

# Strategic Insights for Further Developing and Strengthening Relations between Flanders and Africa

A policy preparatory study

Huib Huyse, Koen Dekeyser, Lara Helsen, Pol Vijverman,  
Geert Laporte, Jean Bossuyt

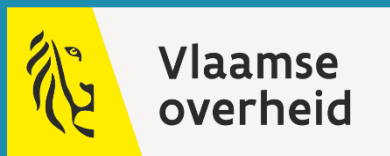
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**Research commissioned by the Flanders Chancellery and Foreign Office of the Flemish public administration**



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# List of abbreviations

AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
AMEA	Africa, the Middle East and Asia
AU	African Union
AWEX	Wallonia Export & Investment Agency
BBB	Better Administrative Policy
BMZ	Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative, China
Catalisti	Spearhead cluster for innovation in the chemical and plastics industries in Flanders
CBL – ACP	Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture Belgium - Luxembourg - Africa - Caribbean - Pacific
Credendo	Belgian credit insurance group
CRMA	Critical Raw Materials Act, European Union
CSDDD	Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive
CSRD	Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive
DGD	Directorate General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid, Belgium
DKBUZA	Flanders Chancellery and Foreign Office
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EAC	East African Community
EC	European Commission
ECDPM	European Centre for Development Policy Management
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
Enabel	Belgian Development Agency
EU	European Union
EUNIC	European Union National Institutes for Culture
EWI	Department of Economy, Science and Innovation
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations
Fiabel	Federation of Belgian Institutional Actors
FICA	Flanders International Cooperation Agency
FIT	Flanders Investment & Trade
FITA	Flanders International Technical Agency
FMDO	Federation of Global and Democratic Organisations
FPS	Federal Public Service
FUST	Flanders/UNESCO Science Trust Fund
GNP	Gross National Product
HIVA	Research Institute for Work and Society, KU Leuven
ICB	International Cultural Policy
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOB	Institute of Development Policy
IOM	International Organisation for Migration

ITM	Institute of Tropical Medicine Antwerp
JAES	Joint Africa-EU Strategy
KU Leuven	KU Leuven
LIC	Low-income country
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OVAM	Public Waste Agency of Flanders
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SARiV	Flemish Foreign Affairs Council
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SFERE	Sustainable Food Economies Research Group, KU Leuven
SIDA	Swedish International Development Agency
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UNECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
US	United States
USP	Unique selling point
VDAB	Public Employment Service of Flanders
VIKAP	Flanders International Climate Action Programme
VIL	Spearhead cluster for logistics, Flanders
VITO	Flemish Institute for Technological Research
VLAIO	Flanders Innovation & Entrepreneurship
VLIR-UOS	Flemish Interuniversity Council - University Development Cooperation
VLUHR	Flemish Higher Education Council
Voka	Flanders Chamber of Commerce and Industry
VUB	Vrije Universiteit Brussel
VVOB	Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance
VVSG	Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities
WBI	Wallonie-Bruxelles International
WEWIS	Work, Economy, Science, Innovation and Social Economy
WHO	World Health Organisation
WRR	The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy



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# **PART 1 MAIN REPORT: TOWARDS A FULLY- FLEDGED FLEMISH AFRICA POLICY**



# Synthesis

*The Flemish public administration commissioned a strategic analysis for a forward-looking Africa policy. The report explores how Flanders, in a dynamic world and against a backdrop of geopolitical changes, can develop sustainable and mutually beneficial relations with Africa. Although broader cooperation with Africa offers great economic opportunities, such as a growing market and raw materials for the green economy, stronger relations and deeper partnerships are also recommended 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 actors, 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 with an analysis of existing collaborations, challenges and opportunities and identifies the actors involved in Flemish foreign policy. Next, it brings together strategic insights to inform the political and societal debate on a more coherent Flemish Africa Strategy while overcoming fragmentation. Africa is approached as a strategic partner, not just as a recipient of development cooperation. This encompasses economic, social, diplomatic and cultural cooperation with an emphasis on shared interests and reciprocity. The study does not prejudice stakeholders' political choices and priorities in determining further steps in Flanders's international policy.*

## The importance of a forward-looking Africa policy

Africa is gaining 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 should adapt to the changing global context in which actors such as China, Russia and India are challenging Europe's traditional influence. These developments require a forward-looking Africa policy.

**Africa as a strategic partner** - Flanders has an open economy where exports support one-third of jobs; putting the growth opportunities in Africa as a trade and investment partner to strategic use is key to strengthening Flanders's growth and prosperity. The African continent holds significant opportunities for Flanders. Rapid economic growth, demographic expansion and the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) are creating a fast-growing market of more than 1.2 billion people. This development presents opportunities for Flemish companies in sectors such as food technology, renewable energy and infrastructure. Moreover, Africa is a major source of critical raw materials like cobalt and lithium, which are essential for the green economies of Flanders and Europe.

**Common interests and challenges** - Although 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. Nevertheless, tensions often arise because of historical inequalities, good governance and human rights debates, migration flow management and climate adaptation finance, among other things. Africa is increasingly looking to diversify international partnerships and demands equal cooperation. This offers Flanders the opportunity to develop partnerships based on mutual interests and shared responsibility for impact.

**The need for a strategic approach** - A forward-looking Africa policy should go beyond traditional development cooperation. This report argues in favour of a policy that integrates the economic, social and political dimensions. Flanders can respond to the pragmatic approach to African states that focus on economic development, security and strategic autonomy. By deploying its strengths in areas such as green technology, circular economy, SME development and sustainable agriculture, Flanders can contribute to Africa's development goals and international objectives while serving its own economic interests.

**Sustainable relationships and reciprocity** - A forward-looking policy should be based on sustainable relations and reciprocity. This requires investments in long-term collaborations that harness the strengths and complementarity of both regions. Engaging the African diaspora, local governments, knowledge institutions and civil society is crucial to building sustainable connections and developing forms of cooperation that align with Africa's priorities.

### Relations between Flanders and Africa: a historical perspective

The Flemish public administration has maintained relations with Africa since the 1970s, initially focusing on cultural exchange and later expanding to include trade and development cooperation. Following successive state reforms, Flanders was allocated more powers through the 'in foro interno, in foro externo' principle, including treaty-making powers, and subsequently developed its own fully-fledged foreign policy. On the diplomatic front, Flanders has delegations operating in South Africa and offices in Mozambique and Malawi. Bilateral collaborations have also been strengthened recently, for instance with Morocco. Still, political contacts with Africa have grown less intense since 2014.

Flanders exports more to Africa than it imports, resulting in an annual trade surplus fluctuating around €2.5 billion over the past decade, but showing a strong upward trend more recently due to medicine exports (COVID-19) and disrupted oil trade as a result of the conflict in Ukraine, among other things. Trade is heavily oriented towards raw material exports and processing. Although Flemish companies are active in Africa, economic relations lack depth and breadth. FIT supports initiatives with a new strategy focusing on several countries and sectors, including climate and energy transition, food technology and logistics.

The Flemish public administration concentrates its development cooperation on Mozambique, Malawi and Morocco. In this context, the focus is gradually shifting from traditional aid to multi-stakeholder approaches, with Flanders contributing more expertise. Flemish knowledge institutions, like universities and other research institutes, have various sources of financing and are committed to capacity building, research and education with academic partners, mostly in African countries other than Flanders's three partner countries. Flemish civil society and local governments have intense international solidarity and sustainable development relationships with partners in several African countries, mostly outside Flanders's three 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 utilise the continent's opportunities as a strategic partner in trade, diplomacy, sustainable development, security and cultural exchange.

## Actors and interests

This section analyses Flanders's main actors and their interests in the relationships with Africa. The actors include public entities, such as the Flanders Chancellery and Foreign Office (DKBUZA), the private sector, knowledge institutions, civil society organisations, local governments and diaspora organisations. Each actor has specific roles, interests and challenges in shaping a forward-looking Africa policy for Flanders.

**State actors** - DKBUZA plays a central role as a coordinating body and is responsible for diplomatic relations and policymaking towards Africa. The department can develop an integrated Africa Strategy based on the identified opportunities and targeted political choices. At the same time, better internal and external coordination between the Flemish and federal levels and other international partners is advised. Political strength and financial resources are essential preconditions in this regard. 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 & Trade (FIT), sees Africa as an emerging market with great potential. Flemish companies are showing interest in sectors such as energy, agriculture, climate adaptation and logistics. Yet the full potential of investment is not unlocked due to the fragmentation of initiatives, lack of strategic intelligence, and organisational challenges such as inefficient bureaucracy and exchange rate 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 healthcare, agriculture, energy and sustainable development. Although collaboration is growing, many initiatives remain project-based and dependent on short-term financing. Structural support can promote long-term partnerships and give Flemish knowledge institutions a more prominent role in the Africa policy.

**Civil society and local governments** - Civil society in Flanders has a long tradition of cooperation with African organisations. The focus is on strengthening African civil society and contributing to various sustainability goals through capacity building, joint action and policy influence, among other things. There is a strong focus on promoting equal partnerships. Local governments play an important role in bottom-up development initiatives and further international solidarity. These actors advocate a whole-of-society approach, with civil society organisations and local governments being structural components of foreign policy.

**Diaspora organisations** - Diaspora organisations act as an important bridge between Flanders and Africa. Their cultural, economic and societal expertise can help reinforce ties with Africa. These organisations are currently insufficiently involved in the policy process.

## Recommendations

1. **There is a strategic opportunity for a renewed policy framework for Flanders's cooperation with Africa, brought together in a fully-fledged Flemish Africa Strategy.**

This strategic analysis stresses the importance of an integrated policy framework that prevents fragmentation and strengthens strategic cooperation between Flemish actors. This Africa Strategy should formulate a clear vision, focused on reciprocity and shared interests, and provide practical guidance for prioritising and coordinating Flemish actions in Africa.

**2. An Africa Strategy should ideally be underpinned by political and institutional commitments and a mutual obligation to achieve results.**

- **Political ambition** - Flanders can increase its political stance by recognising Africa's importance. This requires a clear prioritisation of Africa in Flemish foreign policy.
- **Institutional ambition** - There is an opportunity to strengthen institutional capacity through better coordination between Flemish departments and actors and closer cooperation with federal institutions and international partners.
- **Striving for shared results** - The Africa Strategy should be based on mutual commitments, with both Flanders and its African partners pursuing concrete results that contribute to shared prosperity and sustainable development.

**3. Flanders can deploy resources more strategically. Its in-house expertise, priority demarcation and appropriate set of instruments are of strategic importance in this regard.**

- **From aid-driven North-South relations to fully-fledged partnerships** - The strategic analysis supports the shift from traditional development cooperation to partnerships that combine multiple goals (economic, social, environmental, etc.), 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 significant expertise and that 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 focus on those that offer the most opportunities for mutually beneficial collaborations.
- **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 that mobilise the expertise and capacity of different actors (government, knowledge institutions, business and civil society).
- **Increasing opportunities for Flemish SMEs in African growth sectors** - The report highlights the importance of supporting Flemish SMEs in gaining access to African markets, with FIT as a key facilitator.

**4. Flanders can adopt a more proactive diplomatic role within Europe and Africa and further strengthen the focus on complementarity and coherence.**

- **Intensified cooperation with other European regions or countries** - Flanders can utilise 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 raises the profile of Flanders's offering to 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.**
- **A whole-of-government approach as the starting point; whole-of-society where feasible and relevant** - Cooperation should be cross-departmental and seek the broad involvement of the private sector, civil society and the diaspora where possible.
  - **Responding to the new regulatory framework on business and human rights** - Flemish companies and their partners in the Global South should be prepared for new European directives and regulations on human rights and sustainability.
  - **Multilateral institutions as levers** - Multilateral institutions can be used as a catalyst to strengthen Flanders's presence in Africa, with a focus on international cooperation.

## From policy recommendations to actual implementation in ten steps

**1. Ensure strong political direction** - Effective implementation of the Africa Strategy requires strong political commitment and clear direction. This means that the Government of Flanders should position Africa as a priority in its foreign policy and support concrete actions. High-level contacts and trade missions can contribute to visibility and engagement in this regard.

**2. Strengthen interdepartmental consultation within the Flemish public administration** - Departments should work together better to combat fragmentation. This consultation, coordinated by DKBUZA, can ensure coherence in policy goals and an integrated approach so that the different actors work together effectively towards a shared vision.

**3. Encourage an inclusive approach based on added value and empowerment of relevant actors** - The strategic analysis advocates an approach that increasingly involves relevant actors and better uses their specific added value within strategic policy goals. Where feasible and relevant, civil society organisations and local governments are involved in Flemish initiatives related to sustainable development and trade.

**4. Organise regular and targeted policy dialogue with African diplomatic, EU and multilateral representations in Brussels** - By engaging regularly in dialogue with diplomatic representatives and multilateral organisations, Flanders can better respond to the needs and

priorities of African countries. This dialogue promotes mutual understanding and cooperation at both bilateral and multilateral levels.

**5. Strengthen the Delegations of Flanders in Africa** - Depending on the definitive Africa Strategy and political choices, expanding and strengthening the Delegations of Flanders in strategic African regions and countries should be considered. These delegations 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 of the opportunities and possibilities for cooperation with Africa. Public debates, educational campaigns and media coverage can broaden support for deeper cooperation with Africa and increase 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 Flanders's expertise and values and build a positive image as a reliable partner.

**8. Complement a concise and accessible Africa Strategy with concrete action plans** - Flanders should develop practical action plans that define priority countries, sectors and objectives in addition to a strategic framework. These plans should be clear, achievable and targeted at measurable results.

**9. Organise the monitoring and evaluation of strategy outcomes** - A systematic approach to monitoring and evaluation is essential to ensuring the progress and effectiveness of the Africa Strategy. This guarantees continuous adjustment and strengthens the impact of the cooperation.

**10. Align budgetary and human resources with the objectives of the future Africa Strategy** - Successful implementation of the strategy requires an adequate budget and sufficient personnel to enable sustainable impact.

# 1 Exploring options for a fully-fledged Flemish Africa policy

*This study explores the possibilities for a stronger integrated Flemish foreign policy towards the African continent in all its diversity. It examines the major opportunities and challenges having a direct impact on key societal issues in Europe and Flanders such as prosperity, sustainable development and migration. As a dynamic region seeking its place in a volatile and polarised world of international relations, there is a growing need to raise its profile economically, socially, politically and culturally vis-à-vis emerging Africa. The analysis in this report is based on a broad literature review and some 60 interviews, with references to experiences from other countries and regions, and on an analysis of developments in Flemish international policy (in various areas) due to successive state reforms.*

*An independent team of researchers at the Research Institute for Work and Society (HIVA-KU Leuven) and the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) compiled this report on the authority of the Flemish public administration out of a primordial concern to stimulate an open debate between the various key actors in the Flemish sector of 'international' relations, beyond traditional development cooperation. The aim is to examine together how Flanders can realistically put its many assets, and its knowledge and expertise, at the service of international cooperation focused on an African continent in full development. A continent that, despite many structural challenges, increasingly presents itself as a 'privileged partner' for mutually beneficial cooperation on common interests.*

## 1.1 A dynamic Africa in a rapidly changing world

**Flanders has a long-standing and multifaceted relationship with Africa**, with centuries of interaction and mutual influence in numerous areas. Trade with Africa, for example, is centuries old and has gone through some dark periods. However, it has found a new lease of life in recent decades with a growing group of Flemish companies looking to trade and invest equally. African labour migration has played an important role since the second half of the 20th century. Initially, this concerned Moroccan guest workers primarily employed in the Limburg mines in the 1960s<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile, a growing group of labour migrants from numerous African countries contributed to various economic sectors and activities in Flanders. In the 1990s, relations with Africa were marked by the genocide in Rwanda and other crises in Central Africa. Long-running conflicts and the lack of prospects for improved living standards in parts of Africa, in addition to human suffering and large migratory movements within Africa, continue to cause additional migration to Europe. The work of Flemish civil society organisations in the context of development cooperation has been an integral part of relations with Africa in recent decades. They are active in sectors like education, agriculture, democracy and rule of law building, and emergency relief. Other Flemish development actors, such as the Flemish public administration, cities and municipalities, and citizens' initiatives

<sup>1</sup> Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering. (2021). [Migratie als constante. Migratiepijlers in de Belgische geschiedenis.](#)



for international solidarity, help shape these aid efforts. Lastly, Flemish knowledge institutions have systematically built their relations with Africa in the areas of research, education and institutional cooperation.

**Africa's role in the world is changing fast.** Significant geopolitical and economic shifts also translate to Africa's position in the world and its relations with Europe. Tensions between the West and China are growing, while emerging players such as Türkiye, India, Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are claiming their positions on the world stage. Russia's invasion of Ukraine increases the pressure on these tensions<sup>2</sup>. The superpowers are increasingly turning their attention to Africa for economic, security and geopolitical reasons. This fragmenting world with greater multipolarity holds other opportunities and risks for different countries and regions<sup>3</sup>. For Africa, the changing world order offers opportunities to take a more united and assertive position. The continent therefore seems to make the deliberate choice to follow an independent course and avoids aligning itself strongly with any particular world power<sup>4</sup>. Africa instead seeks relationships and partnerships aimed at economic development and security. In doing so, its economic and political dependence on Europe is decreasing, while cooperation with other superpowers such as China and Russia is growing. This pragmatic approach allows Africa to enhance its strategic autonomy and utilise partnerships that align with its own development priorities. This versatility also enables Africa to benefit from a wider range of investments, technologies and expertise visible in China's many infrastructure projects, among other things.

## 1.2 Importance of a Flemish Africa Strategy

Today, strategic collaboration between Flanders and Africa is more crucial than ever. The African continent is characterised by rapid economic growth, demographic expansion and greater geopolitical importance. Africa offers huge opportunities for Flanders, which has an open economy in which a third of jobs depends on exports. Thanks to its young, fast-growing population and expanding middle class, Africa is becoming an important market and labour source. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) reinforces this by creating a single market of more than 1.2 billion people. Moreover, Africa plays a key role in the supply of critical raw materials, such as cobalt and lithium, which are essential for the green economies of Flanders and Europe.

Besides trade and investment, sustainable development cooperation holds great potential. Although Africa's huge population growth may create economic opportunities, it also requires employment, education and climate adaptation solutions. For its part, Flanders is facing challenges relating to energy transition, climate change, water management, pollution and mobility. While Flanders's expertise, for example in green energy, digitalisation, healthcare and sustainable agriculture, can contribute to solutions for sustainability challenges in Africa, this study shows that Africa also has important assets for Flanders.

However, approaching future cooperation solely from a win-win perspective would be historically insensitive and demonstrate limited prospective insight. Because Flanders is one of the world's most prosperous regions with a large ecological footprint, while still being part of a country with a problematic colonial past, it is vital to demonstrate solidarity through the various mechanisms of

<sup>2</sup> Tadesse Shiferaw, L. & Di Ciommo, M. (2023). [Trouble in paradise: The EU-Africa partnership in a geopolitical context](#).

<sup>3</sup> WRR. (2024). [Nederland in een fragmenterende wereldorde](#).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



international cooperation. This is even more necessary vis-à-vis those countries and population groups with little or no access to Africa's great economic growth.

However, the challenges in the relationship with Africa must not be underestimated. Tensions around migration management, market access and climate finance illustrate its complexity. Moreover, Africa is rightly increasingly claiming its own place in geopolitical relations and is seeking cooperation with several world powers, including China and Russia. This calls for a nuanced approach by Flanders that takes economic interests, human rights, democracy and sustainable development into account. An Africa Strategy also aligns closely with the 2024-2029 Flemish Coalition Agreement, which puts strategic autonomy, sustainability and economic growth centre stage and mentions the importance of developing a strategy for strongly emerging growth countries in Asia and Africa. The Coalition Agreement emphasises international trade and investment, in which Africa can play an important role as a growth market and source of critical raw materials. Flanders's expertise in green technology, sustainable agriculture and digitalisation, among other things, offers opportunities to contribute to sustainable development and growth in both Flanders and Africa.

### 1.3 The research assignment

This policy preparatory study, commissioned by the Flanders Chancellery and Foreign Office, involves a scientific analysis of Flemish foreign policy's basic choices and effectiveness vis-à-vis Africa. The aim is to formulate global recommendations and future scenarios to contribute to a transition towards a more integrated foreign policy. The scientific analysis explores the mutual interests that consider the African continent as a whole and allow for differentiated partnerships. The scientific insights from this study provide a basis for developing the strategy further, prompting additional analyses of opportunities and parties involved in specific countries and sectors.

The assignment was carried out by a consortium of the Research Institute for Work and Society (HIVA-KU Leuven) and the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM). Both institutes acknowledge their policy preparatory role and respect the primacy of politics and the role of stakeholders in determining the next steps in Flemish international policy, adapted to the challenges of the 21st century.

