
Strategic Insights for further developing and strengthening Flemish relations with Africa

Executive summary

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Executive summary

The Flemish government commissioned a strategic analysis for a forward-looking Africa policy. The report explores how Flanders, in a dynamic world and against a background of geopolitical changes, can develop sustainable and mutually beneficial relations with Africa. Expanded cooperation with Africa offers great economic opportunities, such as a growing market and raw materials for the green economy, but enhanced relations and deepened partnerships are also desirable in other areas. There are shared interests and challenges, but also mutual contradictions in the relationship between Flanders and Africa. Through systematic analyses, literature review, and input from key informants, this report outlines a framework for a more strategic and integrated policy that better positions Flanders in the rapidly changing international context.

This study, conducted by HIVA-KU Leuven and ECDPM, starts from an analysis of existing collaborations, challenges, and opportunities, and identifies the actors involved in Flemish foreign policy. The study then brings together strategic insights to feed the political and social debate on a more coherent Flemish Africa strategy, overcoming fragmentation. Africa is approached as a strategic partner, not just as a recipient of development cooperation. This includes economic, social, diplomatic and cultural cooperation with an emphasis on shared interests and reciprocity.

This preparatory policy study does not imply any pre-emptive determination of the political choices and priorities of stakeholders in defining the next steps in Flemish international policy.

The importance of a forward-looking Africa policy

Africa is growing in geopolitical and economic importance, with a young population, fast-growing markets and increasing strategic autonomy. At the same time, the relationship between Flanders and Africa requires adaptation to the changing global context, with actors such as China, Russia and India challenging traditional European influence. These developments require a forward-looking Africa policy.

Africa as a strategic partner - Flanders has an open economy where exports support a third of jobs; strategically exploiting growth opportunities in Africa as a trade and investment partner is key to strengthening Flemish growth and prosperity. The African continent offers significant opportunities for Flanders. Rapid economic growth, demographic expansion, and the creation of the Pan-African Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) are creating a fast-growing market of more than 1.2 billion people. This development offers opportunities for Flemish companies in sectors such as food technology, renewable energy, and infrastructure. Moreover, Africa is a vital source of critical raw materials, such as cobalt and lithium, which are essential for the Flemish and European green economy.

Common interests and challenges - While the opportunities are promising, cooperation also brings challenges. Flanders and Africa share common interests in areas such as climate change, sustainable development, and migration cooperation. Yet there are often tensions, including historical inequalities, discussions about good governance and human rights, managing migration flows and funding for climate adaptation. Africa is increasingly seeking diversification in

international partnerships and making greater demands for equal cooperation. This offers Flanders an opportunity to develop partnerships based on mutual interests and shared responsibility for impact.

The need for a strategic approach - A forward-looking Africa policy must go beyond traditional development cooperation. The report argues for a policy integrating economic, social, and political dimensions. Flanders can align with the pragmatic approach of African states, which are focused on economic development, security, and strategic autonomy. By deploying Flemish strengths in areas such as green technology, circular economy, SME development and sustainable agriculture, Flanders can contribute to African development goals and international objectives while serving its own economic interests.

Sustainable relationships and reciprocity - A forward-looking policy must be based on sustainable relationships and reciprocity. This requires investment in long-term collaborations that harness the strengths and complementarities of both regions. Engaging African diasporas, local governments, knowledge institutions, and civil society is crucial to building sustainable connections and developing cooperation models that align with African priorities.

A brief overview of the Flemish relations with Africa

The Flemish government has maintained relations with Africa since the 1970s, initially focusing on cultural exchange, and later expanding to include trade and development cooperation. Successive state reforms gave Flanders more powers, such as treaty powers through the "in foro interno, in foro externo" principle, and developed a full-fledged foreign policy of its own. On the diplomatic front, Flanders is active with representation in South Africa and offices in Mozambique and Malawi. Recently, bilateral collaborations have been strengthened, such as with Morocco. Nevertheless, the intensity of political contacts with Africa has decreased since 2014.

Flanders exports more to Africa than it imports, resulting in an annual trade surplus that has fluctuated around 2.5 billion euros over the past decade, but more recently has shown a strong upward trend due to, among other things, drug exports (Covid 19) and disrupted oil trade due to the conflict in Ukraine. Flemish companies are active in Africa, but economic relations are limited in depth and breadth. FIT supports initiatives with a new strategy that focuses on selected countries and sectors, including climate and energy transition, food technology and logistics.

