

Interview – Max Koffi

Written by E-International Relations

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Max Koffi was born in Togo and grew up in Congo. While he completed his studies in Medicine and Psychology in Brazzaville (Congo) and Nice (France), he now is a prominent advocate for Africa's economic decolonization. Max is the founder and CEO of *Africa in Motion*, a non-profit organization that aims to increase the impact of the African Diaspora on the sustainable and economic development of the African continent. Additionally, he is the founder and chairman of the *Equal Trade Alliance* (ETA). The ETA aims at bringing European and African professionals, students, and civil society actors together to reflect upon the current (trade) relations between Europe and Africa, as well as the challenges that arise.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Value chain debates between Africa and the rest of the world are mostly frustrating. If we're strictly talking about research or debates, I might not be able to answer the question. The good news is that our target group – the youth – is reacting very positively to our work. When discussing how the system operates on their behalf, young people from the West display eagerness to participate. However, engaging in conversations with larger organizations often leads to significant resistance.

Regarding research, we have been actively advocating for an 'equal trade academic alliance'. The aim is to conduct comprehensive research encompassing both the upstream and downstream aspects of value chains. Unfortunately, there is limited support from funding sources for such endeavors. In terms of debates, one of the primary frustrations lies in the current discourse surrounding poverty in Africa, which inhibits accurate action and policy formation. On one hand, African leaders struggle to establish an authentic position in relation to poverty, regularly echoing Western perspectives. On the other hand, there is a severe lack of education regarding Africa's virtues, philosophies, and resources. The media predominantly portrays Africa through the lenses of poverty and conflict, perpetuating a limited understanding. Just last week, I encountered a 24-year-old student who was unaware that agriculture was possible on the African continent. Similarly, as a panelist at events, the initial excitement quickly gives way to reaffirming the hegemonic discourse on African poverty, disregarding the unjust hold that Western nations have on Africans through exploitative value chains and the imposition of Western values on a diverse and distinct continent. If this is the level we're at now, in my view, the exciting developments are yet to come. It is still a struggle to gain awareness, but it's something we have to do.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I left Africa with the idea that there was something wrong. I'm fortunate enough to have been brought up in a relatively wealthy household, but I was dedicated to studying the reasons for poverty in Africa from a young age. One of my first dreams that I told my friends was that I wanted to be the first President of the United States of Africa. So my mind has always been on changing, or challenging, the root causes of Africa's poverty. The only changes in understanding relate to the methods for doing so. Through my first organization (Africa in Motion) and after collaborating with Wageningen University, I realized that the core of poverty in Africa is rooted in the distribution of wealth along the value chains. It's a problem that happens in every single country on the continent, and problematizing it can bring the different countries together. So the mindset didn't necessarily change, just the

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approach towards the problem changed a couple of times.

How are price and profit distributions currently determined in value chains between Africa and so-called Western countries?

African countries have value chains with Europe, the United States, and Asia. The core of these trade relations haven't changed since the times of slavery. When colonization happened, the raw material in Africa wasn't even bought: it was stolen from the African people. The colonizer decided what to do with the raw material, which was simply to extract it for profit. This hasn't changed. African raw material prices remain determined externally, even after independence of the countries. The ownership of raw materials was given to governments rather than citizens. Trade partners therefore deal directly with governments, not farmers or miners. Because of the current geopolitical landscape, power dynamics often result in governments receiving insufficient compensation. They still accept it, because it provides some level of wealth. However, this doesn't sustain the miners and farmers in any way. Despite the end of colonization, African people still lack control over their raw materials, as they are effectively owned by outsiders.

African people are deprived of the wealth accumulated along the value chain due to the capitalist system. In a profit-driven approach, the goal is to maximize profit margins by setting low prices for raw materials. Since the power is located in the Western countries and its capitalist enterprises, the prices are indeed low. They have no intention of returning a share of the eventual profits to African countries. Existing certifications, including Fair Trade, fail to adequately address these issues. Hence, the concept of Equal Trade Certification was introduced to enforce equal wealth redistribution among the people involved in the value chain. The certified products would be traded according to a new economic model: instead of selling the raw materials for a minimum price, the producers of the raw materials would receive a share in the financial benefits of the (semi-)finished product. Instead of ending the transaction as soon as the raw material is sold, the African producers become stakeholders within the commodity's value chain. As a result, African states, workers, and farmers would thus obtain partial ownership in the value chain. They would be compensated accordingly in line with each process of value addition encapsulated in the larger value chain.