The study is based on a systematic analysis of sources on Flemish international policy towards Africa and its implementation in recent decades. The Africa policies of other European countries and regions were also screened. Interviews, focus groups and workshops with 61 key informants from Flanders, the EU and Africa generated additional insights and deepened the literature review.

The content of this report is the responsibility of the researchers and does not necessarily reflect the official position of the Flemish public administration. The Flanders Chancellery and Foreign Office cannot be held liable for the dissemination and use of the scientific insights contained in this publication.

## 2 Synthesis: Flanders and Africa: a situational picture

*This chapter synthesises Part 2 of the report (Flanders and Africa: past and present). It provides a concise overview of the economic, social, political and cultural relations between Flanders and Africa, focusing on the underlying actors and processes. Such a helicopter perspective is lacking to date. The analysis allows us to bring the geographical intensity of cooperation and the sectors, themes and actors involved into focus. The study discusses the powers of Flanders but also considers other themes relevant to relations with Africa from the perspective of the government, the business community or civil society. The chapter ends with a reflection on the implications of this analysis for the future Africa policy.*

### 2.1 The emergence of a Flemish foreign policy

Flemish foreign policy developed progressively from the 1970s onwards due to successive state reforms. Initially, this policy included mainly cultural powers, but it gradually expanded into other areas, including trade and development cooperation. The first state reform initiated this process by adding an external dimension to the cultural powers of the Government of Flanders, which allowed Flanders to maintain its own relations with foreign governments and international organisations. The third state reform in 1988 added a substantial part of foreign trade to Flanders's powers, resulting in the appointment of Economic Representatives of Flanders. A breakthrough followed with the fourth state reform of 1993, giving Flanders treaty-making powers through the 'in foro interno, in foro externo' principle. This allowed Flanders to conclude international agreements in areas in which it has competence, and laid the legal foundations for establishing international collaborations autonomously. The last two state reforms further expanded this by adding development cooperation to Flanders's powers, among other things.

The Flanders International Cooperation Agency (FICA) and the Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance (VVOB) played an important role in the early development of Flemish international policy. The establishment of FICA in 2006 strengthened the coordination of international cooperation, focusing on both poverty reduction and increased support for development cooperation in Flanders. In 2013, these tasks were integrated into the Flanders Department of Foreign Affairs, which was part of the Better Administrative Policy (BBB) reforms. The BBB reforms aimed to separate policy preparation and policy implementation and led to the creation of the Flanders Chancellery and Foreign Office (DKBUZA). The 2015 cutbacks resulted in the abolition of strategic advisory bodies such as the Flemish Foreign Affairs Council (SARIV), which played an important role in formulating policy and advising on international agreements, development cooperation and other aspects of foreign policy.

The lack of an overarching policy framework fragmented the approach to relations with Africa. The absence of a clear strategic vision for foreign policy allowed for an autonomous approach to be adopted by several institutions, but also caused the various initiatives to be hardly interconnected.

For instance, between 2014 and 2019, Flanders Investment & Trade (FIT) implemented its own Africa Strategy aimed at trade promotion to increase the footprint of Flemish companies in sub-Saharan Africa and strengthen trade relations through cooperation and expertise exchange. Other Flemish policy areas also developed and implemented international actions with Africa, for the greater part autonomously. More recently, Flanders has been working towards a whole-of-government approach within specific country programmes (Morocco).

## 2.2 Diplomatic representation and political contacts

In the late 1980s, Flanders started building a diplomatic network to maintain international political and diplomatic relations, including with Africa. This network, which includes strategically important posts such as South Africa (Pretoria), plays a crucial role in advocating Flanders's interests, gathering information and facilitating cooperation. The Delegation of Flanders in South Africa has acted as a hub for the entire Southern Africa Region, including countries like Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho and Eswatini, since 1999. Development cooperation offices were opened in Mozambique and Malawi in 2002 and 2007, respectively.

In addition to its own delegations, Flanders can avail itself of the wider Belgian network encompassing forty-six embassies and consulates in Africa. The presence of Wallonie-Bruxelles International (WBI) in regions such as North and West Africa provides additional channels to promote Flanders's interests. One example of putting political relations to good use is the cooperation with Morocco, which was strengthened in 2021 to address the root causes of migration and promote sustainable economic growth, among other things. The 2023 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Moroccan Ministry of Energy Transition and Sustainable Development illustrates a new multi-pronged approach by Flanders (see also Section 2.4).

In addition, during this period, Flanders's diplomatic network was strengthened by its engagement in multilateral organisations and international institutions such as the EU and the UN. Participation in these widely connected institutions allows for additional contacts to be established on the international stage.

Bilateral political contacts with Africa peaked between 1999 and 2014, followed by a decline in recent years. Apart from being placed lower on the agenda of political decision-makers, the reduced intensity of contacts with Africa is also due to the impact of COVID-19, the larger portfolios of the ministers in charge (which resulted in less time being devoted to bilateral contacts with Africa) and the elimination of policy preparatory input from the SARiV and centres of expertise.

## 2.3 Trade, investment and the private sector

Trade relations between Flanders and Africa have developed gradually in recent decades, resulting in a positive trade balance for Flanders. Although Africa represents only a small share of Flanders's total trade, exports to Africa have made a disproportionately large contribution to its total trade surplus. Between 2014 and 2020, the annual value of trade with Africa amounted to approximately

€23 billion, with a trade surplus of around €2.5 billion. Exports saw a notable uptick from €10 billion in 2020 to nearly €18 billion in 2022 due to refined oil exports to Nigeria<sup>5</sup>.

FIT is pivotal in supporting Flemish companies in expanding their operations in Africa by offering guidance during trade missions, organising networking events and advising on tenders for multilateral institutions such as the World Bank. As a follow-up to FIT's 2014-2019 Sub-Saharan Africa Strategy, a new strategy was introduced in 2024, in which Africa is part of a broader policy framework concentrated on Asia, the Middle East and Africa. This strategy uses different levels of support, with the maximum support being rolled out in ten African countries, with the focus sectors being the climate and energy transition, food and food technology, and logistics. Despite these efforts, the involvement of Flanders's private sector in Africa remains rather limited. Flemish companies, such as DEME, UMICORE and many others, are active in Africa. However, apart from that select group of companies, Africa enjoys substantially less interest than other regions and growth countries. The main reasons are a lack of knowledge about the continent, the relatively limited current economic interests at stake and problems regarding foreign exchange and good governance.

The impact of existing initiatives seeking to strengthen trade and investment is limited by the lack of a clear policy framework that promotes cooperation between different actors. Although initiatives such as Voka's MENA Business Club and networking events held by the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture Belgium - Luxembourg - Africa - Caribbean - Pacific (CBL-ACP) are trying to remedy this situation, an overarching framework remains necessary to create more coherence.

Flanders's exports consist mainly of higher value-added products, such as refined oil and pharmaceuticals, whereas Africa primarily exports raw materials to Flanders, such as crude oil and minerals. Moreover, exports from Flanders are more diversified, highlighting the asymmetry in trade relations and the economic vulnerability of African markets to price fluctuations. Flemish investments in Africa remain limited, although some companies are achieving success with projects in sectors such as energy and infrastructure.

## 2.4 Flemish development cooperation

Flemish development cooperation is an important part of relations with Africa, focusing on a limited number of partner countries, specifically South Africa, Mozambique, Malawi and recently Morocco. The total budget for Official Development Assistance (ODA) has long approached €50 million a year, but has risen in recent years due to increased spending on the reception of refugees in Flanders. At the end of 2024, an annual cutback of €2 million in Flemish development cooperation funds was announced, effective from 2025. DKBZA coordinates half of the Flemish ODA; the rest comes from departments such as Education and Training, and Work, Economy, Science, Innovation and Social Economy (WEWIS).

South Africa was one of the first countries that Flanders cooperated with, initially through initiatives aimed at democratisation and culture. After that, the focus shifted to climate change and the green economy. Cooperation in Mozambique began in 2002 with a focus on HIV/AIDS prevention and evolved into projects concentrated on healthcare and reproductive health. Cooperation with Malawi

<sup>5</sup> This oil trade may decrease in the future due to a possible Belgian export ban on polluting oil or the planned restart of refining capacity in Nigeria.

started in 2007 and focuses on agriculture and women and youth empowerment to fight poverty and stimulate economic growth. The latest strategy papers introduce new elements, such as the inclusion of secondary cities and climate-smart agriculture. Cooperation with Mozambique and Malawi is generally strongly embedded in traditional development cooperation (focusing on aid) and less in mutual self-interest or the realisation of added value from the specificity of Flanders as a region.

By contrast, cooperation with the middle-income country Morocco, set out in the 2024 strategy paper, illustrates a new direction in Flemish development cooperation. Choosing a middle-income country makes combining development goals with economic cooperation and knowledge exchange easier through a partnership-oriented approach. The aim is to boost green jobs and find innovative solutions to shared challenges like water scarcity and circular economy. This partnership marks a shift from the traditional donor-recipient relationship to a model emphasising mutual benefits and long-term cooperation. Flanders hopes this approach will not only support sustainable development in Morocco but also strengthen economic and societal ties and contribute to alternative solutions to migration to Europe. Projects in Morocco include, for example, collaborations on renewable energy and circular economy, using Flemish expertise to develop innovative solutions that also create economic opportunities in Flanders itself.

The main implementing partners of Flemish development cooperation are knowledge institutions and multilateral organisations. Historically, the share of multilateral institutions in ODA financing was high. However, this has declined in recent years due to the choice of more direct collaborations with Flemish and local partners, aligning with the focus on creating added value through Flemish expertise and specific themes such as agriculture, healthcare and climate change. Academic institutions play an increasing role in this, including by using research results to steer policy.

One quarter of Flemish ODA funds are allocated to civil society organisations and are focused on Central and East Africa. However, Flemish ODA represents only a small part of the financing of Flemish and Belgian civil society organisations. This financing is a mixture of federal ODA, own funds and other sources. Civil society organisations mainly focus on Central Africa (with the DRC at the centre stage), followed by East, West and Southern Africa. There is growing convergence with the priority countries of the federal aid channel, despite NGOs and trade unions not being limited to bilaterally prioritised countries. The Flemish public administration also supports Fourth Pillar initiatives through a support centre that offers advice, networking and promotion. However, these civic initiatives depend largely on their own resources for their actions. By early 2024, 968 initiatives were registered, with a geographical spread largely in line with the civil society organisations. Flemish cities and municipalities work on international solidarity and sustainable development through town twinning, especially in East and Southern Africa. These projects are financed mainly with federal funds and coordinated by the VVSG.

## 2.5 Other areas of cooperation

Besides development cooperation and trade, Flanders plays an active role in education, science and culture in Africa. The Department of Education and Training supports, among other things, the teaching remit of the Institute of Tropical Medicine Antwerp (ITM), which trains many African students. However, the ITM mainly uses federal and other international financing sources to provide institutional support to African health institutions. The VVOB has structural links with the

Department of Education and DKBZA, but it develops its education programmes mainly using federal and other international financing. In doing so, it focuses on capacity building and cooperation with local educational institutions in several African countries.

Cooperation by the Department of Education and Training also includes financing for mobility grants and encouraging international student exchanges with Flemish universities. This helps increase the number of African students studying in Flanders and fosters knowledge sharing and intercultural exchange. The primary financing source of university development cooperation is the federal government through VLIR-UOS, which supports development-oriented projects and establishes collaborations with African universities to promote capacity building.

The Department of Work, Economy, Science, Innovation and Social Economy (WEWIS) contributes to Flemish projects in Africa, focusing on sustainable development, circular economy and technological innovation. Initiatives such as the DKBZA-funded Flanders/UNESCO Trust Fund (FUT) and the WEWIS-funded Flanders/UNESCO Science Trust Fund (FUST) support projects on climate adaptation and sustainable technologies, such as the Ocean InfoHub, which facilitates access to ocean data and supports the protection of marine resources. WEWIS's involvement in programmes like Horizon Europe also strengthens Flanders's presence in innovative and circular projects with African partners.

Flanders's international cultural policy mainly concentrates on South Africa and Morocco, promoting cultural exchanges and cooperation projects in the areas of art and media. Despite the presence of strategic plans for cultural cooperation, implementation challenges are often caused by limited financial resources and the need to better tailor cooperation structures to the specific cultural needs of the countries involved.

## 2.6 Summary and implications for the future Africa policy

**Flanders's interaction with Africa is multifaceted and growing in importance, but actors are present on the ground in a diffused manner due to the lack of an overarching strategy.**

This synthesis outlines the multifaceted nature of relations between Flanders and Africa, further explored in Part 2 of this report, with a wide range of actors collaborating with Africa in a multitude of working forms and configurations. These interactions do not occur on the periphery of what these Flemish actors do, but belong to the core of their operations. Most respondents we spoke to acknowledge Africa's growing importance and plan to continue or expand their actions over time. However, with the exception of development cooperation, the African continent is mostly approached by individual organisations and initiatives rather than by a collective of actors and/or a broader overarching strategy. The advantage of this organic approach is that relationships can be built in an easily accessible manner, while responding flexibly to arising opportunities. Mutual alignment and knowledge sharing for relations with Africa, if this occurs at all, are found to show signs of silo working in contrast to, for example, Flanders's approach to spearhead clusters (mainly active within Europe). The limitations of that approach are related to coherence, synergy, resources and focus. As a result, opportunities are missed to collectively address expertise building, facilitate access to new networks and achieve synergies with other actors. There is an increased risk of

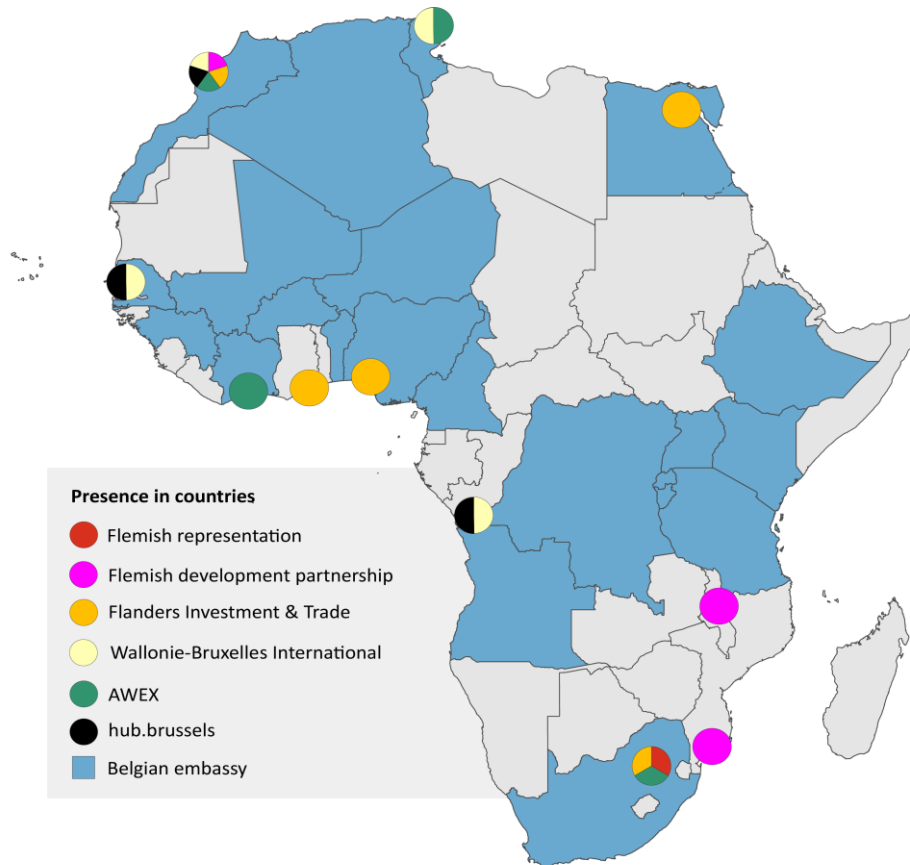
fragmentation of efforts and resources, as well as contradictions between the actions of different actors.

**The geographical concentration of actions in Africa varies greatly between different Flemish actors.**

Superimposing the geographical spread of the activities of various Flemish actors in Africa paints a mixed picture. First, there are few countries in which all Flemish actors are operating. There are many activities by Flemish companies, universities and the government, and to a lesser extent by civil society, in South Africa. The DRC is the only country where all kinds of Flemish actors (businesses, knowledge institutions and civil society) are highly active. However, this is not one of DKBZA's partner countries for development cooperation and does not have a FIT office. East Africa is an interesting region when considering potential cooperation between Flemish companies and universities as both operate in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia. Flemish companies and NGOs are running a relatively large number of activities in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana in West Africa, but Flemish academics less so. Egypt is an important partner for Flemish researchers for scientific publications and has established quite intensive cooperation with Flemish companies. Flemish civil society organisations, on the other hand, have only limited relations with the country. Nigeria is a special case. Although it contributes strongly to the trade balance with Flanders, this is due to the refined oil trade rather than investments by Flemish companies.

This first rough overview gives a schematic picture of the presence of Flemish actors in Africa. Naturally, the extent to which synergies are possible and desirable at the Flemish level depends on a whole range of other factors, including the thematic convergences in each country and the ambitions and plans of all actors. A more detailed analysis would have to be carried out to demonstrate this.

FIGURE 2.1 Political presence of Flanders, Wallonia and Belgium in Africa



**The policy preparatory capacity, resources and policy focus on Africa have been under pressure in the past government terms.**

Part of the policy preparatory capacity has been phased out over the past decade, including due to the discontinuation of the SARiV strategic advisory council and the policy research centres. This is despite the fact that international cooperation has become increasingly knowledge-driven. In addition, development cooperation budgets, as a percentage of GNP, have not grown accordingly, and the share for Africa has decreased in recent years. Lastly, there are indications that political contacts with Africa have grown less intense.

**Flanders has critical expertise for Africa's sustainable development challenges.**

Flemish knowledge institutions, companies, civil society organisations and local governments have valuable expertise to support Africa in sustainable and inclusive development. Despite its recent economic growth, Africa continues to face challenges such as healthcare and education access,



climate change, environmental pollution and poor working conditions. Flemish institutions have gained international recognition in many of these areas.

**Flemish companies are finding their way to Africa, mostly with support from FIT or other Belgian services, but there may still be a lot of untapped potential.**

A limited but growing number of Flemish companies have been active in Africa for decades. The growing trade surplus with Africa is still mainly dominated by raw materials: oil and diamond imports and refined oil exports. The shift to more high-quality products seems to be slow. FIT plays an important facilitating and supporting role for Flemish companies and aims to shape their growing ambitions through its revamped strategy. Despite the strategic importance of existing activities, Flanders offers a limited response to rapid developments in Africa's other economic sectors. The healthcare and vaccination sectors, logistics, infrastructure and green energy are important exceptions. Compared to (relatively small) European countries like the Netherlands and our Scandinavian neighbours, cooperation between Flemish companies, government, research institutions and civil society is less integrated. The Netherlands, for instance, prioritises specific domains in African countries and promotes cooperation between Dutch partners, subsequently establishing connections with African partners. One example is the focus on the water and horticulture sector in Nigeria<sup>6</sup>. Although there are also initial moves towards an integrated approach in parts of Flemish foreign policy - such as in South Africa and emerging in Morocco - cooperation is often project-based and lacks a structured and systematic approach.

**Flemish development cooperation opts for concentration, but has been mostly detached from the actions of other Flemish actors in the past.**

Flemish development cooperation concentrates its limited resources on a limited number of African countries and themes, ensuring focus. Flanders looks for specific niches that meet concrete needs in the partner countries and, in the second instance, considers geographical and thematic complementarity vis-à-vis other donors and Belgian bilateral aid. This is another consequence of the explicit choice to pursue coherence in partner countries in the first instance rather than with other Flemish actors. Concrete examples include the programmes in Mozambique and Malawi regarding healthcare, agriculture and the empowerment of women and girls. As such, Flanders has chosen development-relevant themes around which major bilateral donors and multilateral actors are also working. The latter need not necessarily be a problem because Flanders operates within clear niches. However, the limited presence of, among others, Flemish knowledge institutions in those countries does limit the possibility of seeking additional synergies with other Flemish actions and expertise. One positive example of an integrated approach is the cooperation with South Africa, with a great policy focus on an underpinned transition process to renewed, more integrated cooperation. In recent years, there has been growing attention on synergies with Flemish actors within the ongoing programmes with Malawi and Mozambique, and more structurally in the context of the new programme with Morocco.