Development cooperation by the Flemish government concentrates on Mozambique, Malawi, and Morocco. Here the focus is gradually shifting from traditional aid to multi-stakeholder approaches, with more input from Flemish expertise. Flemish knowledge institutions, such as universities and other research institutes, have various sources of funding and engage in capacity building, research and education with academic partners, largely concentrated in African countries other than the three Flemish partner countries. Flemish civil society and local governments have intense relationships in terms of international solidarity and sustainable development with partners in various African countries, but mostly outside the three Flemish partner countries. Diaspora organisations are underused as bridge builders. Although attempts have been made to involve them in diplomatic and economic activities, a structured approach is lacking.

The report calls for more coherence and cooperation between Flemish actors and stresses that Africa should no longer be seen exclusively as a development partner. A fully-fledged Africa

strategy can better exploit the opportunities the continent offers as a strategic partner in trade, diplomacy, sustainable development, security, and cultural exchange.

Actors and interests

This section analyses the main Flemish actors and their interests in relations with Africa. The actors include government institutions, such as the Department of Chancellery and Foreign Affairs (DKBUZA), the private sector, knowledge institutions, civil society organisations, local governments, and diaspora organisations. Each of these actors has specific roles, interests, and challenges in shaping a future-oriented Flemish Africa policy.

State actors - DKBUZA plays a central role as a coordinating body and is responsible for diplomatic relations and policymaking towards Africa. The department can, based on identified opportunities and targeted political choices, develop an integrated Africa strategy to strengthen existing collaborations and identify new priorities. At the same time, improved internal and external coordination between the Flemish and federal levels, as well as with other international partners, is recommended. Political support and financial resources are essential preconditions for this to happen. An integrated strategy could harmonise the various Flemish initiatives and clarify which sectors and countries are prioritised.

Private sector - The Flemish private sector, supported by Flanders Investment and Trade (FIT), sees an emerging market with great potential in Africa. Flemish companies are showing interest in sectors such as energy, agriculture, climate adaptation and logistics. Yet the full potential of investments remain unmet by, fragmentation of initiatives, lack of strategic intelligence and organisational challenges such as inefficient bureaucracy and currency risks. FIT recently introduced a new strategy focusing on cooperation in specific sectors and countries. By offering more support and networking opportunities, Flanders can better position companies in the African market.

Knowledge institutions - Universities and research institutes work with African partners to build capacity and share knowledge in areas such as health, agriculture, energy, and sustainable development. Although cooperation is growing, many initiatives remain project-based and dependent on short-term funding. Structural support can take the form of long-term partnerships and give Flemish knowledge institutions a more prominent role in an Africa policy.

Civil society and local governments - Flemish civil society has a long history of cooperation with African partner organisations. The focus is on strengthening African civil society and contributing to various sustainability goals through capacity building, joint action, and policy advocacy, among others. There is a strong focus on promoting equal partnerships. Local governments in Flanders also play an important role in bottom-up international development initiatives and contribute to international solidarity. These actors favour a 'whole-of-society approach' in which CSOs, and local governments are actively involved in designing and implementing foreign policy.

Diaspora organisations - Diaspora organisations can form an important bridge between Flanders and Africa. Their expertise in cultural, economic and social domains can contribute to strengthening ties with Africa. Currently, these organisations are often underutilised in the policy process.

Recommendations

1. There is a strategic opportunity for a renewed policy framework for Flanders' cooperation with Africa, brought together in a comprehensive Flemish Africa Strategy.

The strategic analyses stresses the importance of an integrated policy framework that avoids fragmentation and strengthens strategic cooperation between Flemish actors. This Africa strategy should formulate a clear vision, focused on reciprocity and shared interests, and provide a practical guideline for prioritisation and coordination of Flemish actions in Africa.

2. An Africa strategy should ideally be supported by political and institutional commitments and a mutual dedication to results.

- **Political ambition** - Flanders can strengthen its political stance by recognising the significance of Africa. This requires a clear prioritisation of Africa in Flemish foreign policy.
- **Institutional ambition**- There is an opportunity to strengthen institutional capacity, with better coordination between Flemish departments and actors, and closer cooperation with federal institutions and international partners.
- **Striving for shared results** - The partnership between Africa and Flanders should strive for results benefitting both Flanders and Africa with both partners striving for concrete results that contribute to shared prosperity and sustainable development.

3. Flanders can deploy its resources more strategically, in which its own expertise, demarcation of priorities, and an appropriate set of instruments are of strategic importance.

