are not really helping your partner if you have them locked to something that they cannot operate and use for themselves. This means that your partner needs high digital skills rates, which in turn affect democracy in that given country. Without the digital skills focus, your partner will always need to come back to you to make it operational – this goes back to path-dependencies and the like. The human-centric approach is totally opposite to that. There are many digital skills projects and investments falling into this category, such as those we are doing with Nigeria. Digital entrepreneurship is similar, in the sense that it

provides people with new ideas or economic ambition to get their stake in the digital market and try it out. It complements digital skills, as it is specifically aimed at creators or innovators in the digital economy and enables the latter to grow. This also means that you are boosting the local economy and general GDP growth, a trend also supported by digital infrastructure investments – which also affects social development in other ways. On top of this, we must mention the general focus on the most vulnerable and marginalized groups – women, the youth, rural areas etc. This allows the EU to truly address the digital gap. If you give skills to people that have already been blessed with a more privileged position – access to better schools, more stable socio-economic conditions etc – and give digital skills and entrepreneurship just to them, you are actually widening the digital gap and the whole entrepreneurial narrative loses meaning. It needs a large sector of the population in order to be truly relevant and create internal stabilization and jobs growth.

Researcher: Could we say that this category leads to a heightened participation in the sociopolitical life?

P6: It is a long-term process, but in my opinion, we are going to see a causality. At the moment we really struggle with measuring the specific impact of our actions, but they are really long-term. You cannot see democracy blossom out of thin air, it takes time and consistency. However, these projects are really aimed at driving democracy promotion, in a way I would say that this is our guiding star as Europeans. It also depends on the country you examine. A formal democracy like Nigeria allows better results, because you can legitimize the already-present democracy with more political and social participation. However, in order to secure this causality at 120%, I would also point out that we need to include all our partners from the beginning, without conditionality as before – which definitely made things harder than they are now. There have been instances whereby the EU has created a project without even consulting the locals first, but we are definitely getting better at that from a digitalization perspective. One important aspect to point out is that this category does not really function alone. It is imperative that we integrate it with the other aspects – infrastructure and governance – otherwise it loses its true meaning. The real deal comes when we push all three of them at the same time with the same strength. I would even say that there is a proportional relation amongst them, though especially between digital governance and digital skills and entrepreneurship, and especially when it comes to non-governmental and civil society actors. EU Digital Partnerships can help and engage with them through digital skills and entrepreneurship.

Researcher: What suggestion could you give to the EU to increase the effectiveness of these projects?

P6: I would say that the only missing requirement would be to include partners from day 1. This does not mean that partners should dictate our policies, we still need to do our homework with the 27 Member States before jumping into the void. However, I believe the best results from all viewpoints can be achieved only if we include partners from the beginning. This is because it allows the EU to see and hear what is needed, not what the EU thinks is needed.

ANNEX C: CONSENT FORM SAMPLE

Consent Form to take part in research

- I.....voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves a semi-structured interview conducted by the researcher on the topics of the study.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original recordings will be retained in the researcher's computer until the submission date of the Master Thesis (June 11th, 2023).
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained in a specific Annex to the study.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signature of research participant

----- Signature of participant Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

----- Signature of researcher Date