**Potential of the diaspora underused in the development of economic, social and cultural relations with Africa.**

Building on the previous conclusion, African diaspora organisations in Flanders can be involved more closely in the various dimensions of foreign policy. In the past, there have been timid attempts

<sup>6</sup> Adeniyi, D., et al. (2024). [The horticulture sector in southwest Nigeria: A political economy analysis](#). Maastricht: ECDPM

to involve the diaspora in development cooperation, diplomatic activities and economic cooperation, but these were limited to pilot projects. Experience shows that diaspora organisations vary greatly in terms of mission, strategy and professionalism, and that cooperation requires the necessary preparation. However, even these organisations are constantly evolving and gradually becoming more important in interactions with home countries. Moreover, diaspora organisations, and, for example, African alumni who studied at Flemish universities, are interesting actors making connections and building networks in a changed setting where African policymakers and the population are more assertive and critical towards Europe.

### **Implications for the future Africa policy**

Based on the situation outlined earlier, three general conclusions can be drawn regarding the future of Flemish foreign policy, which are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

- (1) **Potential for further policy development** - Over the past three decades, Flemish foreign policy has been able to develop to the rhythm of various state reforms, with varying support from the political world. Innovative dynamics can be observed in various domains that point to a more strategic vision and approach towards Africa, both at the government level and among actors from the private sector, civil society, knowledge institutions and other stakeholders. There is potential to make a qualitative leap forwards in policy development towards Africa in the next few years.
- (2) **Lack of shared vision and goals** - Nevertheless, it is important to note that the various positive developments in relations between Flanders and Africa currently do not sufficiently reinforce one another. The current dynamics have not yet led to a shared vision and approach among public and private actors. A joint strategy on how Flanders can best position itself towards a rapidly changing Africa is lacking. As a result, Flanders's many strengths in developing mutually beneficial partnerships remain underused.
- (3) **Need for an integrated process** - There is a need for a fundamental shift from a fragmented approach to a more supported and integrated vision. This requires clearly defined objectives, a detailed overview of interests, and relevant and realistic implementation strategies. A process that ensures the involvement of multiple actors is crucial to shaping this policy together. It does not suffice to put an attractive Africa Strategy in writing; it is crucial to actively involve stakeholders in the development and ensure a clear approach to the implementation.

This study may provide an initial impetus for this by delving deeper into the building blocks of a renewed Flemish foreign policy, focusing specifically on the different actors and their interests, opportunities and capacities.

## 3 Building blocks of a renewed Flemish Africa policy

*Chapter 3 analyses the key components of a possible future Flemish Africa Strategy. It discusses the following in depth: i) the main actors and interests, ii) the need for a forward-looking Africa policy for both Flanders and Africa, and iii) lessons from the Africa policies of the EU and various EU Member States and two relevant European regions. Based on this, we formulated several recommendations and possible actions at different levels of ambition that could strengthen the relationship between Flanders and Africa.*

### 3.1 Actors and interests

This section maps the main Flemish actors that can contribute to the development of a more widely supported and integrated Flemish Africa policy. This overview focuses on: (i) the interests and opportunities of these various actors for deepening relations with Africa, (ii) the challenges that may arise in doing so, and (iii) possible lessons to be learned from already existing initiatives. This basic analysis outlines the main strands of the playing field of actors and their interests and challenges, but should be deepened for specific countries and sectors later.

#### 3.1.1 By actor

##### a. The Flanders Chancellery and Foreign Office (DKBUZA)

**Interests and opportunities** - DKBUZA is the main driving force seeking to strengthen diplomatic cooperation between Flanders and Africa. It plays a coordinating role in relations with Africa within the Flemish public administration. An integrated Africa Strategy, directed by DKBUZA, could provide a clear framework to fine-tune policy goals and other interests (economy, security, migration management, climate, etc.) towards Africa. In addition, it can enable a more efficient approach to addressing both challenges and opportunities in relations with Africa. To underpin such a policy, it is essential for DKBUZA to identify the various key actors and indicate geographical, sectoral and thematic priorities as well as Flanders's unique selling points (USPs) and areas of expertise. An integrated Africa policy can strengthen the existing collaborations between Flanders and its African partners (such as the countries in Southern Africa and Morocco) while helping identify new economic regions and countries with which Flanders would like to develop potential partnerships.

**Challenges** - Carefully balancing and reconciling the needs, interests and values of Flanders and its African partners presents a crucial challenge for a Flemish Africa Strategy in a context where a growing number of African states are led by authoritarian leaders and military personnel who, in line with global trends, aim to narrow the space for dissenting opinions and erode basic rule of law principles. Strengthening policy coherence with other levels of government and relevant partners is also essential. DKBUZA also asks itself how existing cooperation initiatives can be improved, which new partnerships might be interesting and how the Flemish public administration can

become an important, active partner for other Flemish and African actors. Furthermore, a good knowledge and assessment of Flanders's current political ambitions with respect to Africa are required<sup>7</sup>. As noted earlier, there seemed to be less political support and a smaller budget to put Africa at the centre of foreign policy in the past two government terms, unlike in many EU Member States and other regions in recent years. With a strong political mandate, clear priorities and a sufficient budget from the Government of Flanders, DKBZA can realise the ambition of playing a facilitating and connecting role between various actors. This furthers the implementation of the objectives of the 2024-2029 Flemish Coalition Agreement for an ambitious, impactful and coherent Flemish international policy.

*Possible lessons for the future* - The renewed strategy for the Flanders-Morocco partnership offers opportunities to implement a more integrated approach. After finalising the ambitions for the Africa Strategy, it is essential that the financial resources for DKBZA are aimed at achieving this mission and that the development and implementation of this process meet with strong political support.

#### **b. Flemish private sector and Flanders Investment & Trade**

*Interests and opportunities* - The involvement of the Flemish private sector and FIT is crucial to developing a strong Africa policy. Key actors in the business community recognise the growth potential of the African market and stress the willingness and need to capitalise on it. Flemish companies would be able to respond better to opportunities in Africa through stronger networking and collective action. Yet, this requires some direction, a more complete overview and more in-depth knowledge of the active Flemish public and private actors. Flemish companies appreciate and use FIT's support for their activities with Africa. However, the extent to which the Flemish public administration (and DKBZA) is considered a necessary partner for trade with Africa differs between companies and between stakeholder organisations. Belgium's different policy levels do not always share the same strategy and geographical priorities for Africa, but this is fleshed out pragmatically on the ground. Generally, companies, FIT, the Walloon AWEX Agency, hub.brussels and the federal government work together well.

*Challenges* - Several private sector actors have expressed their desire for more structured interaction between Flemish companies and with African partners. A stronger network, integrated into a broader Flemish Africa policy that enjoys strong political support, could provide the proper framework for this. This would make it easier for Flemish companies to access the fast-growing African market and enable them to jointly make better use of Flanders's assets and unique strengths in partnerships with Africa. By focusing on creating local added value, Flemish companies can collectively raise their profile as preferential partners within certain niches, offering a competitive alternative to large international players using a more traditional approach, such as China, Russia and the US.

*Possible lessons for the future* - The new FIT strategy is based on a strategic analysis of needs and opportunities, with clearly defined geographical and sectoral priorities. FIT wants to focus on Flemish companies that can contribute to the local economic upgrading of value chains. This aligns with the policy of African governments that prefer to cooperate with foreign companies that create local added value and are not just looking to export African raw materials. However, there is room

<sup>7</sup> The 2024-2029 Flemish Coalition Agreement states that Flanders wants to strengthen cooperation with South Africa and Morocco, and from a strategic point of view, also wants to make proposals for emerging growth countries in Asia and Africa. It also stresses the importance of an international ports policy.

for a better alignment of FIT's strategies with Flanders's broader policy towards Africa, creating new opportunities for cooperation with other public sector bodies, knowledge institutions and Flemish actors. This will allow the Flemish private sector to respond more effectively to opportunities in the African market while contributing to a coherent and sustainable Africa policy.

**c. Other Flemish departments (Environment; Education; Work, Economy, Science, Innovation and Social Economy; Culture, Youth and Media)**

*Interests and opportunities* - Other Flemish departments, such as Environment; Education; Work, Economy, Science, Innovation and Social Economy; and Culture, Youth and Media play an important role in further supporting specialised Flemish institutions and actors active in Africa, such as education, climate research and awareness raising, energy, science and the pharmaceutical sector. They also do so from commitments regarding climate finance, biodiversity, education or culture arising from international treaties or cooperation with multilateral organisations. It is essential to continue promoting interaction between Flemish and African universities, as well as research institutes and cultural institutions. A reinforced framework for networking with African alumni of Flemish universities could contribute to the sustainability of cooperation with Africa.

*Challenges* - Key challenges include better integration and visibility of programmes and initiatives across departments. While some departments, such as Culture, Youth and Media, have a clear policy framework in place for their international actions, others do not. There is no overarching framework to ensure coherence and alignment of geographical and thematic conditions and modalities across departments. Flemish actors wishing to apply for financing from various Flemish departments currently face major differences in modalities and conditions. There is an urgent need for increased policy coherence and cooperation between the different departments and with other actors. This alignment should also translate into the geographical and thematic/sectoral choices, as well as the modalities. Moreover, establishing additional partnerships and targeted distribution of the ODA budget may help increase the impact of Flemish initiatives in Africa. More attention can also be devoted to anchoring projects locally so that they better meet the needs of local partners. Furthermore, several Flemish departments have expressed the need for a coordinating task force to bring together government actors working around Africa. Such a network should be provided with sufficient resources and capacity in the coordinating departments, and other departments should have a clear say in it.

*Possible lessons for the future* - The Department of Culture, Youth and Media operates based on a clear policy framework with targeted actions in a limited number of partner countries (see Part 2 - 4.4.3.e). The Environment Department raised its strategic focus by tying a significant part of its actions to climate themes, for instance by using a multi-actor approach within the Flanders International Climate Action Programme (VIKAP) that also seeks alignment with FIT's investment policy. In turn, the WEWIS Department is strongly committed to cooperation and coherence with the federal and European levels, opting for a renewed focus in growing markets on themes like the circular economy and digitalisation. Going forward, it will be important to further coordinate with DKBZA and other policy levels to better respond to these growing African markets.

**d. Universities and other knowledge institutions**

*Interests and opportunities* - Universities and research institutions in Flanders are seeking to expand their partnerships with African partners. The focus is on technology transfer, joint research

and education programmes and capacity building for various themes, including healthcare, agriculture, economic development and sustainable development. Cooperation is shaped by the different objectives linked to sustainable development goals, technology development and internationalisation. For example, the university's teaching remit involves working with African partner institutions to attract talented researchers while tapping into new research markets. In doing so, universities respond to the rapidly growing group of young African professionals who want to obtain a master's degree at a European university or are considering a research career in Europe, and may subsequently engage in research in their home country. The cooperation has elements of reciprocity with Flemish students, researchers and academics who go to various African universities to study and work.

*Challenges* - The importance of strong knowledge-driven cooperation with Africa transcends the needs and interests of Flemish knowledge institutions. Based on mutual interests and global agendas, modern international cooperation is increasingly driven by knowledge, exchange and networking. The Flemish public administration also has every interest in cooperating structurally with its own knowledge institutions and helping them achieve their potential. Some knowledge institutions (VITO and ITM) that already engage in structural cooperation with Flanders for their actions in Africa see a role for DKBUZA in facilitating a multi-stakeholder dialogue towards a shared vision and strategy. This dialogue could also contribute to selecting potential priority sectors and countries. The existing spearhead cluster model could be relevant in this context, but is mainly focused on Europe and international partner countries such as the US and Canada. Other knowledge institutions are currently putting the Flemish level less centrally in their partnerships and research projects in Africa. Flemish financing for these knowledge institutions is mainly project-based, with the exception of structural financing from the IOB, the ITM and VITO. All knowledge institutions stress the importance of long-term cooperation in building relations with African institutions. Short-term project-based financing does not allow for sufficient capacity to be built and synergies to be pursued with other financing sources. Just like other actors, European knowledge institutions are looking for other, more equal partnerships with their African counterparts.

#### BOX 1: THE AFRICA CHARTER FOR TRANSFORMATIVE RESEARCH COLLABORATIONS<sup>8</sup> (JULY 2024)

The Charter, co-created by higher education and research bodies in Africa, provides a framework for research collaborations in which Africa takes centre stage. It aims to foster collaborations that strengthen and safeguard the continent's role in the global production of scientific knowledge in a transformative manner. Consideration is given to inequalities at different levels of knowledge production, ranging from knowledge theory (epistemology), language and theories to the role of developmental thinking and collaboration modalities. The Coimbra Group of Europe's top universities subscribes to the Charter.

The growing importance of major European initiatives, such as the Green Deal, Team Europe and the Global Gateway, is seen as both an opportunity and a threat. Although these initiatives offer new structural financing opportunities, the substantial financial resources are often accessible only to a small group of actors. Experience shows that, for instance, Team Europe tends to comprise large international players, including consulting firms and large development organisations, such

<sup>8</sup> Africa Charter for Transformative Research Collaborations. (2024): <https://parc.bristol.ac.uk/africa-charter/>.

as GiZ, instead of specialised research institutions. Access to both European and international sources of financing is essential for continuing and expanding research initiatives in Africa. It allows universities and research institutions to develop long-term projects that can increase the impact of their research and cooperation with African institutions.

*Possible lessons for the future* - Several Flemish knowledge institutions are in the process of strengthening and restructuring their cooperation with Africa. For example, VITO is working on a new Africa Strategy with result areas in six broad themes, including air quality in Africa, decarbonisation, waste treatment and circularity, smart and resilient agriculture, etc. The themes are defined so as to align with international frameworks and the actions of other relevant actors. VITO actively aims for coordination with Flanders and other Flemish and international actors, but it finds that, for the time being, there are few to no public forums or consultation bodies to achieve this through a multi-actor approach.

#### **e. Civil society and local governments**

*Interests and opportunities* - Civil society in Flanders has a long tradition of cooperation with African partners on a wide range of topics, mostly related to sustainable development. Contributing to the creation of a strong African civil society is both a means to achieve other objectives and an end in itself. As such, African civil society will also be able to fulfil its long-term roles of supervision (watchdog), civic education, service delivery and facilitation of public consultation processes. Over the past decades, relations between Flemish and African civil society organisations gradually evolved from substitution to institutional development and capacity building and to forms of cooperation on shared (global) themes on a more equal basis. Flemish local governments too play an important role through concrete cooperation with African local governments on sustainability and international solidarity. Evaluations regularly confirm the importance of local governments in achieving the SDGs and the advocacy of other global standards that take local realities and an effective multi-level governance system into account.

*Challenges* - Civil society organisations worldwide are faced with a shrinking civilian space, both in Africa and in Europe. This is accompanied by ODA cuts and budget shifts favouring increased cooperation with the private sector, migration management, security and defence and humanitarian aid. Flemish civil society opposes a reduction in ODA budgets and is making efforts to use resources more efficiently and effectively. Local governments such as cities in Europe and Africa are increasingly committed to bottom-up forms of territorial development driven by a wide range of local actors. This offers great opportunities for meaningful development support and jointly addressing common (global) challenges. A major obstacle to effective action by local governments is their limited integration - as independent actors - in policy dialogues on international cooperation priorities and in donor (including the EU) financing mechanisms and private investment flows.

*Possible lessons for the future* - When reviewing Flemish international policy towards Africa, it may be useful to focus on trends that have been visible in modern international cooperation for some time now. Those evolutions share a focus on actually applying a whole-of-government approach (with local governments as fully-fledged actors) and a whole-of-society approach (with civil society and the private sector as key actors in a multi-level governance system).

#### **f. Diaspora organisations**



*Interests and opportunities* - Diaspora organisations play a central role in supporting their community in both their home country and the guest country. Their activities cover a broad spectrum of societal, economic, cultural and political topics. Diaspora organisations often aim to promote cultural exchange and integration. Business ties between the diaspora and its countries of origin create economic opportunities for Flanders and Africa. In this case, diaspora organisations act as bridge-builders, establishing contacts for Flemish companies looking to invest. In addition, they are often involved in development projects in their country of origin, monitor the preservation of their culture and take up an advocacy role. They thus have valuable expertise and insights in areas such as development cooperation, trade, education, health and culture, which can help improve the knowledge and understanding of the challenges and needs in Africa and targeted policymaking.

*Challenges* - Focus elements include increasing their visibility and better integrating their visions and interests within Flanders's policy so that their networks and initiatives can contribute more effectively to broader Flemish initiatives and interactions with African partners. As already mentioned, diaspora organisations often differ largely in terms of objectives, strategy and professionalism, requiring more in-depth knowledge to identify their specific added value.

*Possible lessons for the future* - The Maghrib Belgium Impulse project ran from 2018 to 2023 and was implemented by Enabel with financial support from the Belgian government. The project aimed to support the Moroccan diaspora in Belgium in its investments in Morocco. In addition to awareness-raising actions, professionals in Belgium and Morocco offered bespoke guidance to future diaspora entrepreneurs to start businesses in Morocco. To ensure the sustainability of these investments, the project also worked with Belgian institutions responsible for promoting entrepreneurship. The effectiveness of the initiative could not be inferred from publicly available information.

### 3.1.2 Synthesis

Respondents were **unanimous as to the need for a coherent and consistent Flemish Africa Strategy**, which could provide guidance for the various departments of the Flemish public administration cooperating with Africa. Non-state actors also saw the importance of networking around Flanders-Africa, better coordination and more regular and in-depth information exchange. On the other hand, non-governmental organisations had divided opinions on the use of far-reaching direction by the Flemish public administration. Several companies, sector organisations and knowledge institutions acknowledged its importance, for instance in line with their experiences with the spearhead clusters. Other companies, NGOs and trade unions were less convinced of the added value of tighter direction. This has to do with current policy: given the rather limited presence of the Flemish public administration in Africa today, certain non-state actors do not immediately regard the Flemish public administration as an important partner. For the moment, there is little support for a tight central Flemish direction of relations with Africa, but the lack of a supporting and facilitating role of Flemish policy is mostly seen as a deficit. Yet, the Flemish public administration and other key actors are not starting from scratch. In any case, the renewed political commitment and cooperation with Morocco meet several of the conditions described above. Another possible example of dialogue and knowledge exchange is the Port of Antwerp-Bruges's 'Club Afric' (see also 4.3.2), where different actors share knowledge on cooperation with Africa. This exchange mainly focuses on the port and networks of Antwerp companies and renowned institutes (for



example the ITM), with regular invitations to the Flemish public administration, FIT and other actors such as development organisations and local governments.

## 3.2 The importance of a forward-looking Africa policy

The aforementioned global picture of the interests of various Flemish public and private actors reinforces the demand for an Africa policy that deepens and modernises. It is important to analyse the incentives for renewed cooperation that exist in Flanders and Africa. Why does the time seem ripe to strengthen cooperation? To what extent and where can objectives be better matched? This analysis of incentives or inducements is crucial for convincing political actors on both sides of the partnership that the status quo no longer suffices and that it is possible to gradually develop new equal relations based on mutual interests.

The starting point is clear: Flanders and African countries mutually engage in social, cultural and political cooperation and trade, exchange knowledge and have considerable mobility and diaspora in each other's continents. The cooperation varies greatly between countries. Common interests and current and future opportunities for closer cooperation are growing. The fast-growing continent of Africa is becoming more important for Flanders as a market and trading partner, as well as for legal labour migration and sustainable development. However, this relationship is also under strain, for instance in terms of access to Flemish and European markets, migration management and forced return, climate finance, patent rights and the broad domain of governance (including democracy, rule of law, human rights and LGBTQ+). Better understanding and enhanced cooperation are needed to realise the ambitions of both continents and meet future challenges.

### 3.2.1 Economic potential

**Africa will become more important for Flanders's prosperity** - Flanders has an open economy where one-third of jobs are linked to the export of goods and services<sup>9</sup>. Strong demographic growth and projected growth rates make Africa a more important future trading partner<sup>10</sup>. In 2024, two-thirds of countries in sub-Saharan Africa reported a GDP growth of more than 4%. With an expanding middle class and a young population, Africa offers new markets and great labour potential. At the same time, the EU is seeking to reduce its dependence on China, prompting European companies to diversify their value chains, with Africa as a potential key partner for investment and trade. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) aspires to create a single market for goods and services for more than 1.2 billion people, a development that will be crucial for African economic growth and political integration. Although some of these developments are still at an early stage, in the long run they will offer a unique opportunity for Europe, and therefore for Flanders, to strengthen trade with Africa and respond to the growing African market.

#### BOX 2: FLANDERS'S ASSETS AND UNIQUE SELLING POINTS FOR AFRICA

Flanders is a logistics hub and a major import and export destination for African goods. Thanks to its role as the host city for EU institutions, Brussels is also an important diplomatic crossroads and

<sup>9</sup> Federal Planning Bureau (2016). [Analysis of the interregional input-output table for the year 2010](#).

