"Ladies and Gentlemen, dear participants to the Forum, dear guests,

I am very pleased to be able to speak to such a diverse and inspiring audience which perfectly captures the spirit of the new form of cooperation that we have been striving to build between our two continents. You have all come from various countries and backgrounds, but you share our fundamental aspiration to make the Africa-EU partnership work for the people of both continents, and make it a truly 'people-centred partnership'.

Today we open the second Africa-EU Civil Society Forum after its premier in Cairo in 2010. This fact alone should serve as a welcome reminder of just how far relations between Africa and Europe have developed in the course of the last fifty years. In the 1960s, when relations between Europe and the newly independent states of Africa took form, they were still very much the exclusive business of governments. Over the years, however, we have recognised that governments are not alone in representing their peoples.

Today Africa-EU relations are subject to a broad and participative dialogue between Africans and Europeans, which reflects our shared vision of putting the people at the heart of our cooperation. This is the result of a growing perception that, if cooperation is to provide effective and lasting improvements for people’s daily lives, it has to go beyond governments, and civil society involvement has become a central element in this process.
Our support for civil society is premised on the idea that it is able to represent the needs and interests of the people in a complementary way to governments: CSOs can correct and complement government action by addressing neglected issues and advocating for a political agenda more representative of people’s needs. CSOs can identify issues of concern for citizens and raise awareness when public action is needed. They provide a way for citizens to mobilise themselves and engage in public affairs. CSOs also give a voice to the most vulnerable and disenfranchised people in society. And civil society can empower exactly those marginalised groups and thereby lead to more effective, equitable and inclusive policies. Engaging with civil society and promoting CSOs as responsible and active agents for social change is therefore crucial if we wish to deliver on our promise to engage in a truly ‘people-centred partnership’.

This has become all the more important as the relationship between our two continents has not been isolated from wider political and economic trends at a global level. This is more visible today than at any other moment in the past 50 years. Africa and Europe are both at a crossroads: Europe has yet to fully recover from a deep economic crisis while Africa is one of the few regions of the world experiencing fast and sustained levels of economic growth of about 5% per year on average. But in many ways, the resulting challenges both sides face are identical: the quest for durable paths towards economic prosperity, the fight against youth unemployment, the adaption of our economies to global climate change, only to name a few. There are other challenges, previously seen as African internal problems – state fragility, violent conflicts, abysmal poverty, deficient democracies and weak respect for human rights – which we now know are in our interdependent world also European problems.

Lastly, recent events such as the Arab Spring or the Lampedusa tragedy are further reminders that the destinies of the African and European peoples are closely intertwined. These are numerous and complex challenges which we firmly believe cannot be tackled by one country alone but call for a collective and coordinated response by all stakeholders involved. Our joint endeavours should aim at creating the basis for a common area of peace and prosperity in partnership.

There are not only common interests which tie our continents closer together. There is also a strong and shared belief in fundamental values such as the respect for human rights and democracy, freedom, equality and the rule of law which acts as a solid groundwork for our cooperation. This has found expression in the signature of the JAES in Lisbon in 2007. With this document, Africa and Europe departed significantly from earlier forms of cooperation.

We are today working together as equals in an even-handed partnership, based on principles of mutual respect, joint ownership and shared responsibility. Common interests and a shared set of values is what made this partnership so flexible and dynamic, and allowed it to adapt to new emerging challenges and priorities.

We have suggested that the theme of the next Summit, in Brussels next April, should revolve around ‘Investing in peace, prosperity and people’. This will provide an opportunity to explore new alleys for cooperation in those areas where the concerns of our people are the greatest, and where our collective effort has the potential of providing strong added value. We need to find innovative ways of building and sustaining prosperity through investment and mutually
beneficial economic relations, rather than aid alone. The EU and the AU need to further deepen their cooperation with the final aim of establishing a vast area of prosperity and peace, reaching from the Baltic Sea to the Cape of Good Hope. We shall also define new areas of cooperation beyond our frontiers: Global issues such as environmental preservation, migration and human rights, where we share strong values and common interests, should be more forcefully addressed together by a joint African-European voice in international fora.

Over the last 6 years we have been able to set up an overarching framework for our relationship. However, now we need to find ways to better put our common vision into practice and make the system work for the people of Africa and Europe. The Africa-EU partnership needs to deliver on its promise for meaningful and durable change in people's daily lives. We have high hopes that the next summit in April will be the opportunity to kick-start a reflection on how to achieve better and more flexible implementation of our shared vision, while remaining attentive to the needs of our people.

We are in many respects still at the beginning of a process, which should breathe in new momentum in our partnership and make it a robust and reliable framework for cooperation in the years and decades to come. In this process, we believe, engaging with CSOs is key because you are able to cast a fresh look and guide us in adapting and improving our cooperation even further. Your input, your expertise and sense for local realities will be important in formulating more inclusive and people-centred responses and I invite you therefore to fully contribute to this joint reflection.

Civil society has been an active and reliable partner at all levels of Africa-EU relations. We have made strong efforts in ensuring a greatest possible consultation of voices from the middle of African and European societies. We believe that dialogue should be strengthened and become more systematic in order to make civil society a responsible and constructive actor within the Africa-EU partnership. The 2010 Cairo CSO Forum was a first milestone in this regard for it demonstrated the ability of civil society of both continents to work together constructively and present the Heads of States and Governments with clear recommendations. We wish that this spirit of fruitful dialogue will again prevail these coming three days. By organising the first accompanying event, civil society can set an example and produce momentum ahead of the 2014 summit.

I invite you to wholly take this opportunity and contribute to this process so we can make sure that your perspective will feed in into the debates in April 2014."

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