Your organization, the Equal Trade Alliance (ETA), argues the 'symptoms' of poverty are being framed as the 'root causes'. How is that the case? How does this affect international aid programs?

It's a system that just keeps on reaffirming itself, like I touched upon in the first question. Several stakeholders play a role in this, including politicians and development organizations. Both are fighting the 'root causes' of poverty in Africa. But if you start dissecting these so-called root causes, they turn out to be just the symptoms. Let's take child labor. That's very funny when you think about it. How long have we been talking about evaporating child labor? For centuries on end. But who are the children that are subjected to child labor? The children of the poor farmers, of the poor miners, the ones who either have to work on the land or move to the city to make money for the family. They are not the children of doctors or lawyers, they are children of poor farmers. By keeping trade relations like they are now, there is very little prospect for the farmer to manifest a wealthy future. Because of this, there is very little prospect for children to get out of child labor, and it creates a system of intergenerational poverty.

Also, human rights violations and corruption in Africa are not inherent to the continent. They can be attributed to various factors. One key factor is the mistreatment by Africa's trade partners, who prioritize maximizing their own profits without considering the values of African people. African philosophies like Ubuntu emphasize different perspectives on interpersonal and natural relationships. However, without an adequate influx of wealth, these are suppressed as African politicians succumb to corruption and forcefully oblige to Western standards. It is essential to address the actual root causes of poverty and ensure fair and equitable trade partnerships to change the narrative of Africa.

Still, the IMF or the World Bank don't focus on that. They focus on what the ETA determines the symptoms. And they frame it in such a way that it seems to be legitimate, all while enforcing their own rules. That's what happens now in Nigeria. One of the requirements for aid was to stop with subvention for oil. What you get is a social crisis, which currently extends to Benin, Togo, and all other countries around Nigeria. They are all dependent on Nigeria; the

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biggest country and oil producer in the region. The role of international aid programs and Western politics is to keep Africa weak and easily exploitable through so-called leaders in Africa. By formulating the symptoms – in this case the social crisis – as if it were the root causes, they continue to reinstate this. It's quite evident that the aid programs and Western politics make these decisions consciously, which in turn forms the unconscious position of Westerners and African citizens towards Africa. Keeping people in ignorance is a strategy.

How does this problem relate to the overall aim of the ETA?

The most important aim of the ETA is awareness creation, simply through explaining how things are currently going. Explain the way the system is working. Make people aware that the coffee you are drinking, the chocolate you are eating, or the oranges; it's all coming from Africa. By pointing out the role of international organizations and the role of African governments, we can at least make a start with uncovering the true story and spread it on a large scale.

Something that's very crucial to our aims is academic research. We can come with evidence for the severity of this unequal trade system, for example how many billions Douwe Egberts (a Dutch coffee brand) makes from extracting and processing African coffee. And, of course, how little the farmers make. It's not like this knowledge isn't out there, since all Western governments know exactly how many raw materials there are and where they are located. In fact, they call it 'strategic raw material', which reaffirms the appropriation of materials that are nowhere close to their countries. This knowledge isn't available to the public, however. So exposure through academic research is the main focus of the ETA right now.

Advocacy is another crucial part of our philosophy, so that consumers can hold the multinationals better accountable. It's evident that they aren't taking their responsibility as long as the critique is coming from the African farmers, so this is partly why our campaign is taking place in Western countries. We need to mobilize the people in Western countries in order to actually create a movement.

Is there a situation in which international economic organizations (WTO, World Bank, etc.) can contribute to the cause of the ETA, or South—North trade relations more generally?

The organizations are already in place, and it is undeniable how much influence they have. Because there is so much influence already, there is a role for them. However, it is very different from their current one. These organizations still set the political stage for African countries, which needs to change. Through pressure from people in African and Western countries for the redesign of international organizations like the WTO or IMF, the position of African leaders will also be more valued. We are not a political organization, we just want to enable politicians to do their job. To take their responsibilities. A lot of legislation is currently based on demands from international organizations, as a prerequisite for receiving aid.

This makes African countries dependent on international organizations that are in no way fighting for the interest of African countries. Take the African Union for example – the highest organization for talking about African interest. The African Union is highly dependent on funding from the European Union, and all the actors within the African Union get their salaries from Brussels. How can we talk about independence if that's the case? As long as these things are happening, the power is located in Westernized international organizations, not in Africa. What is the influence of the IMF on the Netherlands, or the USA? There is none; they are the ones who run them. The African governments are simply too weak and suppressed to change these relations, so with the ETA we rely on a critical mass of supporters to challenge this.