<sup>10</sup> However, population growth is causing some countries' per capita wealth to rise less rapidly than economic GDP growth.

home to many African diplomatic representations and a growing number of African lobby groups. As a knowledge region, Flanders participates in numerous projects and partnerships with African counterparts through its companies and knowledge institutions. In addition, Flanders has the critical expertise and capacity to meet the needs of African growth sectors, including green energy, climate adaptation, digitalisation, food processing and logistics. Traditional sectors also play an important role, such as the Antwerp diamond trade where demand for African diamonds has grown following the sanctions against Russia but where synthetic stones are putting pressure on the whole market and on Antwerp as a world diamond trade hub. Brussels Airport, being one of Europe's main hubs for passenger and freight transport to and from Africa, offers significant opportunities for tourism and further logistics. Lastly, Flanders's high prosperity creates an attractive market for Kenyan horticulture, Ethiopian coffee and Côte d'Ivoire cocoa, among other things, and the COVID-19 pandemic has put the pharmaceutical industry in Flanders in the spotlight.

**Thanks to Flanders, Belgium has the largest trade surplus with Africa in the whole of the EU** - Although Africa accounts for only 5% of the EU's total imports and exports, the EU plays a much bigger role for Africa, representing one-third of Africa's exports and 31% of its imports in 2020. Therefore, the EU is much more important as Africa's sales and buying market than vice versa. However, this share has fallen sharply since 2001, when half of African exports still went to the EU. Belgium is the sixth largest EU exporter and importer for EU-Africa trade, accounting for 10% of total EU exports to Africa and 6% of African imports into the EU. With a trade surplus of €7 billion for Flanders and €7.2 billion for Belgium<sup>11</sup>, Flanders creates the largest positive trade balance with Africa in the EU. Thanks to strategic infrastructure like the Port of Antwerp-Bruges and Brussels Airport, Flanders plays an important role in this as a logistics hub. However, trade and investment remain concentrated in specific countries and sectors (see Section 4.3).

**Africa is a crucial supplier of critical raw materials for the green economy and high-tech applications** - Africa remains an important source of essential raw materials, including cobalt, platinum and lithium, which are crucial for various sectors in Europe and Flanders, and in particular for growth sectors such as the green economy, digital technology and high-tech industries. Therefore, Africa can play a key role in making Europe more sustainable - think of raw materials for batteries - and in reducing dependence on China. Europe is also largely looking to Africa for green hydrogen supply, specifically to Morocco, Egypt and Namibia. The European Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) seeks to ensure access to these critical raw materials for the green and digital transitions. The CRMA is designed to reduce the EU's dependence on China for these materials and increase its own supply security. It is one of the parts of the European Global Gateway initiative, which supports partnerships and infrastructure investments aimed at building new and strengthening existing supply chains. The CRMA, combined with the Global Gateway projects, offers opportunities for Flemish companies through its expertise in circular economy and material reuse and its strategic logistics position. For example, Umicore carries out relevant activities under the CRMA, such as extracting germanium from a former mine in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

**Big opportunities or big risks?** - The economic situation of African countries differs greatly. Some countries remain stuck in a vicious cycle of instability and low growth. High inequality often means that economic growth does not sufficiently reduce poverty, while structural problems

<sup>11</sup> Eurostat. (2025). [Eurostat database \[ext go detail\]](#). Luxembourg: Eurostat.

relating to conflicts, governance, investment and trade are not addressed to a sufficient extent. Moreover, a small group of African countries are not eligible for Credendo's export insurance and support services, making economic cooperation with those countries very difficult. Lastly, industrialisation and integration into global value chains are difficult to initiate, with the exception of African raw materials. Due to these challenges, Africa's share of world trade still only fluctuates between 2% and 3%<sup>12</sup>. Still, forecasts are positive, and recent developments on the continent show that the economic situation may recover faster than in the past. Foreign companies currently trading or investing in Africa usually do not do so from a short-term perspective, but focus on long-term opportunities and growth.

### 3.2.2 Politics and governance

**A more ambitious continent striving for integration** - African political and economic integration occurs through eight different Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and the African Union (AU). The AU was established in 2002 and is founded in part on the EU model, although the level of integration, capacity, power and budget are of a lower order. Agenda 2063 is Africa's long-term continental strategy that pursues integration, security, prosperity and identity<sup>13</sup>. More specifically, Agenda 2063 has several flagship projects, including the continent-wide single market AfCFTA, probably the best known, and projects on visa-free travel. Although intra-African trade is currently still modest compared to other continents, the RECs are working actively to reinforce economic integration. The AfCFTA was officially launched in 2021 and represents an important step towards greater continental integration. It aims to reduce trade barriers on most goods and services over a thirteen-year period. Despite high ambitions, the AfCFTA came into being slower than expected. As demonstrated by the decades-long European integration process, clear rules and a functioning rule of law are also necessary to promote economic cooperation between countries.

Processes such as the AfCFTA can, in time, contribute greatly to the necessary improvements in transparency, public accountability and the rule of law. These structural changes generate benefits for economic cooperation and are important for deepening international trade. In addition, they strengthen institutional foundations in many African countries. This is important as Flanders pursues a balance between a value-driven international policy and economic advocacy.

**There is growing political competition for a more assertive Africa** - The past decade has seen an increase in Africa's freedom of choice and assertiveness in foreign and economic relations, and more collective efforts are being made to reach common African positions in global forums, even if they run counter to Western interests. Recent examples show African countries' willingness to adopt their own positions that may differ from those of the West. Almost half of the 35 countries that abstained in a UN resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine were African<sup>14</sup>. Most African countries believe in a multipolar order where different powers compete for influence. They prefer to navigate between the West, China and other (emerging) powers rather than take sides. The same goes for the AU, which has entered into strategic partnerships with China, Russia, India, Brazil, Türkiye, Japan and other global players in recent years. The AU tries to benefit from as

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. (2024, 1 March). [African countries trading more outside the continent than amongst themselves, ECA report](#). and Tadesse, B. (2024, 31 May). [African countries could unlock billions in local and global trade - what's working and what's not](#). The Conversation.

<sup>13</sup> African Union Commission. (2015). [Agenda 2063 The Africa We Want](#).

<sup>14</sup> Berwouts, K. (2022, 9 May). [Waarom Afrikaanse landen zich liever niet bemoeien met de oorlog van Rusland](#). MO\* Magazine. and Danish Institute for International Studies. (2023, 15 November). [How African states voted on Russia's war in Ukraine at the United Nations – and what it means for the West](#). DIIS.

many sides as possible and avoids taking a position in geopolitical conflicts. This allows Africa to fine-tune its priorities and seek relevant partnerships, focusing on economic development and security. These developments also bring new challenges to the continent's stability: Russia provides military and other related support to some autocratic regimes (e.g. Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and the Central African Republic) while Türkiye and China sell arms to countries that the EU and the US do not want to supply. Europe remains Africa's largest trading partner, but its influence seems to be waning vis-à-vis China and smaller countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which are rapidly gaining ground from their second and fifth positions, respectively. The increased geopolitical complexity requires the Flemish public administration to gain more thorough knowledge and expertise of Africa's political economy to analyse these dynamics expertly. This presents both opportunities and challenges for Flanders. By participating more actively in the Team Europe narrative and liaising more closely with EU delegations, Flanders, together with FIT, can utilise potential economies of scale and work complementarily with EU partners within Africa.

**A widely shared perception of an EU policy of double standards** - Africa often equates the EU with France and several other past colonial powers. This explains why the EU is regarded as "patronising, overpromising and underdelivering". And yet, the lion's share of EU Member States (some 20 countries) have never had a colonial past in Africa. Many 'more recent' EU Member States, including the Baltic States, have rarely, if ever, had historical relations with Africa but are now showing their interest, including through national Africa Strategies. There is also the perception in parts of Africa that the EU wants to impose its own societal model and values framework on Africa and the rest of the world, regarding the rule of law, sustainability, good governance, women's rights, LGBTQI+, and other ethical issues, while the EU itself is divided on these themes and often applies double standards. The Green Deal is another sensitive topic for African policymakers because they fear it may have a negative impact on the continent's economic development. More and more countries in Africa refuse to subscribe to the international order promoted by the EU in international treaties any longer, and are fully backed by Russia, China and other global players. The AU, RECs and several countries are trying to make progress on political governance and de-facto share core elements of the European values agenda. Even in autocratic states, local governments and civil society actors are pushing for more participation, transparency and accountability in public spending. Many places are demanding social and fiscal justice. Like other external actors, Flemish actors must proceed cautiously in Africa to navigate this sensitive and complex matter. A match can also be made regarding governance matters and values agendas between most African countries and Flanders. Moreover, experience shows that investing in inclusive development is a good way to strengthen the legitimacy and credibility of the EU and its Member States and regions. Therefore, it is essential for Flanders to fully endorse EU processes aimed at inclusive development, such as the Team Europe initiatives.

### BOX 3: GLOBAL GATEWAY

The Global Gateway earmarks €150 billion for large-scale projects in Africa and is regarded by many as Europe's response to China's large-scale Belt and Road Initiative. So far, the AU, African authorities, civil society and local governments have not responded with great enthusiasm. Much will depend on how this investment programme is rolled out in practice. For the moment, it is still regarded too much as a collection of different ongoing projects without a clear political dialogue and sufficient alignment with other European agendas<sup>15</sup>. According to the EU, investment programming must be done with all actors involved, respecting good governance rules and considering the direct benefits for the local population. It believes that this approach should ensure that the Global Gateway generates added value compared to what other major players are doing on the continent with (often much larger) investment funds. Flanders can also position itself strategically in this domain, as the Global Gateway is not just a story of major financial institutions but also of strategic partners who can help turn resources into tangible development results with the 'Europe' branding in the broad sense of the word, including the regions.

Although the Global Gateway offers opportunities for Flemish companies to participate, often as part of a consortium, Flemish SMEs seem to have made little use of it to date. This is mainly because access to the programme is often perceived as challenging. FIT supports Flemish companies wishing to participate in a Global Gateway project<sup>16</sup>. A common criticism of the Global Gateway is the lack of transparency, as little data is available on the companies and actions involved. Although the private sector is integral to the Global Gateway, attracting it is still a considerable challenge. This is due in part to the long and complex tendering procedures, even for small projects<sup>17</sup>.

Digitalisation is one of the priorities within the Global Gateway. For instance, the Smart Africa partnership was added recently, which supports the implementation of African data governance and e-governance<sup>18</sup>. The private sector is actively involved in the digitalisation approach within the Global Gateway, including through an advisory group with companies such as Nokia and Orange and other consultation structures<sup>19</sup>. These consultation structures could potentially also serve as a gateway for Flanders's digital sector to weigh in on the Global Gateway approach.

**A Flemish Africa policy within a changed geopolitical reality** - The fundamental shift from Europe's near-exclusive relationship with Africa to a transactional relationship with more players and more room for Africa to manoeuvre, is a geopolitical reality in which Flanders's future Africa policy will have to move. European-African relations are expected to be driven more by mutual interests and less by historical or ideological ties. Flemish companies, knowledge institutions and civil society organisations from a small European country with limited geopolitical influence and clout may have a comparative advantage in navigating this new complex reality, compared to their counterparts from larger European countries.

<sup>15</sup> Bilal, S. & Teevan, C. (2024). [Global Gateway: Where now and where to next?](#)

<sup>16</sup> Flemish Parliament (2024). Request for clarification from Karl Vanlouwe to Jan Jambon, Minister-President of the Government of Flanders, Flemish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Culture, Digitalisation and Facility Management, on the Global Gateway Conference of 7 February 2024. Brussels: Flemish Parliament

<sup>17</sup> Bilal, S., & Teevan, C. (2024). [Global Gateway: Where now and where to next?](#)

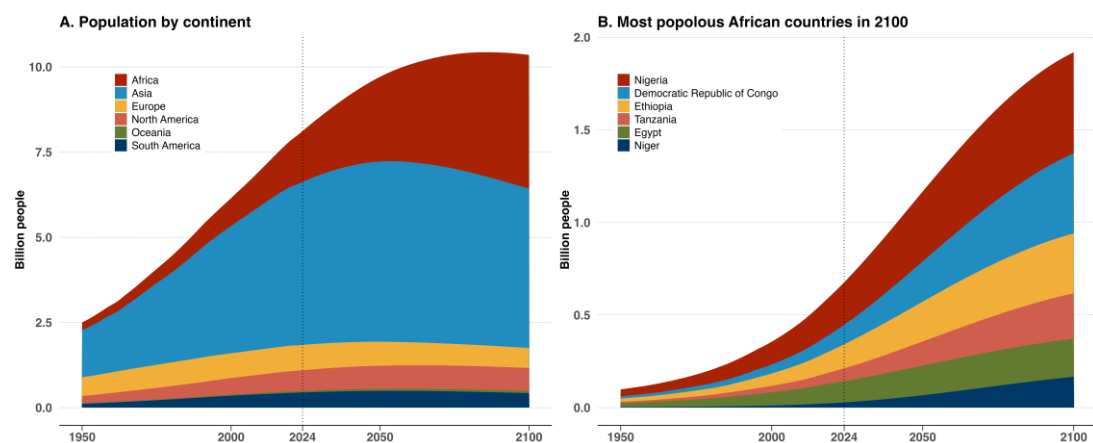
<sup>18</sup> EC. (2024, 3 December). International Partnerships. [Global Gateway: EU and Smart Africa strengthen partnership for Africa's digital transformation.](#)

<sup>19</sup> Teevan, C., Domingo, E. & The centre for Africa-Europe relations. (2022). [The Global Gateway and the EU as a digital actor in Africa](#) [Discussion paper]. *The centre For Africa-Europe relations.*

### 3.2.3 Social, environmental and sustainable development

**Africa's population could more than quadruple in the 21st century** - Historically, Africa has always had a low population density, but the situation is changing rapidly. Although estimates are constantly evolving, several forecasts show that the African continent could potentially have nearly 4 billion inhabitants, or more than one in three people in the world, by 2100. Almost half of all births in the coming decades is projected to occur in Africa. The number of Europeans would be less than 600 million, or 5.7% of the world total, by the end of this century (Figure 3.1).

FIGURE 3.1 World population by continent and by African country



Source: UN & OWID (2024)

Population growth brings both opportunities and challenges. A larger working population can provide a demographic 'dividend' if the share of employed people increases sharply. In 2018, the median age was 18 in Africa, 31 in Asia and 42 in Europe<sup>20</sup>. This has major implications for the available labour force and the employed/non-employed ratio. Unlike other continents, projections suggest that Africa's working population will continue to grow after 2050, which could create opportunities in the global economy, especially for labour-intensive industries. Generating sufficient and continued employment and economic growth, however, also poses a huge challenge to African leaders. Without this mass employment, population growth will inevitably lead to greater poverty and instability. Europe, including Flanders, has every interest in contributing to the enormous challenges of job creation and economic development.

**Africa is a necessary partner for migration management** - Although migration within Africa is significantly higher than migration to Europe, Europe is also a major destination for African migrants, with an estimated 27% share. This Africa-EU migration is mainly legal and for economic reasons<sup>21</sup>. A unilateral migration policy is a sensitive topic: African countries, for example, are reluctant to accept forced returns and want more legal labour migration opportunities with easier access to Europe. Europe is allocating ODA budgets increasingly to migration management, which causes great controversy in Africa. The topic remains a sticking point among the various EU

<sup>20</sup> Lam, D., Leibbrandt, M. & Allen, J. (2019). [The Demography of the Labor Force in Sub-Saharan Africa: Challenges and Opportunities](#). Bonn: GLM|LIC.

<sup>21</sup> Friends of Europe & Mo Ibrahim Foundation. (2022). [Africa and Europe: Facts and Figures on African Migrations](#). Brussels: Friends of Europe.

Member States and within the EU-Africa partnership. Yet, cooperation between the EU and Africa is crucial for promoting orderly, safe and humane migration, addressing the causes of forced migration and stimulating stability and prosperity in both regions.

**Flemish knowledge institutions, companies, civil society organisations and local governments have critical expertise for Africa's sustainable development challenges -**

Despite the multitude of opportunities, Africa continues to face enormous sustainable development challenges, from access to healthcare and education, poor working conditions, and the impact of climate change on agriculture and other economic sectors to environmental degradation and exposure to air, water and soil pollution. Flemish knowledge institutions, companies and civil society organisations enjoy international renown in many of these areas, mostly because Flanders is struggling with the same issues. As a result, Flanders has expertise that can play an important role in supporting and cooperating with Africa. The situational picture already mentioned knowledge institutions like VITO, the ITM and the IOB, but several universities such as KU Leuven, University of Antwerp, Ghent University and the VUB have also established extensive partnerships with African institutions. Section 3.3 briefly discusses some key areas that hold potential for deepening cooperation. Civil society organisations and local governments in Flanders and their partners are also natural allies with a proven track record of peer-to-peer cooperation and exchanges on various sustainability challenges.

### 3.3 The transition to a renewed strategic framework

After analysing the existing situation (Chapter 2) and articulating the interests of various Flemish public and private actors (Section 3.1), the previous section discussed the main motives for closer cooperation with Africa (Section 3.2). The present section of the study mainly explores how to shape a renewed, widely supported and integrated Flemish policy that matches Africa's dynamics, needs and expectations. As indicated earlier, it does not suffice for the authorities to 'decree' a new Africa Strategy from the top down. Such a strategy must be supported and shaped by the various actors themselves through a clearly defined process with concrete objectives, milestones and proactive facilitation. This study helps in this regard by presenting **several recommendations** on key elements of a renewed Africa policy such as (i) the fundamental objectives of the future Flemish Africa policy, (ii) the underlying principles for implementation and (iii) possible outcomes. Next, possible subsequent steps in the process are proposed in the form of a ten-step plan.

EU-Africa cooperation, including successive EU-Africa Strategies, and the Africa Strategies of fourteen European countries and regions, can be a source of inspiration from which Flanders can learn. Section 3.3.1 below discusses this in greater detail.

#### 3.3.1 Lessons from the Africa policies of the EU and Member States/regions

##### a. The EU-AU relationship

**The EU explicitly focuses more on Africa from a changing policy logic** - In 2006, the EU and the AU launched the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES), the first comprehensive joint continent-to-continent strategy. AU-EU institutional consultation mechanisms were created including triennial



summits of heads of state, follow-up meetings at the foreign minister level, regular meetings between the AU and EU Commissions and parliamentary meetings between the Pan-African and European Parliaments (Figure 3.2). In 2018, the Juncker Commission launched the New Alliance for Sustainable Development and Jobs to boost strategic investment in Africa. At the inception of Von der Leyen's Geopolitical Commission, the EU launched a new EU Strategy with Africa in early 2020. The EU sets five clear priorities for cooperation with Africa in this strategy: green transition and energy access; digital transformation; sustainable growth and jobs; peace and governance; and migration and mobility<sup>22</sup>. The strategy proposes an integrated approach to address current African challenges through cooperation in security, multilateral alliances and diplomatic networks, humanitarian assistance and sectoral development cooperation. However, this strategy essentially remained a dead letter due to the COVID-19 crisis and the lack of an AU response to the EU's proposals. The EU is working on an integrated approach to Africa, but Africa does not yet have an approach to the EU. The sixth AU-EU Summit in Brussels in 2022 delivered 'A Joint Vision for 2030'<sup>23</sup>, with a particular focus on the Global Gateway, the EU's response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Global Gateway aims to mobilise investments totalling €300 billion, of which €150 billion in Africa. Currently, EU-AU relations are in murky waters. This is due, in part, to disagreements about the wars in Ukraine and Palestine, the migration issue, and the Green Deal and climate agenda. In recent years, it has become increasingly difficult to organise structural dialogue at the level of heads of state, foreign affairs ministers and the AU-EU Commissions and Parliaments. Whether there is enough political traction between the two continents to host the seventh AU-EU Summit in Africa in 2025 remains to be seen.

Meanwhile, the implementation of the Global Gateway and the support for regional initiatives in conflict-prone regions are being continued, with varying degrees of success. In the past, the Horn of Africa was a good example of how the EU could use its instruments for an integrated approach that combined diplomacy, development, trade and security. This was done, among other things, by the EU Special Representative, but also through the NDICI-Global Europe instrument, including guarantees from the European Fund for Sustainable Development and the encouraged private sector investment, the European Peace Facility and the Common Security and Defence Policy<sup>24</sup>. Meanwhile, the EU's political influence in the Horn of Africa is receding again due to regional and geopolitical developments.

<sup>22</sup> EC (2020). [Towards a comprehensive Strategy with Africa](#). Brussels: European Commission.

<sup>23</sup> Sabourin, *et al.* Unpublished.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*



FIGURE 3.2 Overview of AU-EU summits



In a context of changing power relations, Africa has more freedom of choice and assertiveness and is presenting a more united front with common African positions in global forums<sup>25</sup>. This inevitably implies that the EU will have to invest more in a partnership that is no longer based on a donor-recipient dependency relationship but on equality and shared interests.