- **From aid-driven North-South relations to full partnerships** - The strategic analysis supports the shift from traditional development cooperation to partnerships which combine different objectives (economic, social, environmental, ...), aligned with the needs and interests of both partners.
- **A clear choice of African growth sectors with Flemish expertise** - Flanders should focus on sectors in which it has strong expertise, and which match African needs, such as green energy, logistics and health technology.
- **Strategic consideration of focus countries** - Not all African countries should be approached in the same way. Flanders should adopt a tailored approach to African countries, combining countries where there are most opportunities for mutually beneficial collaborations and countries which require support from an international solidarity perspective.
- **Working on adapted instruments from a long-term perspective** - Developing flexible policy instruments that match Africa's realities is crucial. This may consist of new financing mechanisms, mobilizing the expertise and capacity of different actors (government, knowledge institutions, private sector, and civil society).

- **Increasing opportunities for Flemish small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in African growth sectors** - The report highlights the importance of supporting Flemish SMEs to access African markets, with FIT as a key facilitator.
- 4. Flanders can take a more proactive diplomatic role connecting Europe and Africa, and further strengthen the focus on complementarity and coherence.**
- **Intensified cooperation with other European regions or countries** - Flanders can exploit synergies by working more closely with European regions or countries that already have strong Africa strategies.
 - **Complementarity and coherence with other policy levels** - Better coordination between Flemish, federal, and European policy levels is necessary to avoid overlaps and strengthen complementarity.
 - **A clear delineation of priorities contributes to the profiling of the Flemish offering in Africa** - This is essential, as the lack of a clear profile is a recurring point of concern.
- 5. Flanders can prioritise inclusive forms of cooperation that also contribute to sustainable development.**
- **"Whole-of-government" approach as a starting point, "whole-of-society" where feasible and relevant** - Cooperation should be cross-departmental and seek broad involvement of private sector, civil society, and diaspora where possible.
 - **Responding to new regulatory framework on companies and human rights** - Flemish companies and their partners in the Global South need to be prepared for new European directives and regulations on human rights and sustainability.
 - **Leveraging multilateral institutions** - Multilateral institutions can be used as a catalyst to strengthen the Flemish presence in Africa, with a focus on international cooperation.

From recommendations to implementation in ten points.

- 1. Ensure strong political guidance** - Effective implementation of the Africa Strategy requires strong political commitment and clear guidance. This means that the Flemish government must position Africa as a priority in its foreign policy and support concrete actions. High-level contacts and trade missions can contribute to visibility and commitment in this regard.
- 2. Strengthen interdepartmental coordination within the Flemish public administration** - To combat fragmentation, better cooperation between departments is needed. DKBUZA can coordinate and ensure coherence in policy goals and an integrated approach so that the various actors work together effectively towards a shared vision.
- 3. Encourage an inclusive approach based on the added value and empowerment of relevant actors** - The report advocates an approach that involves relevant actors more and better engages their added value and contributions to align with the strategic goals of the policy. Where

possible and relevant, CSOs and local governments are involved in initiatives related to sustainable development and sustainable trade.

4. Organise regular and targeted policy dialogue with African diplomatic, EU and multilateral representations in Brussels - By engaging regularly with diplomatic representatives and multilateral organisations, Flanders can better engage with the needs and priorities of African countries. This dialogue promotes mutual understanding and cooperation at both bilateral and multilateral levels.

5. Strengthen Flemish representations in Africa - Depending on the final elaboration of the Africa strategy and political choices, an expansion and strengthening of Flemish representations in strategic African regions and countries should be considered. These posts can serve as bridgeheads for economic, cultural, and political cooperation.

6. Stimulate public debate and communication in Flanders - The report highlights the need for greater awareness in Flanders about the opportunities and cooperation possibilities with Africa. Public debates, educational campaigns and media coverage can contribute to broader support for deeper cooperation with Africa and a better understanding of the mutual benefits.

7. Invest in public diplomacy in Africa - Flanders should increase its visibility in Africa through targeted communication and diplomatic initiatives. Public diplomacy can help promote Flemish expertise and values and build a positive image as a reliable partner.

8. Complement a concise and accessible Africa strategy with concrete action plans - In addition to a strategic framework, Flanders should work with practical action plans that define priority countries, sectors, and objectives. These plans must be well-defined, executable, and focused on measurable results.

9. Organise monitoring and evaluation of strategy impacts - A systematic approach to monitoring and evaluation is essential to ensure the progress and effectiveness of the Africa Strategy and the proper use of resources. This ensures continuous adjustment and strengthens the impact of cooperation.

10. Align budgetary resources and human capital with the objectives of the future Africa strategy - Successful implementation of the strategy requires adequate funding and sufficient personnel to enable a sustainable impact..



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