In which places do you think this critical mass can be the most effective?

People need to be organized in order to make a change. Something has to happen that surprises all the world, sort of like the Arab spring did, but then on a much larger scale, involving all 54 African countries simultaneously. The image of Africa now is that everybody is fleeing the continent, people are confused, the government is of no use, etc. This discourse is not something we can change through polite conversation, partly due to the reasons mentioned before.

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The forces behind this discourse are convinced that they deserve to be ruling the world. But nobody has to rule the world, everybody is equal. The idea is not to fight this system, the idea is to make a new system so that we can build from the ground up. This doesn't necessarily require people within the international organizations. Rather, it requires a diverse group of people over different continents that exercise pressure on the current hegemony whilst developing their own strategies. We can not just challenge them. People have been challenging capitalism for decades, even centuries. What has it led to? Climate change and more concentration of wealth, if anything. Since Africa is such a young continent – the youngest in fact —, there is a potential bright future if we are able to organize ourselves. With support from people in Western countries, the pressure can be applied from all sides, which in turn gives way to the emergence of African prosperity and autonomy.

If trade relations can be redesigned for the benefit of the African people, how can you ensure that this influx of wealth is divided properly and attributed to the actual goals of the African people?

In my opinion it's very simple. You need two things. The first is political influence, which is an essential feature for the eradication of poverty. Indeed, the eradication of poverty and the rise of political autonomy of the African continent are simultaneous. With that political influence, the redistribution of money for the benefit of the African people is possible. The proposal we have in place now is the Equal Trade Wealth Fund, which mainly functions as a transitional tool. It means that the raw material will belong to the citizens. Every trade that is related to this raw material will benefit the citizens of Africa. That is to say, if you are born on the continent of Africa, you have the right to benefit from any economic transition that is going on in Africa or between Africa and other countries.

As long as the political power is there, and it is located in the people of Africa themselves, the raw materials won't be sold for ridiculous prices. In turn, the governments won't struggle providing adequate infrastructure and other necessary projects. Because of that, there is no aid needed from outside and, therefore, there is no prominent opportunity for exercising external power over Africa. It starts, however, with moving that power from international actors to the African people themselves – something that can be established through the critical mass.

How do you and the ETA envisage minimizing or eradicating the negative role of extraction on the climate disaster; already disproportionately affecting Africa?

If we demand to stop extraction right here and now, the whole world will collapse. The Equal Trade Certification is a transitional step to get sufficient financial means, which allows Africa to move towards a bio-based industrialization. There is currently enough knowledge in Western countries for a clean industry, but this isn't used since the current system is working for them. With ETA, we don't believe in this form of linear industrialization. It has led to climate change and vast violations of human rights. When you listen to the African leaders of today, they are talking about industrialization in the same way as the West does. If the money is returned to Africa, we have more agency to make our own decisions, based on our own beliefs. We can invest in cleaner agriculture, and the byproducts can become the raw materials for bio-based industrialization.

If the political power is concentrated in African countries, we can set the rules ourselves and demand others to move towards a green world. We can say that Europe can only buy our lithium if it is used and processed in a very clean way. In the case of the Netherlands, you can demand the closure of Tata Steel (a notorious multinational producer of steel). Or think about the material that is used for bullets in the USA: it all comes from Africa. We can tell them: we don't want any relations with you as long as you have the current weapon policy. Or, the war in Ukraine. Russia is funding the war with gold from Sudan, which they can take because of the aforementioned problems.

All in all, the ETA and ETA Fund simply function as a transition to more political and economic independence in Africa. At this moment, there is basically no political power, and they play with us like toys. They drain us, kill us, and can do anything they want. Having something pan-African, which is central to the ETA, is needed to change this. Africa can save this world, something which nobody can imagine at this point.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

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The most important advice would be: try to believe that all human beings are equal. That would be my only advice. It's not easy, because everybody has their own background and differences. But if you exercise it and grow into this mindset, a lot of things will change inside you and around you. To me, this seems to be the only way out for humanity. To stop thinking in competition, stop thinking within borders and binaries. Stop believing that some are better than others and that one needs to be ruled by another. Try to imagine that we are all equal, and use this to save the world we are living in.