#### **b. Africa policies of other EU Member States and regions**

A lot of EU Member States and regions have shown much more interest in Africa in recent years. **Since 2019, a growing number of European countries have developed their own Africa Strategy**, such as [Ireland \(2019\)](#), [Italy \(2020\)](#), [Germany \(2019; 2023\)](#), [Malta \(2020\)](#), [Spain \(2019; 2023\)](#), [Denmark \(2021; 2024\)](#), [Finland \(2021\)](#), [Switzerland \(2021\)](#), [Estonia \(2021\)](#), [Czech Republic \(2022\)](#), [The Netherlands \(2023\)](#) and [Norway \(2024\)](#) (Figure 3.2). Luxembourg, Austria and Sweden are also preparing an Africa Strategy. Several European regional governments have also developed an Africa Strategy (e.g. [Catalonia \(2020\)](#) and [Bavaria \(2021\)](#)). These strategies have several similarities and differences that provide relevant lessons for the development and content of a Flemish Africa Strategy. The specific thematic and geographical focus points of the above strategies can be found in Appendix I.

<sup>25</sup> Tadesse Shiferaw, L. & Di Ciommo, M. (2023). [Trouble in paradise: The EU-Africa partnership in a geopolitical context](#). Maastricht: ECDPM.

FIGURE 3.3 Africa Strategies in Europe



**Most strategies have a broad, cross-domain approach that goes beyond traditional development cooperation** - They are much wider, adopting a comprehensive and collaborative government-wide approach and integrating a broad spectrum of political, economic and cultural dimensions of the relationship with Africa. The oft-repeated priorities and cross-cutting themes reflect this broader approach from promoting peace and security, sustainable growth, migration and reinforcement of the rule of law and democracy to trade and investment, digitalisation and tourism. Because this comprehensive approach necessitates the involvement of multiple government departments, most countries opt for an integrated, whole-of-government strategy. The foreign affairs department generally facilitates and directs the strategy, aiming to work closely with other departments and ministries that participate actively and co-own the strategy.

**Both the country selection and the whole-of-Africa approach are popular** - The main selection criteria for African countries are *historical ties*, *proximity* (cooperation can contribute to peace and security in Europe and is relevant to migration management) and *reciprocal economic opportunities* that align with an EU Member State's expertise and Africa's needs and aspirations. Some strategies divide between North and sub-Saharan Africa, which somewhat goes against the

AU's desire to regard Africa as an indivisible continent. Switzerland, for instance, has two separate strategies (sub-Saharan and Middle East/North Africa). Whereas Spain's first 2019 Africa Strategy focused exclusively on sub-Saharan Africa, its renewed 2023 Strategy also includes North Africa. Larger EU Member States with sizeable diplomatic representations in Africa often have the resources to spread their strategic focus across different geographical areas. On the other hand, smaller countries take a more targeted approach, focusing mainly on countries with which diplomatic relations already exist or where there is potential to engage in interesting collaborations. Countries like the Netherlands and Denmark concentrate their strategies on the African continent as a whole but ultimately choose several specific focus countries based on their thematic and sectoral expertise and interests, as well as the pre-existing presence of diplomatic representations. Flanders will have to make similar considerations. The approach adopted by the Netherlands and Denmark has the advantage that the overarching strategy remains relevant, even if the selection of priority countries changes.

**Regional cooperation and integration are central to all Africa Strategies** - All strategies encompass collaboration with the AU and African regional organisations (e.g. ECOWAS and SADC). Regional integration is particularly supported when a cross-border approach is needed for peace and security and the promotion of trade relations (e.g. AfCFTA). Some countries have formal agreements or memoranda of understanding with regional organisations. Smaller countries also often stress the importance of African regional organisations as part of their strategy. Although concrete action plans are not always developed with regard to these organisations, which are often not strong enough yet, they are recognised as potentially important actors that should not be ignored today or in the future<sup>26</sup>. The East African Community (EAC) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are considered to be the best integrated economic communities in Africa<sup>27</sup>, although ECOWAS will face a major setback following the exit of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in January 2025.

**Cooperation with the EU is highlighted, but concrete details are limited** - All strategies endorse the importance of collaboration with the EU for political dialogue and strengthening joint European action in priority sectoral and thematic areas. They mention joint initiatives and collective actions with other Member States, such as Team Europe and the Global Gateway, but provide scarce details. Malta and Finland highlight opportunities for actors from partner countries in EU-funded projects. The Netherlands and Denmark also focus strongly on cooperation and policy coherence at the European level.

**Resources are not clearly stated** - None of the strategies clearly mention the (financial) resources necessary or available for the successful implementation of the strategy. Some strategies refer to ODA, private investment promotion and technical assistance, among other things. Italy does mention specific amounts for the EU Emergency Fund and the Africa Fund. Spain and the Netherlands stress the importance of their private sector in Africa generating the resources necessary to replace public budgets. In most countries, the budgets of the ministries and departments in charge are mainly used to implement action points from the strategies.

**Monitoring is an integral part of most strategies** - Most strategies refer to monitoring, involving at least an interministerial or interdepartmental monitoring process. Some countries, such as

<sup>26</sup> ECDPM. (2020). [Rewiring support to African continental and regional organisations](#). Discussion paper No. 268. PEDRO.

<sup>27</sup> ALG. (2024). [African Regional Economic Communities: what they are and why they matter](#).

Germany, have detailed monitoring processes that monitor policy implementation to achieve the SDGs. Finland requires each ministry to draw up an action plan, whereas Spain uses embassies as focal points, combined with additional coordination mechanisms and annual reports.

**Innovative instruments and actions of varying levels of ambition** - Depending on available resources and capacities, European countries and regions are developing a wide range of initiatives. Some of the initiatives can be regarded as a continuation of existing policies, whereas others are new to the countries concerned. Table 3.1 lists several newer, innovative initiatives according to an estimated level of ambition and indicates which countries are committed to them.

TABLE 3.1 Possible actions at different levels of ambition

Action	Description	Direction, support, participation	Examples
<b>1. Basic actions</b>			
<b>Africa envoy</b>	Appointing a 'travelling' envoy to strengthen diplomatic, economic and other interests with Africa in countries where Flanders is hardly present	DKBUZA and FIT are in charge, in collaboration with other stakeholders	Estonia
<b>Strengthening the capacity of diplomatic missions</b>	Providing classes and training to existing diplomatic networks in addition to expanding the diplomatic presence on the continent	DKBUZA, FIT	Ireland, Denmark, Italy, Spain, Malta, Finland
<b>Smoother visa procedures</b>	Faster and simpler visa procedures for emerging countries to promote cooperation and exchange	DKBUZA and FPS Foreign Affairs in collaboration with Belgian embassies	The Netherlands
<b>Cheaper support services for exports to Africa</b>	Providing low-cost services to companies looking to export to Africa	FIT, existing export support	Denmark, Finland
<b>Structural support for civil society</b>	Direct financing for African civil society organisations concerning sustainable development	DKBUZA, 11.11.11	The Netherlands
<b>Integration of new EU regulations</b>	Supporting European and African companies in integrating new EU legislation, for instance concerning the duty of care	FIT, Voka, CBL-ACP	Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain
<b>Strengthening African representation in multilateral institutions</b>	Promoting reforms and fine-tuning of multilateral organisations to increase Africa's representation and influence	DKBUZA, in collaboration with the bilateral diplomatic channel	Norway

2. Medium level of ambition			
<b>Regional innovation centre</b>	Creating an innovation centre to support entrepreneurship and startups in cooperation with Flemish companies	WEWIS, and specialist triple helix model organisations	Denmark
<b>Partnerships with African countries on digitalisation, climate adaptation and the green transition</b>	Cooperation aimed at strengthening digital infrastructure and addressing climate challenges through knowledge exchange, investments and joint projects	DKBUZA, specific departments (depending on the theme), knowledge institutions and relevant companies	The Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Spain, Estonia
<b>Increased student exchange and university cooperation</b>	Exchange programmes, joint research projects (including via the EU) and academic partnerships	VLIR-UOS, knowledge institutions	Denmark, Norway, Czech Republic, Germany, Spain, Finland
3. High level of ambition			
<b>New diplomatic representations and regional hubs</b>	Expanding the diplomatic representation in new regions/countries and establishing regional hubs to strengthen cooperation, economic relations and political connections	DKBUZA, FIT	Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Malta
<b>New export and investment funds for cooperation with Africa</b>	Establishing funds to promote trade, investment and economic cooperation with African countries	FIT, existing export support; DKBUZA and FIT are active in the Finexpo inter-federal consultations	Denmark, Finland
<b>Investment in and stronger integration of Team Europe and the Global Gateway</b>	Supporting knowledge institutions, companies and civil society to build knowledge and engage in networking for participation in European programmes	FIT, Voka, knowledge institutions, 11.11.11	Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Finland
<b>Investing in sustainable value chains with intensive business cooperation</b>	For example by (i) fine-tuning the spearhead cluster model for better alignment with the African market or (ii) setting up targeted funds (development funds) for theme-based actions	FIT, WEWIS, companies, possibly with focus on SMEs	The Netherlands, Denmark

### 3.3.2 Recommendations for a renewed Flemish Africa policy

Various Flemish actors and African contacts in Belgium were surveyed on the possible objectives of a future Africa policy. Recent analyses from relevant studies and expertise from knowledge centres complemented all these views. These contributions combined have generated a palette of choices that requires further deepening in dialogue with the actors involved on the Flemish and African sides and with the necessary political direction. The present study does not seek to define concrete objectives for the Flemish public administration or other actors but rather to suggest some broad action areas that could serve as an inspiration for the future Flemish Africa policy.

#### BOX 4: OVERVIEW OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **There is a strategic opportunity for a renewed policy framework for Flanders's cooperation with Africa, brought together in a fully-fledged Flemish Africa Strategy.**
2. **An Africa Strategy should ideally be underpinned by political and institutional commitments and a mutual obligation to achieve results.**
  - Political ambition: Developing an integrated and coherent policy towards Africa
  - Institutional ambition: Flanders can commit to dialogue and cooperation between all actors involved
  - Striving for shared results: Actors involved strive for concrete and mutually beneficial results
3. **Flanders can deploy resources more strategically. Its in-house expertise, priority demarcation and appropriate set of instruments are of strategic importance in this regard.**
  - From aid-driven North-South relations to fully-fledged partnerships
  - A clear choice of African growth sectors with Flemish expertise
  - Strategic consideration of focus countries
  - Working on adapted instruments from a long-term perspective
  - Increasing opportunities for Flemish SMEs in African growth sectors
4. **Flanders can adopt a more proactive diplomatic role within Europe and Africa and further strengthen the focus on complementarity and coherence.**
  - Intensified cooperation with other European regions or countries
  - Complementarity and coherence with other policy levels
  - A clear delineation of priorities raises the profile of Flanders's offering to Africa
5. **Flanders can prioritise inclusive forms of cooperation that also contribute to sustainable development.**
  - A whole-of-government approach as the starting point; whole-of-society where feasible and relevant
  - Responding to the new regulatory framework on business and human rights
  - Multilateral institutions as levers

The basic principle is that there is an urgent need for a strategic Africa policy that transcends individual policy areas while building on existing policies and various actions of Flemish actors operating in Africa and seeking complementarity with the federal and European levels. Below, five recommendations are made that can inspire different facets of the future Flemish Africa policy.

**Recommendation 1 – There is a strategic opportunity for a renewed policy framework for Flanders's cooperation with Africa, brought together in a fully-fledged Flemish Africa Strategy.**

A widely supported Africa Strategy offers an opportunity to highlight and fine-tune the added value of cooperation between Flanders and Africa. The present study finds that the growing interest in Africa from the business community and civil society translates insufficiently into a stronger political commitment from Flanders. According to several actors, the absence of broad political support and a supportive policy framework results in a lack of direction, coordination, information exchange and coherence. Developing such a policy framework requires several essential and concrete focus points that are elaborated further in the ten-step plan (Section 3.3.3).

**Recommendation 2 – An Africa Strategy should ideally be underpinned by political and institutional commitments and a mutual obligation to achieve results.**

The study presents plenty of arguments for Flanders to invest in a renewed and strong engagement with Africa. Achieving this requires political and institutional ambitions, combined with the pursuit of shared outcomes:

- a. **Political ambition** – In line with its 2024-2029 Coalition Agreement, Flanders can commit itself to developing an integrated and coherent policy towards Africa aimed at broadening and deepening cooperation with Flemish and African partners at various levels and in all relevant domains where they have mutual interests and shared priorities, in a spirit of equivalence, reciprocity and use of comparative advantages. This qualitative leap forward aims to make Flemish foreign policy fit for purpose in light of the new geopolitical reality, the continuing need for international solidarity and the promotion of its own interests and priorities as a dynamic region with an open view of the world.
- b. **Institutional ambition** - Flanders can focus on dialogue and cooperation between all actors involved to shape political engagement. There is an opportunity to provide an appropriate set of policy instruments besides the necessary institutional mechanisms, knowledge, capacities and resources.
- c. **Striving for shared results** - The Africa Strategy should be based on mutual commitments, with both Flanders and its African partners pursuing concrete results that contribute to shared prosperity and sustainable development.



**Recommendation 3 - Flanders can deploy resources more strategically. Its in-house expertise, priority demarcation and appropriate set of instruments are of strategic importance in this regard.**

**a. From aid-driven North-South relations to fully-fledged partnerships focusing on opportunities and mutual interests**

To meet the expectations of African policymakers and economic operators, there is a need for a comprehensive Africa Strategy that not only starts from a problem-driven approach to Africa but also spots opportunities and heeds mutual interests. Development cooperation remains vital to help respond to major sustainable development challenges. Still, aid is no longer the basic principle of cooperation but rather an equal component alongside other forms of cooperation in trade, mutual knowledge exchange, diplomacy and cultural exchange. In addition to the focus on global public goods, there is room for both partners' mutual interests and needs. The combination and integration of different forms of cooperation should be adapted to the partner country's socioeconomic situation. The development cooperation component should be more responsive to, and seek synergies with, existing Flemish expertise areas and actors, without compromising the coherence of actions in the partner country or leading to a strong instrumentalisation of development cooperation. These elements largely align with the orientation of DKBZA's more recent initiatives in Africa.

**b. A clear choice of African growth sectors with Flemish expertise offering added value**

The present study<sup>28</sup> identifies at least seven African growth sectors where Flemish companies and knowledge institutions can provide critical expertise and which respond to African priorities and assets: *essential raw materials, green energy, climate adaptation, circularity, healthcare and digitalisation, food processing and logistics*. Flemish expertise can be used to contribute to the development of these sectors while creating economic opportunities for Flemish and African companies<sup>29</sup>.

**Green energy:** Insufficient investment in energy infrastructure and a growing population perpetuate Africa's energy scarcity in large parts of the continent. However, a catch-up movement is underway. Projections<sup>30</sup> estimate that investments in green energy will at least double by 2030. Flemish companies and knowledge institutions have expertise and experience in building and maintaining renewable energy infrastructure, including wind turbines, solar panels and related technology. Conversely, Flanders needs green hydrogen and other renewable energy sources for its energy-intensive industries, such as the petrochemical sector in Antwerp. Due to the lack of space for large-scale solar and wind power, much of this has to be imported. Flanders is involved in initiatives in Namibia, Egypt and Morocco, among others, which can create win-wins for both the countries concerned and Flanders.

<sup>28</sup> A more comprehensive analysis that allows all relevant sectors to be identified and selected according to a robust analysis framework will require additional research.

<sup>29</sup> This list focuses on the five most prominent growth sectors. Other promising sectors are waste treatment, recycling and the circular economy, and water management and treatment.

<sup>30</sup> [Financing Clean Energy in Africa - Analysis - IEA](#). (2023, 1 September). IEA.



**Climate adaptation:** Climate change is having a disproportionate impact on Africa in terms of food supply, flood risk in coastal areas and heat stress in growing cities. Flemish institutions and companies have critical expertise that can be deployed for the blue economy (e.g. dredging in coastal areas), climate-proof crops and urban development.

**Circularity:** A third, related issue is the growing African waste challenge and the international focus on a more circular economy. This requires investments in technology, the development of adapted business models and sufficient public support. Flemish knowledge institutions and companies (e.g. Umicore) have relevant expertise to support African institutions in waste management, recycling and material reuse.

**Healthcare:** African health systems are in full development, which offers opportunities for Flemish companies and knowledge institutions. Flanders has strong assets in vaccination technology, medical biotechnology and eHealth and medical technologies. Several African countries are interested in developing their own vaccine production capacity, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Digitalisation:** In addition, African startups and tech hubs are hotspots of innovation. Cities like Lagos and Nairobi, dubbed Silicon Lagoon and Silicon Savannah respectively, are at the heart of this digital revolution. Africa's digital economy is estimated to be worth US\$180 billion by 2030, representing a fast-growing market that Flemish digital technology companies can also tap into.

**Food processing industry:** Flemish companies rank among the world's top food processing industries. Through trade and investment, Flanders can contribute to modernising and professionalising Africa's food processing sector. This can subsequently open up new markets for Flemish food products and technologies and improve food security in Africa, especially in urban areas.

**Transport and logistics:** As an open economy at the heart of Europe, Flanders acts as a logistics hub. Its extensive expertise in transport and logistics includes areas and sectors such as port expansion, transport, warehousing and distribution. These respond to Africa's needs for critical logistics infrastructure.

## BOX 5: THREE CONCRETE INITIATIVES WITH DKBUA UNDER DEVELOPMENT

*In parallel with this study, the Flemish public administration has taken new steps for future initiatives in Africa over the past months. While these actions build on existing partnerships with Flemish actors, they address some of the principles put forward in the present study, such as focusing on multi-actor approaches, mobilising Flemish expertise and responding to opportunities at international institutions.*

**Flemish support for mpox research and pandemic prevention** - In December 2024, the Government of Flanders allocated €2.5 million from the development cooperation budget to the World Health Organisation, Fondation Medicines Patent Pool and the University of Antwerp to set up different pilot projects with a focus on Africa. The first project is intended to open up the African market for health technologies by connecting Flemish actors with African institutions and producers to expand local production capacity. The second project focuses on combating the mpox virus, which is mainly found in West and Central Africa. These initiatives connect internationally renowned Flemish expertise to the urgent demand of many African countries to strengthen their health sectors, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. They involve a wide range of Flemish partners, including the pharmaceutical industry, Flemish public administration services such as development cooperation, WEWIS, VLAIO and Care, knowledge institutions in Antwerp, Ghent and Leuven, among others, as well as FIT. Collaboration with international organisations, such as the WHO, also facilitates contacts with African institutions and the AU.

**Collaboration with VITO, OVAM and Enabel in Morocco** - The Government of Flanders earmarks €5 million for a project on the transition to a circular economy through education and socioeconomic inclusion of young people. The 'Morocco Circular' project supports job creation and entrepreneurship in Morocco in collaboration with Flanders's centres of expertise OVAM and VITO. The project provides skills training and socioeconomic integration for young people (with a focus on women) in the circular economy in the l'Oriental and Béni Mellal-Khénifra regions. Enabel supervises the actual implementation on the ground and coordinates with the Moroccan authorities.

**Port of Antwerp-Bruges (PoAB) in Namibia** - Namibia plays a key role in the global energy transition thanks to its renewable energy sources, natural resources and strategic location. The country has ambitious plans to use its green energy potential and natural resources for its Green Industrialisation Agenda, by focusing on a strong policy base and blended financing. Green hydrogen is considered a crucial factor in decarbonising hard-to-electrify sectors, and Namibia aims to become a production hub driving the transition to green energy. The Port of Antwerp-Bruges and the Flemish public administration are partnering with Namibia regarding green hydrogen and ammonia. During COP26 (2021) and a State Visit in 2024, collaborations and investments were strengthened, including €20 million from the Port of Antwerp-Bruges in an export port in Walvis Bay. The Cleanergy Green Hydrogen site and Africa's first hydrogen-fuelled vessel are examples of some projects. Namibia is crucial to the EU's and Belgium's hydrogen strategies and global trade. Initiatives such as the Hydrogen Academy promote knowledge exchange. A Namibian delegation visited Belgium for technical cooperation, with support from Enabel, further strengthening ties between the two countries (see also Box 10).

### c. Strategic consideration of focus countries

In particular, historical relations played a role in the past selection of partner countries, e.g. the Flemish anti-apartheid movement in the case of South Africa, and the development cooperation policy area for Malawi and Mozambique. Economic considerations and migration were also considered in the selection of Morocco. The present study argues for a comprehensive analysis in preparation for the selection of future partner countries that weighs up both country-specific characteristics (economic growth, stability, governance and level of development) and an assessment of the match with Flanders (diplomatic presence, trade relations, the diaspora, presence of knowledge institutions and civil society). Table 3.2 presents the first rough estimate<sup>31</sup> of the different parameters for:

- four existing partner countries: Morocco, South Africa, Malawi and Mozambique
- a selection of six countries that Flemish companies, knowledge institutions and/or civil society already have close contact with

The scores range from very weak (dark red) to very strong (dark green). When weighing up countries, it is important to also consider the whole country portfolio since not all policy objectives (economic, developmental, diplomatic and cultural) can be united in one country. This rough analysis shows, among other things, that:

- as described earlier, the four existing partner countries represent a mix of countries with major development challenges but limited economic, institutional and diaspora interactions, on the one hand, and middle-income countries with a mixed profile on the other
- countries such as Egypt, Namibia, Ethiopia and Nigeria have a complementary profile with potential strengths/opportunities, which are addressed less or not at all in the existing partner countries, and each has their own concerns and challenges

<sup>31</sup> This exercise is a work in progress that needs further deepening in follow-up research.

