



Opening speech by Carlos Lopes, economist:

Open letter to journalists, editors and media outlets: the price of stereotyping

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for this invitation. It is an honour to open a meeting that focuses on something as crucial as the way we portray Africa. Because stereotypes are not mere mistakes or harmless clichés: they act as filters that condition perceptions, decisions and destinies. The narrative that is constructed about a continent of 1.4 billion people is not an academic exercise; it is an act that has economic, political, symbolic and even emotional consequences. Today, I would like to invite you to look at Africa from the perspective of evidence, but also from that of curiosity: a critical curiosity that dares to question inertia, to broaden the frame and to recognise both the challenges and the profound transformations that are underway.

When Africa enters the global media conversation, it usually appears within a repeated script. And what is most surprising is the longevity of that script. Decade after decade, the continent seems to be summoned for the same stories: crisis, conflict, fragility, epidemics, corruption, dependence. It is

as if, despite the profound and rapid changes on the continent, the dominant narrative has been left behind, trapped in images from previous eras. Africa thus appears as an extraordinary actor, with an immense capacity to play new roles, yet forced to always embody the same character. The story changes, but the assigned role does not.

Stereotypes work precisely like this: they cut reality down to size. They trim the edges, eliminate nuances, simplify complexities.



And what is cut away is inevitably lost. But in addition to loss, there is a real cost: what is repeated about Africa influences how investments are decided, how agreements are

negotiated, how public policies are designed, how risk is perceived, how international cooperation is directed. Stereotypes do not remain on the surface; they penetrate decision-making systems. That is why what is at stake is so important.

The economic cost of these stereotypes is one of the easiest to measure. The gap between perception and reality in Africa is well documented in the financial markets. Several African countries, even though they have levels of debt, inflation and fiscal stability comparable to those of other emerging regions, pay between 300 and 600 additional basis points when issuing debt. This difference does not arise from an objective analysis of macroeconomic fundamentals: it arises from entrenched perceptions. It arises from the narrative. The result is an annual cost overrun of between \$70 billion and \$120 billion. This figure is higher than all the official development assistance the continent receives in a year. It is money that is not invested in health, education, energy, infrastructure, technological innovation or climate adaptation. It is a narrative tax: a penalty for a distorted image.

But while that perception remains frozen, the reality in Africa is changing, and changing rapidly. Africa is not a continent standing still; it is a continent in transition, where urban, energy, demographic and digital models are being tested that are defining the global future. When one analyses the data carefully, a different picture emerges, one that is much more dynamic and complex than the dominant narrative suggests.

Today, six of the ten economies with the highest projected growth for 2025–2026 are in Africa. This fact does not often make the headlines, but it explains much of what is happening. Urbanisation is advancing at a rapid pace, but in a different way than in other regions: not through out-of-control megacities, but through polycentric networks of intermediate cities, which account for more than 75 per cent of the continent's urban growth. This pattern has profound implications for the regional economy, job creation, territorial distribution and social cohesion.

In the energy sector, Africa is undergoing a silent revolution. More than 30 million households now use domestic solar systems to access electricity. This decentralised electrification represents a major innovation at a time when the world is seeking models that combine efficiency, sustainability and adaptability. The absence of large inherited fossil fuel infrastructures, far from being an obstacle, has become an opportunity to experiment with clean, local and scalable solutions.

In the digital sphere, Africa is also ahead of the curve. In East Africa, more than 70 per cent of adults use mobile money. This figure exceeds not only that of Europe, but also that of almost all of Latin America. The region is a world leader in fintech adoption. Lagos, Nairobi, Kigali and Cape Town are home to entrepreneurial ecosystems with double-digit growth rates. The value of the digital sector could reach \$180 billion by 2030. And this dynamism is

not limited to capital cities: it extends to medium-sized cities, rural areas connected by mobile telephony, and networks of young innovators developing local solutions to global problems.

If we examine demographic trends, we find another key piece of the puzzle. One in four people will be African by 2050. The continent's workforce will be the largest in the world by 2070. This is not just a figure: it is a structural change of enormous magnitude. Africa will be the place where a decisive part of the global economic future will be played out. While other regions are ageing, the continent's young population is multiplying: a generation that is more educated, more urban and more connected than any previous one.

