

Key Takeaways

The Africa Roundtable Follow Up

What Does It Take to Implement Africa-Europe Critical Minerals Partnerships?

At *The Africa Roundtable No. 9* in December 2025, a clear message emerged: Europe's critical minerals ambitions on the African continent will remain aspirational without decisive private sector engagement. Building on that discussion, *The Africa Roundtable Follow Up* on 26 March 2026 brought together representatives from the private sector, policy, and civil society to move from principles to practice. The discussion focused on three questions: *Where are the realistic entry points for German and European companies in Africa's critical minerals sector? What de-risking mechanisms and financing structures can make projects bankable? And how can investment in processing and enabling infrastructure create commercially viable value chains that benefit both continents?* The following paper offers some key takeaways from the discussion.

1. Without government support, meaningful private sector engagement will be difficult to achieve.

Equity instruments, concessional finance, price guarantees, the majority of European companies look to state-backed de-risking tools before entering this space. Germany's Raw Materials Fund and the inclusion of critical minerals on the National Security Council agenda show that awareness is growing. But the resources currently deployed do not match the scale of the challenge. Germany and Europe will have to be more decisive on mobilising funds.

2. Entry points exist but they call for different approaches and timelines.

There are a number of entry points: partnerships with African mining companies that have existing assets and proven reserves but lack the capital to revive them; off-take agreements with formalised small-scale miners; reprocessing of tailings; and essentially investment in geological survey, the foundation on which China built its position. Germany's established role as a machinery and equipment supplier could be expanded toward local assembly and local content. Generally, thinking beyond individual projects was also seen as important: regional value chains and cross-border processing clusters, such as the Lobito Corridor model, can create the scale to make operations commercially viable. The discussion pointed to the value of pursuing short-term and long-term approaches in parallel.

3. Europe is not present enough.

Europe's current absence as a stakeholder on the continent in the field of critical minerals is also reflected in its limited representation at major African mining conferences and ministerial forums. China's position was built over decades, through scholarships, university partnerships, people on the ground. African participants in particular emphasised that these are not soft instruments, they are strategic investments in the relationships that lead to business.

4. Greater coordination is needed, within the German government and across Europe.

Germany and Europe are too fragmented to be effective. German SMEs currently manage their procurement individually, with no joint purchasing and no clear picture of what defence and industrial demand will require. At the European level, frameworks exist; the Critical Raw Materials Act sets targets for diversification, and Global Gateway was designed to mobilise investment. But implementation has been slow, national efforts remain largely uncoordinated, and there is frustration that Global Gateway has not yet delivered at the expected scale. Several avenues were discussed: moving toward more coordinated purchasing for critical raw materials, greater coherence within the federal government on a critical minerals strategy, pooling national funds into a consolidated European raw materials fund that can operate at scale, and developing a clearer quantitative picture of European industrial demand as a basis for strategic planning.

5. The business case is difficult but the problem can be addressed.

European companies struggle to make investments in African critical minerals commercially viable. Chinese-controlled price indexing plays a significant role in this. But Chinese companies are operating profitably across the continent, which suggests that risk perception and the willingness to engage under imperfect conditions matter just as much. A European pricing mechanism, independent of Chinese indexing, would be an important step.

6. The relationship with China calls for a more honest assessment.

China is the dominant player in Africa's minerals sector. Competing with China on its own terms is not realistic. Treating China purely as a collaboration partner understates the competitive reality. A differentiated approach would serve Europe better, one that is clear about where interests conflict, pragmatic about where cooperation makes sense, and focused on developing a credible offer of its own.

7. Standards are a must but they should work in practice.

There is agreement that ESG standards and due diligence are important. They protect communities, they secure social licence to operate, and they reflect values Europe should stand by. But the current framework creates legal and administrative burdens that risk deterring investment rather than enabling it. The discussion pointed toward maintaining high standards as a goal while allowing for progressive implementation that reflects what is achievable on the ground.

8. Local value addition is non-negotiable and it makes commercial sense.

African governments increasingly require local processing before export. For European companies, which largely lack processing capacity themselves, this is an opportunity to build it on the continent. Africa's growing domestic market, 2.5 billion people by 2050, with a rising middle class, adds a demand logic that goes well beyond export. The long-term ambition should not stop at 30 or 40 percent of the value chain; Africa's trajectory calls for more.

9. Start with concrete projects. Think in decades.

The most urgent step is to identify a small number of projects, link them to European investment, and begin. African participants stressed that conditions may not be perfect at the outset, but that they can be improved jointly as partnerships develop. Mining operates on timelines of 7 to 15 years; strategic positioning calls for thinking 20 years ahead. A step-by-step approach, learning and adjusting along the way, is likely to achieve more than waiting for a framework that may arrive too late.