TABLE 3.2 Comparison of countries based on diplomatic, economic, social and geographical indicators

Country	Representation of Belgium and the Regions*	Existing trading volumes	2025 economic growth	Governance (rule of law index)	Development index (IHDI)	The diaspora	Presence of knowledge institutions and civil society
Morocco							
South Africa							
Malawi							
Mozambique							
Namibia							
Nigeria							
Egypt							
Kenya							
DRC							
Ethiopia							

\* Qualitative assessment of the presence of Delegations of Flanders, and, where relevant, other Belgian authorities.

Very strong	Strong	Weak	Very weak
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#### d. Working on adapted instruments from a long-term perspective

Flanders's cluster policy brings together Flemish companies, knowledge institutions and the government within strategic domains through spearhead clusters and innovative business networks. For now, the dynamic within the cluster operation is strongly focused on Europe and, in the second instance, on familiar markets (e.g. the US and Canada). Few actions are organised in more complex, emerging markets like Africa, with the exception of ad hoc initiatives within several clusters. And yet, these forms of cooperation can potentially stimulate Flemish actions in these growth markets. Some respondents also referred to a potential role for the Flanders International Technical Agency (FITA), whose mission is to promote Flemish knowledge, technical capacities and realisations in the areas of infrastructure, equipment, transport, the environment and spatial planning, but which is currently not present in Africa. Preparatory study work is needed to assess the relevance of today's structures and mechanisms with a view to improving trade and investment in African growth markets.

**When developing the mechanisms, forms of long-term cooperation are preferable, whenever possible.** This includes the role of the Flemish public administration as financier, for example to support actions of knowledge institutions, development actors or companies. Unlike support for initiatives in middle-income countries, purely transactional or project-based forms of cooperation risk being less effective in low-income countries. In this context, there generally is a need for a gradual process of capacity building that requires trust and long-term investment of resources and expertise. The stop-and-go dynamics associated with short, rapidly changing projects can create uncertainty and staff turnover at local institutions, which results in somewhat unsustainable achievements. Short projects also make it more difficult for Flemish actors to

achieve synergies with other programmes. The experiences of knowledge institutions, such as VITO, the ITM and others, demonstrate that a programme-based approach, possibly divided into several delineated cycles, increases the likelihood of sustainable impact.

In addition, Flemish actors can **focus** more strategically **on new financing mechanisms at the European level**, for instance, within the Global Gateway and Team Europe. Central support and coordination are recommended, however, since these mechanisms are in high demand, and responding to potential opportunities requires a great deal of prior knowledge, cooperation and networking. Table 3.3 describes several opportunities and challenges for Flemish actors seeking to avail themselves of these European mechanisms.

TABLE 3.3 Assessment of the opportunities and challenges of three European mechanisms

	Opportunities	Challenges
<b>Global Gateway</b>	Three possible approaches: (1) Nomination of projects through the Belgian representation, e.g. in cooperation with the private sector and/or development cooperation (2) Flemish companies can join existing GG projects (3) Flanders can nominate projects together with other EU Member States	Lack of clarity on projects, procedures and allocation. Access for European SMEs is not self-evident for the moment.  In practice, FIT and DKBUZA can jointly assess whether their projects have synergies and whether they could benefit from a broader European approach. This can then be nominated as a GG project.
<b>Team Europe</b>	High ODA investments in sectors/themes with Flemish expertise: climate action, preventive healthcare, digital transformation, job creation, etc. Cooperation with other EU Member States can increase the scale and impact of actions.	Procedures seem to favour large bilateral agencies (such as GiZ, AfD, SIDA) and large consultancy groups.
<b>European Investment Bank</b>	The EIB can provide financing, network access and expertise to relevant Flemish projects.	It operates mainly through public institutions; the extent to which Flemish development cooperation can access EIB support is unclear.

#### e. Increasing opportunities for Flemish SMEs in African growth sectors

Thanks to their expertise and capacity in various African growth sectors, Flemish SMEs are ideally placed to play a role in cooperation with Africa. However, their limited knowledge of Africa and lack of networks there deter many SMEs from taking the first step. SMEs can pool their capacities to explore collaboration with potential African partners. In addition, the Flemish public administration can review existing export promotion support mechanisms and further tailor them to the African market.

#### BOX 6: TARGETS FOR ECONOMIC COOPERATION<sup>32</sup>

- Growth of trade with Africa in growth sectors by x% over y years

<sup>32</sup> The exact targets depend on the level of ambition and should be worked out in consultation with relevant actors.

- Growth of x% in the number of Flemish companies operating in growth sectors
- Increase by x % in the number of SMEs with operations in Africa
- Existing mechanisms and entities to promote trade and investment in African growth markets have been mapped and screened

**Recommendation 4 – Flanders can adopt a more proactive diplomatic role within Europe and Africa and further strengthen the focus on complementarity and coherence.**

**a. Intensified cooperation with other European regions or countries with shared agendas**

In its Africa policy, Flanders can focus more strongly on active forms of cooperation with other European regions and countries that have a shared agenda and common interests. This cooperation can take different forms, e.g. pooling resources, setting up joint initiatives or sharing expertise. By combining efforts, policy objectives can be achieved more effectively within a limited budgetary framework.

**b. Complementarity and coherence with other policy levels**

In addition to alignment with policy agendas in partner countries, it is also essential to ensure complementarity and coherence between Flemish actions and those of other policy levels, such as the federal (Belgian) and European levels, and in relation to multilateral institutions. Complementarity and coherence require active efforts for information sharing and alignment, including from the perspective of the Flemish stakeholders with whom the Flemish public administration interacts in its relations with Africa. Organisations collaborating with Flanders actively seek synergies between the support they may receive from Flanders and other financing sources to increase the impact of their actions. This is complicated when Flanders mainly focuses on interpreting complementarity as “not doing the same thing” as other actors and less on alignment and coherence with other Belgian and European actors.

**c. A clear delineation of priorities raises the profile of Flanders’s offering to Africa**

The various principles and strategic goals are based on the ambition to better align Flanders’s offering to Africa, for example, by clarifying and defining several strategic areas for cooperation. This has the added advantage of allowing Flanders’s offering to be profiled more clearly, which can be communicated more specifically. This is necessary because surveys of African diplomatic contacts showed that the lack of a clear profile is a recurring area for attention. Regular contact between the Flemish public administration and African diplomats in Brussels can promote mutual knowledge about supply and demand.

**BOX 7: TARGETS FOR DIPLOMACY AND CULTURE**

- Increase in active cooperation initiatives with other European regions or countries
- Identification of priority areas as a result of discussions with the relevant Flemish actors

**Recommendation 5 – Flanders can prioritise inclusive forms of cooperation that also contribute to sustainable development.**

**a. A whole-of-government approach as the starting point; whole-of-society where feasible and relevant**

The present study finds that the various Flemish public sector actors who maintain relations with Africa often still tend to work in silos. Although consultation structures between different public sector departments and affiliated institutions are in place, their added value is rather limited without a clear policy framework. Regular coordination takes place between diplomatic, trade and development agendas, albeit mainly on an ad hoc basis, for instance in the context of specific projects and programmes, rather than at the structural/strategic level. A whole-of-government approach requires first and foremost a shared vision on the Africa policy goals and strategies, followed by concrete action plans and monitoring, directed by departments with a clear mandate.

The situational picture of cooperation between Flemish actors and their partner organisations in Africa (Chapter 2) describes a rich palette of interactions in a multitude of domains. A future Africa policy should build on these dynamics, mainly in a supporting and facilitating role rather than a rigid, directing one. In some cases, this may be done by 'following the actors', which means identifying what Flemish actors are already doing in certain domains and subsequently engaging in dialogue with these actors and exploring how these actions can be strengthened by seeking complementarity with other initiatives. In other situations, a more directing or inspiring role may be appropriate, for instance, when it concerns the implementation of new regulations or when important topics do not yet feature on the agenda of Flemish actors. To flesh out these changing roles, Flanders can draw inspiration from inclusive forms of governance for domestic affairs, focusing on the participation of and cooperation with a wide range of actors from civil society, knowledge institutions and the business community. The whole-of-society approach should be strengthened in foreign policy because it increases the likelihood of effective, sustainable and inclusive change processes. As the number of parties involved in international projects can quickly add up, a whole-of-society approach sometimes conjures up an image of complex and slow decision-making and implementation. However, this can be avoided by initiating domain-specific processes in which existing consultation structures are used whenever possible and actors and processes are tailored to the needs and individuality of the parties involved. Inclusive forms of governance should also include support for African civil society whenever possible. This can be done, for example, by opening up partnerships to civil society organisations or involving them in the governance and monitoring of sustainable development initiatives. For instance, the new European legislation on business and human rights emphasises the importance of stakeholder engagement in carrying out due diligence, both in producing countries and in Europe.

**b. Responding to the new regulatory framework on business and human rights**

When strengthening existing partnerships or building new ones with the private sector, Flanders can explore how to promote sustainable economic development, with trade, investment and sustainability goals going hand in hand. This can be done when choosing growth sectors, for example, by focusing on renewable energy, waste treatment or climate-robust crops. However, synergies can also be made with economic activities by responding, for instance, to new European

legislation such as the 2022 Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and the recently adopted Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CS3D). They require large (European) companies to pay more attention to and take action towards possible environmental and human rights risks for their own operations and throughout the value chain. The new European sustainability requirements necessitate investment and expertise that Flemish and African companies do not always have in-house. Without accompanying measures and support for Flemish and African suppliers, there may be unwanted side effects, risking the loss of their market share to easier Asian markets, for example. Flanders can play a pioneering role within Europe by explicitly aligning its Africa policy with European legislation while considering the realities of Flemish and African companies.

### **c. Multilateral institutions as levers**

Multilateral institutions such as the UN, the World Bank and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) provide additional levers and financial channels for Flemish activities in Africa. These institutions offer unique access to extensive networks, resources, (strategic) information and diverse views that are difficult or impossible to access through other channels. One example is cooperation with the ILO, which can ensure that Flanders's initiatives regarding business and human rights, for example, are spread further and strengthened on the African continent.

Flemish financing of sustainability projects can ensure a scale-up of certain actions via multilateral institutions by mobilising additional funds. Moreover, cooperation with multilateral institutions offers Flanders important advantages in terms of risk management. Implementing projects in fragile countries is often challenging and requires thorough monitoring systems. However, Flanders does not always have sufficient resources to implement these systems itself. By cooperating with multilateral organisations, it can benefit from their extensive systems. This not only helps to manage risks better, but also ensures that projects can be implemented more efficiently.

Cooperation with multilateral institutions also creates opportunities for capacity building and knowledge transfer. Flemish actors can make valuable contributions in terms of sustainability. One existing example is the 'WHO collaborating centres', in which several knowledge institutes from Flanders have a seat and support WHO programmes through research and advisory opinions. In addition, Flemish actors can benefit from multilateral institutions' expertise and experience. They often have in-depth knowledge of local markets, cultural nuances and regulations, which is crucial for successful project implementation. Such collaborations allow Flemish actors to adapt and optimise their approaches.

Flanders's engagement with multilateral institutions and their programmes also has strategic advantages. The first advantage is the advocacy at the multilateral level. Various forums indeed allow small regions to advocate their interests. This growing recognition of regions at the multilateral level is also reflected in the close cooperation between Flanders and the ILO, which includes annual discussions on current and future projects<sup>33</sup>. The biennial grants to the Flanders/ILO Trust Fund are an asset in that regard. The second strategic advantage is the possibility of new market access for Flemish actors. By participating in international programmes, Flemish actors can gain market access in countries that are difficult (for them) to access. This

<sup>33</sup> DKBZA. (2018). [900,000 euro to Flanders - ILO Trust Fund](#).



creates new opportunities for economic growth and cooperation. The third strategic advantage pertains to Flanders's international reputation. By actively participating in global initiatives, Flanders can profile itself as a reliable and innovative partner in international cooperation. This can increase the impact and visibility of Flanders's efforts on the international stage.

#### BOX 8: TARGETS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

- Supporting Flemish and African companies in complying with new EU directives
- Number of partnerships with multilateral institutions involving Flemish organisations
- Number of initiatives involving African civil society organisations and local governments

### 3.3.3 From policy recommendations to actual implementation in ten steps

The effective implementation of an integrated and inclusive Flemish Africa Strategy requires a deliberate process-based approach. In this regard, lessons can be drawn from several European Member States that have implemented a bilateral Africa Strategy in recent years. The ten-step plan below can be considered to guarantee an effective and successful implementation of the Flemish Africa Strategy:

#### 1. Ensure strong political direction

As indicated earlier, the strong political direction from Flemish policymakers is paramount. Without this political commitment (which also requires earmarking the necessary financial and human resources), the strategy risks remaining a dead letter. Besides the Government of Flanders and its Minister-President, the Flemish Parliament (viz., the Committee on Foreign Policy, European Affairs and International Cooperation) can also play a crucial role in directing the Flemish Africa policy. Lastly, a stronger political commitment by Flanders should also translate into more high-level political contacts with African policymakers in Africa and Flanders. The present study has shown that Flanders stands to gain a lot if it manages to modernise its Africa policy, including in terms of promoting its own prosperity.

#### 2. Strengthen interdepartmental consultation within the Flemish public administration

Consultation and cooperation between relevant Flemish departments that, one way or another, play a role in relations with African institutions and partners should be further strengthened. DKBUZA already acts as a facilitator in this regard and can continue to direct the structural dialogue between the different departments to optimise strategy implementation.

In an increasingly competitive global context, Flanders will have to highlight its knowledge, added value and visibility even more, especially in key areas that are rapidly gaining importance in Africa such as digitalisation, sustainable green energy, climate adaptation, healthcare, circular economy and inclusive development.

To avoid a silo approach and promote the coherence of Flanders's policy towards Africa, it may be useful to focus mainly on policy areas that have strong common grounds. Small and flexible interdepartmental task forces are best suited for monitoring such a nexus approach. Possible examples are connections between climate action, sustainable energy and agriculture or between climate action, migration and security.

A joint and coherent approach between various Flemish public administration departments can help make clear choices and set common priorities. It will allow Flanders to raise its profile in Africa and generate greater impact in and with Africa.

### **3. Encourage an inclusive approach based on added value and empowerment of non-governmental organisations and local governments**

Besides promoting interdepartmental cohesion within the Flemish public administration, it is also important to draw on the knowledge of various representative non-governmental organisations in Flanders such as the intermediary organisations of the private sector, knowledge institutions, trade unions, NGOs and civil society, as well as the African diaspora. Local governments investing in international cooperation should also be involved in the process. To avoid talking shops or pro forma consultations, selecting these actors on the added value they can generate in the policy areas central to the Flemish Africa Strategy is essential. Accountability is indispensable to gain a seat at the table. This can be done by taking up concrete responsibilities like providing targeted analyses, advisory opinions and networking.

### **4. Organise regular and targeted policy dialogue with African diplomatic, EU and multilateral representations in Brussels**

When implementing the Flemish Africa Strategy, a stronger contribution from Africa must be guaranteed in the partnership. The Government of Flanders can increasingly use Brussels, which is home to embassies from almost all African countries, as one of the world's major diplomatic hubs. Enhanced use can also be made of the presence of the EU and numerous international organisations, for instance by responding better to large-scale EU initiatives (e.g., the Global Gateway, Team Europe and the Green Deal) for which Flanders can generate added value and resources. In addition, it allows the Government of Flanders to better respond to the many high-level visits by African heads of state and government and European and international representatives to Brussels-based institutions.

### **5. Strengthen the Delegations of Flanders in Africa**

Strengthening Flanders's role in and with Africa inevitably also requires stronger representation and visibility in Africa. The existing Delegations of Flanders, development cooperation sections, FIT and larger individual private sector players in Africa are already playing a useful role. It may be advisable to pool and increase the coherence of various Flemish actors in a selective number of focus countries to generate more impact. This could imply, for instance, that the Delegations of Flanders establish themselves in countries or regions that are considered important from an economic, political and developmental perspective. In addition, it should be further examined whether it could be useful for Flanders to open a Delegation of Flanders in Addis Ababa (the 'Brussels of Africa'). Besides relations with Ethiopia, whose economy is growing more important, such a Delegation of Flanders could also play a role in maintaining ties with Pan-African institutions such as the African Union and numerous continental and multilateral institutions (e.g. UNECA), which shape Africa's political and economic policies. Apart from broadening and deepening contacts in Addis Ababa, it is vital for Flanders to maintain contacts with other major Pan-African institutions (e.g. African Development Bank - Côte d'Ivoire) and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), which may be important for Flanders to implement the strategy.

### **6. Stimulate public debate and communication in Flanders**

A new, societally supported and integrated Flemish Africa policy requires public debate and good communication at various levels in Flanders. A strong connection with key societal actors, including journalists, seems indispensable to keep the debate on the Flanders-Africa relationship alive. In addition, an annual Flanders-Africa day or event with involved actors from various sections of society could make Flanders's policy in and with Africa more widely supported. Such initiatives usually produce few concrete policy recommendations, but this kind of networking event is important for discussing and analysing the rapidly evolving contextual changes in the world, in Africa and in the Europe-Africa relationship, in consultation with key Flemish actors and African partners. This may also be a useful forum to communicate and discuss annual progress in implementing the Flemish Africa Strategy and consider reorientations, if any.

#### **7. Invest in public diplomacy in Africa**

In Africa, Flanders can also invest more in public diplomacy, for instance through academic and student exchanges between Flemish and African knowledge institutions, campaigns to make Flanders better known, study visits, cultural exchanges and the promotion of business opportunities.

#### **8. Complement a concise and accessible Africa Strategy with concrete action plans**

As demonstrated by other Africa Strategies, a concise and clearly structured and formulated strategy document (with English and French translations) can appeal to a broad audience in Flanders and Africa. Such an approach requires a small editorial team, led by DKBUZA, which plays a facilitating and coordinating role in considering priority sectoral, thematic and geographical choices and interests. Ideally, the strategy covers a medium- (five-year) to long-term (ten-year) perspective and ensures continuity beyond the expiry of the current government term. To ensure concrete implementation and operationalisation, it is recommended to work with more concrete and time-bound action plans, possibly tailored to each focus country or region. One could think of domain-specific pathways, set up as gradual, subdivided flexible policy formulation and implementation processes, focusing on specific countries and domains. Rather than through a traditional broad-based consultation process, a targeted approach should be sought that delivers creative, innovative and societally relevant goals. In doing so, the intensification of the dialogue with African partners should be central to finding a good match between Flemish and African aspirations and priorities.

#### **9. Organise the monitoring and evaluation of strategy outcomes**

Robust monitoring and review mechanisms, with the involvement of all key governmental and non-governmental actors, are essential to ensure progress in the strategy's implementation and to make adjustments whenever necessary. A five-yearly formal external evaluation of the strategy implementation can also provide useful lessons for further follow-up or adjustment of the strategy. These areas can be guided par excellence by independent centres of expertise with proven competence in monitoring and evaluation.

#### **10. Align budgetary and human resources with the objectives of the future Africa Strategy**

The process of creating and implementing an integrated Flemish Africa Strategy will require the necessary public and private resources. The facilitating and coordinating role of DKBUZA, possible further policy supporting analyses (e.g. of the selection of possible focus countries and regions in Africa), consultation structures, strengthening of the Delegations of Flanders in Africa, field visits, exchange programmes, public diplomacy, and regular monitoring and evaluation moments all require sufficient financial and human resources. When launching the strategy, it is recommended

to have an insight into the budget implications and staff deployment beforehand to make the strategy actually work.

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## **PART 2**

# **FLANDERS AND AFRICA: PAST AND PRESENT**

## 4 Flanders and Africa: a situational picture

*This chapter provides an extensive overview of the economic, social, political and cultural relations between Flanders and Africa, focusing on the underlying actors and processes. Such a helicopter perspective is lacking to date. Through a series of interviews with relevant organisations and individual stakeholders, existing datasets and other secondary sources, we uncover how different Flemish actors place their own emphases in their relations with Africa. The analysis allows us to bring the geographical intensity of cooperation and the sectors, themes and actors involved into focus. The study discusses the areas in which Flanders has competence, but also considers other themes that are relevant to relations with Africa from the perspective of the government, the business community or civil society.*

*After a brief historical sketch of how Flemish foreign policy came into being, we individually identify the actors and sectors affiliated with its powers. We discuss diplomatic representation and political contacts, trade and investment, development cooperation and other relevant policy areas (education and training; economy, science and innovation; environment; culture, youth and media).*

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### 4.1 The emergence of a Flemish foreign policy

**The Government of Flanders's foreign policy developed gradually since the 1970s with each state reform** - Initially, it focused on cultural affairs but later expanded to include development cooperation and trade. The establishment of specialised bodies such as the Flanders International Cooperation Agency (FICA) and the collaboration with the Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance (VVOB-Education for Development) played a central role in the early days of government relations with Africa. Reforms in 2013 and 2020 led to foreign policy integration into the Flanders Chancellery and Foreign Office (DKBUZA). Strategic advisory bodies and centres of expertise supported policy development but were discontinued due to budget cuts.