Despite these profound changes, the dominant narrative continues to use outdated lenses. Africa is interpreted as lagging behind when, in reality, in many dimensions it is ahead of the curve. It is a continent where the tensions of climate change are first felt, where clean energy models are being tested at an accelerated pace, where decentralised urbanisation is shaping new forms of economic organisation, and where digitalisation is redefining financial, health and educational services. It is an unwitting laboratory for the world to come, but this is not usually part of the dominant media narrative.

And here we come to the most difficult cost to measure: the symbolic cost. Stereotypes do not only affect the economy and politics; they affect the way Africans see themselves. The

dominant narrative, repeated for decades, suggests that success lies elsewhere, that the continent is doomed to lag behind, that the future is being built elsewhere. That narrative permeates aspirations. It produces a phenomenon I often describe as migration of the imagination. Millions of young Africans—the most educated and connected generation in the continent's history—grow up hearing a story that narrows their horizons. That reduction in expectations is an immense loss of human capital.

This symbolic effect is clearly evident in my work with Africa No Filter. I chair the committee that oversees its annual study on international media coverage of the continent. We analyse thousands of articles in more than thirty leading global media outlets.

The results are consistent year after year: more than 60 per cent of stories about Africa focus on crises. Only 12 per cent address innovation, culture, science or economic transformation. Barely 4 per cent examine medium- or long-term African public policies. And less than 1 per cent integrate African voices as primary analytical frameworks. These data do not describe the continent; they describe the framing, the angle, the selection. In other words, they describe the window. And when the window is narrow, the landscape appears smaller than it is.

This relates to another initiative that I mentor: the Correct the Map campaign. It stems from a simple but revealing fact: school maps visually reduce the size of Africa. The most widely used cartographic projection in the world

minimises the continent and, in doing so, unconsciously minimises its importance. When we show students from different regions that Africa is larger than China, India, the United States and Western Europe combined, the effect is immediate: surprise, disbelief, and then a correction of perspective. What Correct the Map does is more than correct maps: it corrects perceptions. And it demonstrates something important: stereotypes are not just what we think; they are how we see. Changing the way we see changes the mental scale of possibilities.

This is where you, journalists, come into play. Journalism has immense power because it decides the framing. It chooses not only what to report, but also where to report it from. And that choice plays a fundamental role in the global narrative about Africa. Journalism that only reports on crises turns the exceptional into the norm. Journalism that fails to provide context reduces complexity to clichés. Journalism that fails to examine its own reflexes ends up perpetuating outdated images that no longer correspond to the emerging continent.

But journalism can also open windows. It can broaden the conversation. It can include African voices as interpreters of their own reality. It can connect data, facts and nuances that do not usually appear together. It can show the whole picture. It can allow Africa to appear before the world with the plurality that characterises any region: with lights, shadows, contradictions and transformations.

It is not about replacing bad news with positive stories. It is about telling complete stories. It is about recognising that a continent of 54 countries, 2,000 languages and millions of simultaneous lives deserves a broader narrative than a set of inherited stereotypes. It is about telling Africa's story with the same degree of nuance, complexity and respect with which we tell the stories of Europe, Latin America or Asia.

Let me close with an image. Africa is a vast landscape: vibrant cities, rural areas undergoing transformation, rivers, ports, markets, deserts, universities, innovation centres, beaches, laboratories, logistics corridors, cultural spaces, agricultural fields, demographic megatrends, energy transition, digital economies and millions of lives in motion. But too often it is viewed through a narrow window. The fragment that enters through the window is real, but it is not everything. We do not need to change the fragment; we need to open the window.

Because when the window opens, more light comes in. When more light comes in, perception changes. When perception changes, decisions change. And when decisions change, the future changes.

Africa does not need indulgence. It needs to be seen. It needs narrative space. And you, who write, research, photograph and narrate, have the ability to expand that space. I thank you for being here, willing to question the inherited script and open the window of the story to a much broader, much more complex and much more truthful landscape.

Thank you very much.



Bio: **Carlos Lopes** is an economist from Guinea-Bissau. He was the African Union Representative for negotiations with the European Union (2018-2024) and, in recent months, the AU Representative for climate negotiations at COP30 in Belém (Brazil). He previously held senior positions at the United Nations, including Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa and Assistant Secretary-General. He has served on multiple global commissions on climate, development and governance, and currently chairs the Board of the African Climate Foundation.

Three of his books are available in Spanish in the Casa África essay collection: *Africa in Transformation* (2019), *Structural Change in Africa* (2023) and *The Trap of Self-Deception* (2025).