The Government of Flanders's international policy dates back to the first state reform in the 1970s. Although the powers were limited to cultural powers at the time, they included an external dimension from the outset<sup>34</sup>. This allowed the Government of Flanders to maintain relations itself with foreign governments, the European Union's predecessor and international organisations. Based on this principle, the foreign policy gradually expanded with each subsequent state reform, along with the transfer of new powers to Flanders. For instance, the second state reform of 1988 included a transfer of important parts of **foreign trade**, which resulted, among other things, in the appointment of eight Economic Representatives of Flanders abroad. The fourth state reform of May 1993 assigned the federated states **treaty-making power**<sup>35</sup>, in accordance with the *in foro interno, in foro externo* principle, to conclude treaties with foreign governments and international organisations for all the devolved powers. This means that "the Belgian Communities and Regions

<sup>34</sup> Interview and documentation DKBUZA

<sup>35</sup> SARiV. (2013). Het gebruik van exclusieve bilaterale verdragen en memoranda van overeenstemming: Advies 2013/28.

have exclusive jurisdiction over the international aspects of their areas of power"<sup>36</sup>. In addition, this principle provides the legal foundation for establishing the necessary administrative organisation of international cooperation and for sending its own political representatives abroad<sup>37</sup>. **Development cooperation** was added to Flanders's powers with the fifth state reform in the 2000-2001 period<sup>38</sup>. In 2005, FIT was established as the 'Flanders Agency for International Enterprise' to promote international entrepreneurship in Flemish companies<sup>39</sup>. Next, FIT opened foreign offices, staffed by employees with diplomatic status. The sixth and final state reform resulted in a (partial) transfer of a list of new powers, including the **labour market and healthcare**, around which Flanders could pursue a foreign policy. The **expansion of powers also translated into cooperation with Africa**, with new powers opening up new areas of cooperation.

Flanders has a broad set of powers compared to other European regions. This allows Flanders to pursue a comprehensive foreign policy albeit within **a financial framework that is naturally more limited than that of the federal level or other European countries**. The latter is partly due to the fact that the extension of powers was not accompanied by the transfer of additional resources for the foreign affairs policy area. Also, due to the large number of internal (Flemish) powers, **foreign policy sometimes faded into the background** in the past<sup>40</sup>.

The **institutional embedding of foreign policy in the Flemish public administration occurred in several stages**. Initially, efforts were made to strengthen international capacity within the separate departments. For relations with Africa, the development organisation VVOB, founded in 1982, supported implementing international projects of the Department of Education and other policy preparatory tasks for the Flemish public administration in the early years. From 2006 onwards, the Flanders International Cooperation Agency (FICA) was established to carry out activities for the South to reduce poverty within the Global South, on the one hand, and activities for the North to strengthen support for development cooperation in Flanders, on the other<sup>41</sup>. The Flemish Framework Decree on Development Cooperation (2007) fleshes out the principles, conditions and other focus points of Flemish development cooperation. FICA coordinated development projects with Africa from 2006 to 2013. Following the Better Administrative Policy (BBB) reforms, FICA was abolished as a separate entity in 2013 and placed under the Flanders Department of Foreign Affairs. The BBB reforms aimed to make the administration more efficient, including through a clearer division between policy preparation and policy implementation<sup>42</sup>. During the next government term, the Flanders Department of International Affairs was transformed into the Foreign Affairs Department in 2017. More recently, in 2020, this department merged with the Department of Public Governance and the Chancellery into the Flanders Chancellery and Foreign Office, which is also in charge of relations with Africa.

In the 2008-2014 period, Flanders sought advice for its foreign policy from **the Flemish Foreign Affairs Council (SARiV)**<sup>43</sup>, an independent body advising on any aspects relating to Flemish foreign policy, international business, development cooperation and tourism. SARiV issued several

<sup>36</sup> Departement Internationaal Vlaanderen. (2011). [Vlaanderen en Oeso](#).

<sup>37</sup> SARiV. (2013). Het gebruik van exclusieve bilaterale verdragen en memoranda van overeenstemming: Advies 2013/28.

<sup>38</sup> [The Fifth State Reform](#) | [Belgium.be](#). (s.d.).

<sup>39</sup> Vlaamse Overheid. (2004). [Decreet tot oprichting van het publiekrechtelijk vormgegeven extern verzelfstandigd agentschap "Vlaams Agentschap voor Internationaal Ondernemen"](#).

<sup>40</sup> Crikemans, D. (2019). [Wie kent het Vlaams buitenlands beleid?](#). Samenleving & Politiek.

<sup>41</sup> VAIS. (2010). [Vlaamse ontwikkelingssamenwerking](#).

<sup>42</sup> Bourgeois, G. (2014). [Beleidsnota 2014-2019 Buitenlands beleid, internationaal ondernemen en ontwikkelingssamenwerking](#).

<sup>43</sup> Strategische Adviesraad Internationaal Vlaanderen. (2009). [Bijdrage aan de beleidsnota: naar een geïntegreerd en geïnspireerd internationaal beleid voor Vlaanderen](#).

advisory opinions in relation to the Flemish Africa policy: (i) five on country strategy papers, (ii) four on international agreements (e.g. Cotonou), (iii) four on development cooperation policy, (iv) three on European agreements, (v) seven on Belgian agreements and (vi) nine on Flanders's broad international policy. In 2015, the SARiV was abolished following reforms to reduce the number of strategic advisory councils within the Flemish public administration. This removed an important consultation and advisory structure that strategically monitored Flemish foreign policy from a long-term perspective together with policymakers, practitioners and external experts.

Between 2001 and 2015, three successive generations of **centres of expertise provided the scientific foundations of foreign policy**. The centres of expertise researched the various components of foreign policy, including trade, diplomacy and development cooperation<sup>44</sup>. For relations with Africa, the focus was on development cooperation, including research on the role of the private sector in development cooperation, the emergence of South-South cooperation and the renewal of cooperation with South Africa. The centres of expertise were discontinued in 2015 due to cutbacks. Afterwards, the Government of Flanders continued to invest in research to support its foreign policy, albeit on a more ad hoc basis. In addition, the available financial volume was lower, which reduced knowledge building on Flemish foreign policy within universities.

In the absence of an overarching policy framework, **relations with Africa have so far been mainly directed decentrally from specific policy areas**. Between 2014 and 2019, FIT worked based on an Africa Strategy and accompanying action plan for trade relations. In 2024, it developed a new Africa Strategy with clear geographical and sectoral prioritisation. The development cooperation policy area has been using country strategy papers for specific African countries for some time now. In addition, Flanders developed several overarching strategy papers for development cooperation, covering cooperation with Africa<sup>45</sup>. The following sections further explain and analyse these policy frameworks.

## 4.2 Diplomatic representation and political contacts

**Since the late 1980s, Flanders has been building an extensive network of Delegations of Flanders to actively maintain political and diplomatic relations with a broad spectrum of countries and regions worldwide, including Africa. Outside Europe and North America, the Delegations of Flanders are concentrated in Africa.**

Flanders's diplomatic network spans major trading partners and allies in Europe, North America, Africa and multilateral organisations. Flanders has delegations in Berlin, The Hague, Copenhagen, Madrid, Paris, London, New York, Warsaw, Rome, Vienna and Pretoria, and to institutions such as the UN (Geneva), the EU (Brussels), and the Council of Europe, UNESCO and the OECD (Paris). These Delegations of Flanders play a crucial role in gathering knowledge and information, allowing Flanders to clearly understand local trends and developments that may affect strategic interests.

<sup>44</sup> [Wegwijs doorheen de steunpunten](#). (2012).

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, (1) Departement Internationaal Vlaanderen (2016). De Vlaamse ontwikkelingssamenwerking Anno 2030: Naar een nieuwe identiteit voor Vlaanderen als partner in ontwikkeling.



Flanders has had an economic representative in South Africa since 1994 and a Delegation of Flanders in Pretoria since 1999<sup>46</sup>. The Flemish public administration also has country offices for the development cooperation domain in Mozambique (since 2002, and recently under one roof in the Consulate of Belgium) and Malawi (since 2007). The Delegation in South Africa oversees all official contacts regarding Flanders's powers in other countries in the region, namely Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Eswatini. Over the years, Flanders's presence in South Africa has evolved into a multifaceted partnership, focusing on sustainable development, economic growth and cultural exchange. Today, FIT has economic representatives with diplomatic status in Johannesburg and Casablanca.

In addition to its own Delegations, Flanders can also capitalise on the extensive Belgian, Walloon and Brussels diplomatic and political representations in Africa today. Belgium has 46 embassies and consulates on the continent, and Wallonia-Bruxelles International (WBI) coordinates five official representations that can also serve as a gateway to advocate Flanders's interests. This Walloon and Brussels presence is mainly concentrated in North and West Africa, with offices in Algiers, Dakar, Rabat, Tunis, and one in Kinshasa, Central Africa.

**In early 2021, the Government of Flanders announced that it would deepen cooperation with Morocco** - This cooperation is based on a more layered approach, focusing on development-oriented policy objectives and commercial interests, and addressing the root causes of migration, as set out in the 2019-2024 Coalition Agreement. The partnership covers several sectors for which Flanders has competence, including climate and energy, employment, research and private sector development. In March 2023, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between DKBUZA and the Moroccan Ministry of Energy Transition and Sustainable Development for the theme of environment and sustainable development<sup>47</sup>. In August 2024, the finalised country strategy paper was published, concretising cooperation with Morocco<sup>48</sup>. This cooperation illustrates the growing political and economic importance Flanders attaches to North Africa and the Mediterranean region. The new country strategy also lays the foundations for a more fully-fledged and integrated foreign policy with an African partner. In this respect, Morocco can serve as a living lab for putting this approach into practice. In any case, the initial results met with positive feedback.

**Following the peak in bilateral contacts, ministerial missions and visits of ministers to and from Africa in the 1999-2014 period, a decline has been reported during the past government terms** - Table 4.1 shows documented bilateral contacts between the Government of Flanders and African countries over the 1981-2023 period. The number of contacts spiked between 1999 and 2014. After that, the number of missions dropped, with three missions to Africa, four receptions, fourteen bilateral political contacts, engagement with five African countries and the participation of two Government of Flanders members in the last government term. Possible explanations for the peak in contacts from 1999 to 2014 are the impact of changes in government and the defederalisation of development cooperation. The rapid government changes in previous government terms resulted in new bilateral contacts by successive ministers to establish their own emphases. The defederalisation of development cooperation announced in the 1990s, for which additional bilateral contacts were initiated, may also have played a role. After that, the number of contacts decreased. Possible causes include the impact of COVID-19, the growing portfolios of the ministers in charge, resulting in less time for bilateral contacts with Africa, and fewer issues

<sup>46</sup> Flanders Chancellery & Foreign Office. (2024). [South Africa](#).

<sup>47</sup> Departement Kanselarij & Buitenlandse Zaken. (2023). [Memorandum van Overeenstemming tussen het Departement](#).

<sup>48</sup> Departement Kanselarij & Buitenlandse Zaken. (2024). [Landenstrategienota Marokko 2024-2028](#).

relating to Africa on the political agenda following the discontinuation of the SARiV and centres of expertise. Despite these contextual factors that may help explain a decline in political activity, the elements introduced, together with the responses in the interviews, point to dwindling attention to relations with Africa at the political level. The new programme in Morocco and the intensity of political contacts with the country are exceptions, which may owe in part to the focus on migration issues.

TABLE 4.1 Official bilateral contacts between the Government of Flanders and African countries, 1981-2023

	Missions	Receptions	Bilateral contacts	African countries	Government of Flanders members
Geens I (1981-1985)	1	0	1	1	1
Geens II (1985-1988)	0	0	0	0	0
Geens III-IV (1988-1992)	3	2	4	5	3
Van den Brande I/II/III (1992-1995)	5	1	10	1	5
Van den Brande I/II/III (1995-1999)	4	2	12	2	4
Dewael/Somers (1999-2004)	12	17	55	4	11
Leterme/Peeters (2004-2009)	11	26	59	9	7
Peeters II (2009-2014)	11	14	67	7	5
Bourgeois (2014-2019)	5	12	28	6	4
Jambon (2019-2024)	3	4	14	5	2

Source: DKBZA

## 4.3 Trade, investment and the private sector

### 4.3.1 Driving and supporting trade with Africa

**Flanders has a positive and growing trade balance with Africa. Trade between Flanders and Africa is dominated by raw materials.**

**The EU sets the main strands of trade policy** - The single internal market has made trade policy an exclusive competence of the EU, which has entered into a complex web of preferential trade

agreements with African countries, including (i) five Economic Partnership Agreements with fourteen African countries, (ii) four Association Agreements with Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt, among others, and (iii) thirty-seven African countries coming under a unilateral Generalised Scheme of Preferences, thirty-three of which have an Everything But Arms<sup>49</sup> scheme. As a result of this web of trade agreements, most African countries can export duty-free to the EU. In 2019, more than 90% of African exports entered the EU duty-free<sup>50</sup>. These trade agreements tend to be asymmetrical, as African countries can still impose import tariffs on European exports. Flanders co-determines Belgium's position on trade through intra-federal consultation. Because EU trade agreements are adopted by consensus, Flanders has relatively significant influence within this decision-making process.

New EU legislation, such as the Deforestation Regulation, the carbon border tax and the various directives on companies' duty of care regarding human rights and the environment, will likely have a real impact on trade. The Deforestation Regulation places the responsibility on companies to demonstrate that their products and commodities<sup>51</sup> have not contributed to deforestation. A second example is the carbon border tax, which imposes a carbon tax on certain goods imported into the EU, such as hydrogen. Lastly, the duty-of-care directives for companies differ in focus and scope. The CSRD, for example, imposes new obligations on companies regarding sustainability reporting for key (material) risks within the value chain. The CSDDD, on the other hand, expects companies and their partners to identify any risks of human rights and environmental violations and, whenever necessary, to take action to prevent, mitigate and end them<sup>52</sup>, both for their own operations and throughout the value chain.

**Flanders's spearhead cluster policy does not, or hardly, translate into relations with Africa for the time being** - Flanders supports partnerships between Flemish companies through VLAIO's cluster policy. Flanders's spearhead clusters are strategic partnerships between companies, research institutions and the government within specific sectors that are crucial for the region's economic development. These clusters focus on innovation and sustainable growth. For now, the spearhead clusters have little or no place in the cooperation with Africa. Of the six ongoing spearhead clusters, respondents mainly put forward the logistics cluster (VIL) and the agri-food cluster (Flanders' FOOD) as potentially important for relations with Africa. Other important clusters are the 'Blue Cluster' and MEDVIA. The Blue Cluster promotes innovation for a sustainable marine economy, with prominent players such as Jan De Nul and DEME. MEDVIA focuses on innovation in health, a central theme following the COVID-19 pandemic and in light of Africa's call to strengthen capacity for local vaccine production.

**FIT plays an important role in economic relations with Africa** - FIT offers export support, among other things, by organising trade missions for both small and large companies and providing a global network of local contact points. It also collects and processes data on companies' trade flows and interests, guides Flemish companies in major World Bank tenders and supports grant applications. In 2015, FIT launched a specific strategy for sub-Saharan Africa (2015-2019) based on the observation that, with only one Flemish representative, Flanders was insufficiently present

<sup>49</sup> European Commission. (2024, 18 October). Trade. [Economic Partnerships](#).

<sup>50</sup> European Commission. (2020). [The European Union and Africa: Partners in Trade](#). Brussels: European Commission.

<sup>51</sup> Key African commodities such as timber, cocoa, rubber and coffee are all covered by the Directive.

<sup>52</sup> European Parliament. (2024, 24 April). [Due diligence: MEPs adopt rules for firms on human rights and environment | News | European Parliament](#).

in sub-Saharan Africa<sup>53</sup>. The strategy highlighted two main objectives: expanding the footprint of Flemish companies in sub-Saharan Africa by identifying new market opportunities and facilitating access to these markets; and strengthening trade relations between Flanders and SSA countries by promoting partnerships within regions and sectors and sharing expertise. The strategy also envisaged a greater involvement of the African diaspora in Belgium, for example by actively involving them in trade missions.

Private sector respondents appreciate FIT's actions and, more specifically, its trade missions. These trade missions aim to support Flemish companies in their international expansion by exploring new markets, establishing contacts and better understanding local circumstances. The professionalism and preparation of trade mission participants have also clearly improved since the early years.

**FIT supports companies in tenders for major multilateral institutions** - The commitment to collaborating with multilateral institutions, such as the World Bank, the EIB and EBRD, and the UN, and to fostering public-private partnerships in sub-Saharan Africa have demonstrated that significant opportunities are available for Flemish companies in sectors such as energy, water management, healthcare and infrastructure. Belgium ranks fifth on average among countries where the UN procured goods and services over the past decade, accounting for a total of US\$ 1,748 million in 2022 and 871 million in 2023<sup>54</sup>. Flemish companies are reported to represent 41% of this in 2023. However, there is a need for a deeper understanding of and adaptation to the local business environment and culture, as well as enhanced support for Flemish companies in terms of financing opportunities and risk management. FIT also cooperates with other Flemish partners, including Enabel, Entrepreneurs for Entrepreneurs, Exchange vzw, the Ghent Africa Platform and the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture Belgium-Luxembourg-Africa-Caribbean-Pacific.

**In 2024, FIT developed a renewed approach to supporting Flemish companies in Africa within a broad regional strategy** - After a hiatus of several years, a new Africa Strategy was developed in 2024 as part of a renewed Africa-Middle East-Asia (AMEA) approach. The new strategy commits to a tighter geographical and sectoral demarcation that defines the services delivered by country. Strong cooperation between FIT, AWEX and hub.brussels allows the various agencies to use each other's services. Through this partnership, FIT can provide the best possible support in South Africa, the DRC, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Morocco and Egypt. The priority sectors are green energy, food technology, logistics (gateway), and data and digital applications. For now, few explicit links are made to other Flemish policy areas when making strategic choices. This may be due to the lack of clear overarching policy lines in the Flemish Africa policy, which is why FIT uses its autonomy to further shape its policy.

### 4.3.2 Networking and information sharing

**Companies mainly network within their own sector** - Sector networks not only organise themselves at the Flemish or Belgian level, but can also have a European and international reach. 'Club Afric' is one example of such an active Flemish network, organised by the Port of Antwerp-Bruges, which brings together some 200 economic actors around opportunities in Africa each year.

<sup>53</sup> FIT. (2015). [Strategie voor FIT in sub-Sahara Afrika](#). Brussels: Flanders Investment & Trade.

<sup>54</sup> UNOPS. (2024). [2023 Annual Statistical Report](#). Copenhagen: UNOPS.

**Voka and CBL-ACP are developing an offering for companies that want to establish relations with Africa but expect a clear policy framework** - In addition to existing FIT activities, the Flanders Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Voka) is working on a support package focused on networking and information sharing for Flemish companies entering the African market. This includes attention to sharing successful Flemish practices through peer learning. Voka will expand this support through a MENA Business Club<sup>55</sup>. Nevertheless, the interest of Flemish companies within Voka in Africa is still growing, mainly due to Africa's low share in Flanders's export and import activities and a lack of awareness of opportunities in Africa. The Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture Belgium-Luxembourg-Africa-Caribbean-Pacific (CBL-ACP) also supports companies in developing trade and investment relations in these regions. The organisation involves the diaspora in establishing contacts and organises networking events, often in collaboration with FIT, AWEX or the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This initiative has set up a collaboration with Ghent University's Africa Platform. Despite these actions, Voka has determined that the impact of its initiatives for Africa is limited by the lack of a policy framework that aligns the actions of the different actors, sets priorities and offers additional support for their implementation.

Flemish companies like UMICORE, DEME, Antwerp World Diamond Centre, Brussels Airlines, Greenventures, Vyncke, Port of Antwerp-Bruges, Alterfin, Incofin and others have been successfully operating in Africa for many years. However, several interviews have shown that mobilising a broader segment of Flemish companies remains a structural challenge. Respondents stressed, for example, that, apart from a small group of companies, many Flemish companies and networks are still showing little interest in Africa for the moment. According to these respondents, this lack of interest is mainly due to a lack of know-how and knowledge about the continent, local economic conditions and opportunities, and the absence of a network of Flemish, Belgian and African cooperation partners. In addition, Africa is still too often regarded as a 'problem region', and there is often a lack of awareness of Africa's importance and the economic opportunities this continent offers. The fragmentation of resources and the lack of synergy and cooperation between Flanders, Belgium and the EU also represent obstacles for smaller Flemish companies.

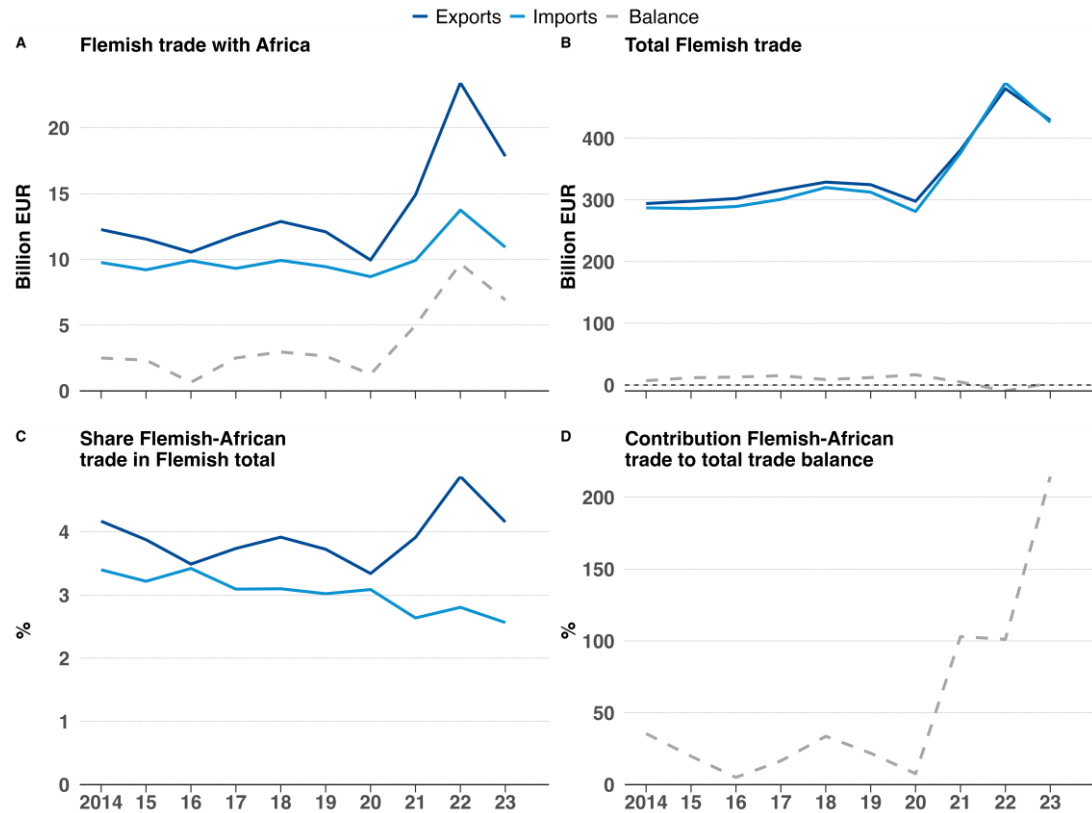
Most active companies and sectors have remained fairly constant over the years. In recent years, however, a certain turnaround can be observed, with several new larger Flemish players exploring the African market using a professional and structured approach.

### 4.3.3 Trends in the trade of goods and services

**Following a stable period, Flanders's goods trade with Africa has increased sharply since 2020** - The value of Flemish-African trade was stable at around €23 billion a year with a positive trade balance of around €2.5 billion (Figure 4.1) between 2014 and 2020. Between 2020 and 2022, exports from Flanders to Africa climbed steeply, from €10 billion in 2020 to almost €18 billion in 2022; an 80% increase. This increase in exports caused the trade balance to peak at €9.7 billion in 2022. To explain this striking increase, experts refer to the high demand during the COVID-19 pandemic, on the one hand, and oil market dynamics following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, on the other. Indeed, the latter caused (refined) oil prices to soar and made it more urgent to find alternatives to sanctioned Russian oil, which strongly boosted trade with oil producer Nigeria.

<sup>55</sup> Voka. (2024). [Business Club Middle East & North-Africa](#).

FIGURE 4.1 Flemish-African goods trade 2014-2023



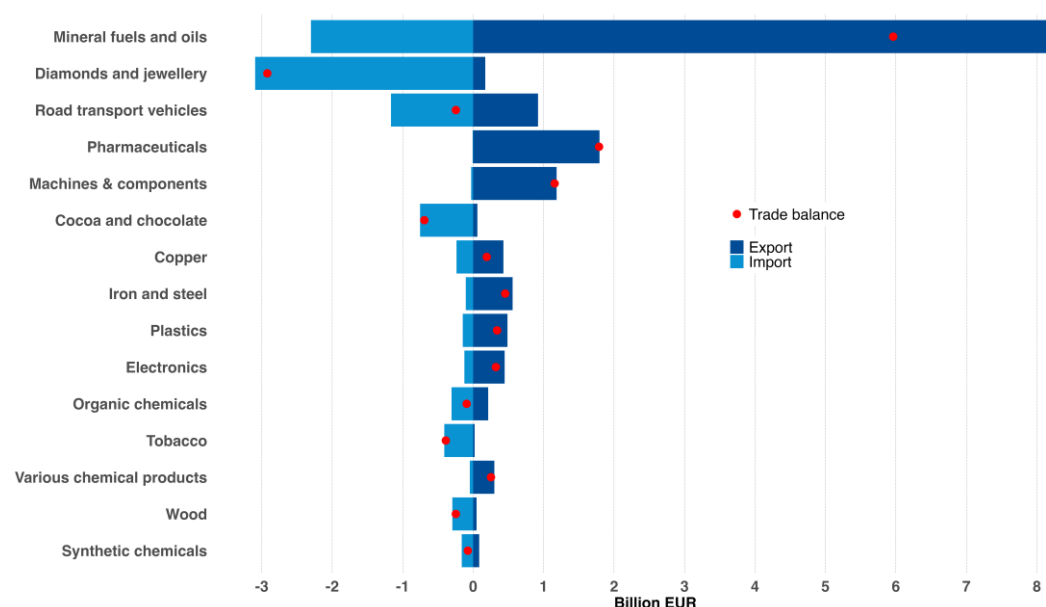
Source: FIT

**Although Africa represents a small share of Flanders's total trade, it helps ensure a positive Flemish trade balance** - In the last decade, exports to Africa fluctuated around 4% of Flanders's total exports, and imports from Africa around 3% (Figure 4.1). Thus, Africa as a whole is a rather small trading partner, similar to the scale of Flemish-Italian trade. On the other hand, Africa's contribution to Flanders's trade surplus is much more substantial. Flanders has a small trade surplus because its exports and imports are almost equal every year. In 2023, for example, Flanders exported €429 billion and imported €426 billion, resulting in a trade surplus of €3.2 billion, or less than 1% of both exports and imports. The trade surplus with Africa was almost €7 billion that same year. Africa thus contributed disproportionately to the 2023 trade surplus. Over the last decade, Africa represented over half of Flanders's trade surplus, with outliers above 100%, especially between 2021 and 2023.

**In 2023, oil and pharmaceuticals together accounted for more than half of the total trade value** - Flanders's refined oil exports accounted for about one-third of its total trade value, followed at a great distance by pharmaceuticals, machinery and components (Figure 4.2). A third group at some distance includes exports of cars, plastics, iron and steel. Flanders's exports thus consist of high-value-added products. Africa mainly exports low-value-added products to Flanders such as gemstones, crude oil, cocoa, tobacco, fruit, wood and copper (Figure 4.2). One exception is car imports from Africa; these finished industrial products originate mainly from South Africa and Morocco. This indicates that, even after decades of focusing on developing and supporting value

chains, Africa mainly exports raw materials and few industrial products or products with high economic added value.

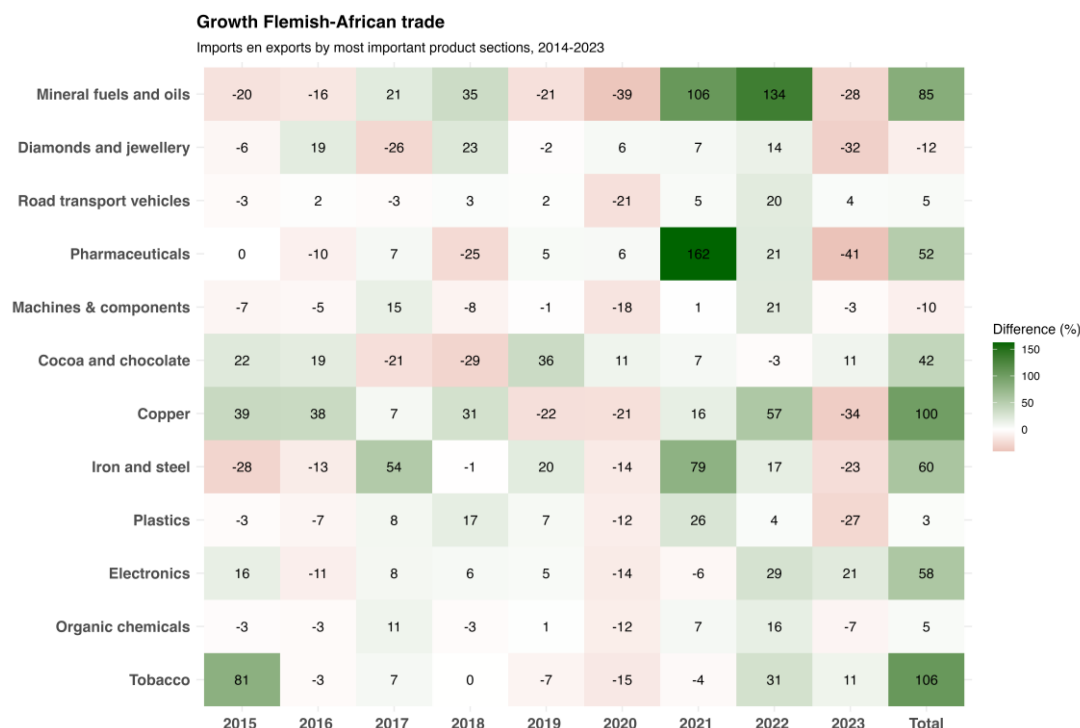
FIGURE 4.2 Flanders's top export and import sectors and trade balance in 2023



Source: FIT

**The 'heavyweights' among traded products grew substantially over the past decade** - Figure 4.3 provides a historical picture of trends in trade with Africa for the main products. As indicated earlier, the stronger fluctuations for some products in recent years are linked to global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but also, for example, to the implosion of oil refining capacity in Nigeria between 2018 and 2022. The biggest riser was pharmaceuticals in 2021, driven by vaccine exports; the main category, mineral products (contains refined oil), jumped from €5.7 billion to €10.6 billion, an 85% increase. Not everything is rising: between 2014 and 2023 trade in the major categories of gems, diamonds and machinery declined by approximately 10%.

FIGURE 4.3 Growth of trade between Flanders and Africa; imports and exports with main products, 2014-2023



Source: FIT

#### BOX 9: THE BOOM - AND UPCOMING BUST - OF ANTWERP OIL TO NIGERIA

Following the collapse of its oil refineries<sup>56</sup> and the rising oil prices after the Russian invasion, Africa's largest oil producer, Nigeria, increasingly imported processed oil. Owing to a Dutch export ban, this refined oil originates largely from Flanders, where the Port of Antwerp-Bruges is home to major oil processing plants. With a total export value of €8.2 billion in 2022, oil thus became Flanders's main export product to Africa, driven mainly by the situation in Nigeria. In fact, this made Belgium the second-largest exporter to Nigeria after China in 2022<sup>57</sup>. However, the quality of this processed oil is below European standards, which is why Belgium is working on an export ban, based on the Dutch example. Nigeria wants to boost its own refining capacity as soon as possible, regardless of any potential ban. Plans are in place, for instance, for a large refinery to be built on a surface area of an estimated 4,000 football fields and a budget of US\$ 20 billion near the capital Lagos. This refinery - the largest in both Africa and Europe - would eliminate the oil trade between Europe and Nigeria, totalling almost €16 billion a year, and have a major impact on the volume and trade surplus of Flemish-African trade. The absence of this trade is expected to put additional pressure on European refineries, which are already under stress from growing competition, resulting in possible closures<sup>58</sup>.

<sup>56</sup> Agency Report. (2023, 5 December). [Alarm Bells Ring As Nigeria's Refineries Collapse By 92%](#). Leadership News.

<sup>57</sup> OEC. (2024). [Nigeria](#) [Dataset].

<sup>58</sup> Ghaddar, A. & Harvey, R. (2024, 27 March). [Nigeria's Dangote oil refinery could accelerate European sector's decline](#). Reuters.



**Commodities dominate Flemish-African trade** - Only few countries and sectors dominate Flemish-African trade, a pattern repeated in Africa's trade relations with other European countries and regions. Africa's historical lack of economic diversification currently translates into exports dominated by a small group of commodities<sup>59</sup>. This creates vulnerability to global shocks in commodity prices and reduces economic and political resilience. It was discussed earlier how important diamond exports are for Botswana, accounting for 30% to 40% of government revenue and the bulk of exports. As a result of increased competition with synthetic diamonds, Botswana's economic growth had to be adjusted downwards in recent years from over 4% to 1%, pushing the government deficit to 6% of GDP<sup>60</sup>.

**Nigeria, South Africa and Algeria were the main trading partners in 2023** - Owing to its oil trade, Nigeria has been Flanders's most important trading partner by far in Africa in recent years, representing a value that was three times higher (€4.7 billion) in 2023 than that of Egypt, ranking second with €1.5 billion. However, this is a recent development for both countries (Figure 4.4). South Africa was the largest trading partner until 2021. Moreover, it exports more to Flanders than it imports, mainly by exporting precious stones and cars. Geographically speaking, Flanders's main trading partners are spread across North Africa, West Africa and Southern Africa, with none of the regions dominating strongly. Sub-Saharan Africa is a more important region than North Africa for both imports (two times more) and exports (three times more), which can be explained in part by the exceptional situation of the Nigerian oil trade.

#### BOX 10: BELGIUM AND NAMIBIA - A PARTNERSHIP IN GREEN HYDROGEN

At the COP26 in 2021, the Belgian Energy Minister and the Namibian Minister of Mines and Energy signed a Memorandum of Understanding to invest in the production and distribution of green hydrogen and green ammonia in Namibia. An MoU was also signed between Belgium and Oman. The energy partnership also seeks to strengthen dialogue and knowledge exchange, support collaboration between scientific research institutions and promote research and development<sup>61</sup>. The EU also recognises the strategic value of opportunities in Namibia and has developed the "EU-Namibia strategic partnership on Sustainable Raw Materials Value Chains and Renewable Hydrogen" with the country as part of the Global Gateway<sup>62</sup>. During King Philip's 2024 State Visit to Namibia, a host of other investments were announced. For example, the Port of Antwerp-Bruges will contribute €20 million to developing a hydrogen and ammonia export port in Walvis Bay<sup>63</sup>. This will make Namibia an important link in the global hydrogen trade and a crucial partner for the 'hydrogen import coalition' between the port, DEME, Engie, Exmar, Fluxys and WaterstofNet<sup>64</sup>. For instance, the Global African Hydrogen Summit 2024 took place in the Namibian capital, Windhoek. The Cleanergy Green Hydrogen site was also presented during the State Visit. This hydrogen refuelling station was developed by Cleanergy Solutions Namibia, a collaboration between Belgian company CMB.TECH and Namibia's Ohlthaver & List (O&L) Group. Together with the Port of

<sup>59</sup> United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2022). [Economic Development in Africa: Rethinking the foundations of export diversification in Africa - the catalytic role of business and financial services](#) (TD/B/EX(72)/4).

<sup>60</sup> Reuters. (2024, 13 July). [IMF slashes Botswana's 2024 growth forecast amid diamond market woes](#). Reuters. And [IMF staff completes 2024 Article IV mission to Botswana](#). (2024, 12 July). IMF.

<sup>61</sup> CBL-ACP. (2021, 17 November). [The signing of a MOU between Minister Alweeendo \(Namibia\) and Minister Van der Straeten \(Belgium\) - CBL-ACP](#). CBL-ACP.

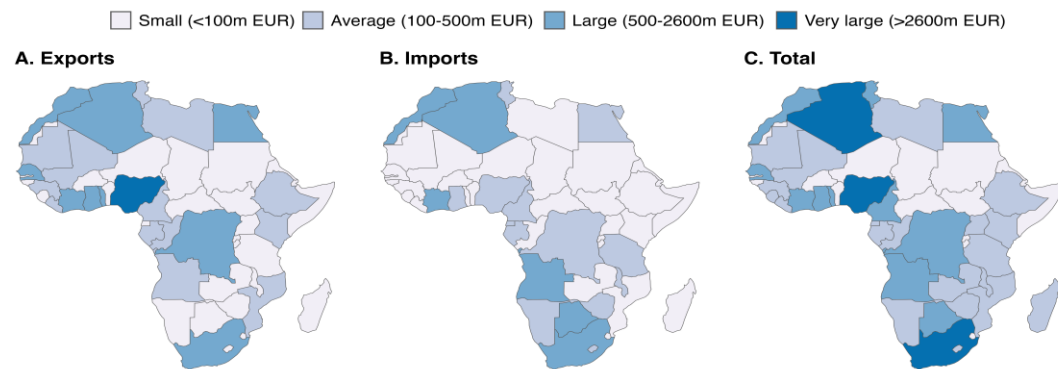
<sup>62</sup> European Commission. (2023, 24 October). [Global Gateway: EU and Namibia agree on next steps of strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials and green hydrogen](#).

<sup>63</sup> Desmet, J. (2024, 3 May). [Port of Antwerp-Bruges invests heavily in Namibian hydrogen port](#). Flows.

<sup>64</sup> Port of Antwerp-Bruges. (2024, 5 February). [Hydrogen](#). Port of Antwerp-Bruges.

Antwerp-Bruges, these companies are also working on Africa's first hydrogen-fuelled vessel. In turn, the Hydrogen Academy offers knowledge exchange and training on hydrogen technology<sup>65</sup>. A few weeks after the State Visit, Belgium hosted a Namibian delegation for a ten-day working visit around hydrogen and renewable energy. This working visit, in collaboration with Enabel, strengthens collaboration between the two countries and lays the technical foundations for their energy partnership<sup>66</sup>.

FIGURE 4.4 Trade between Flanders and Africa in 2023



Source: FIT

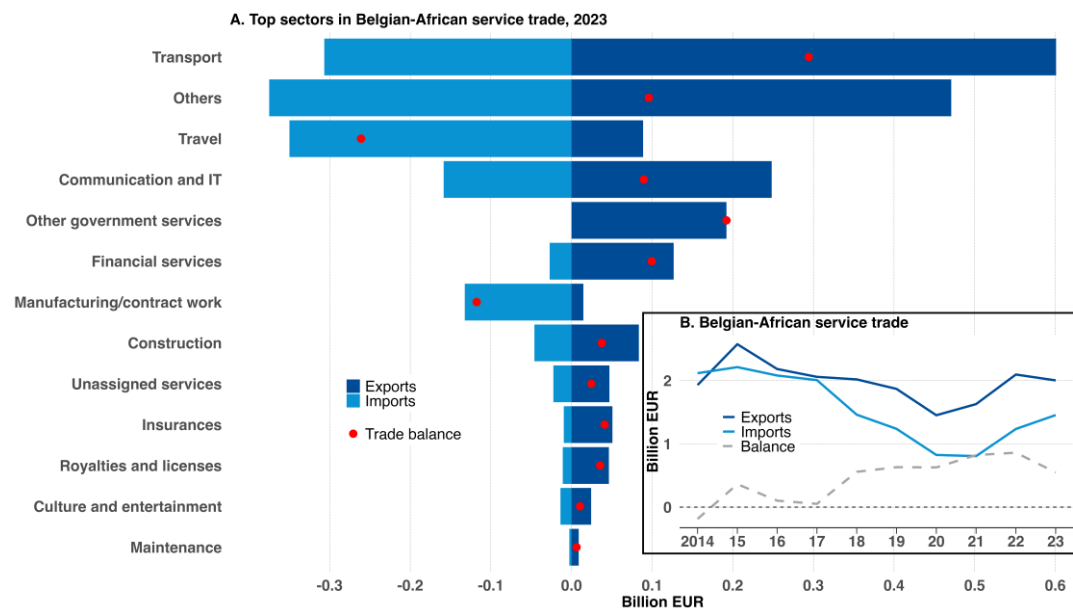
**Belgium's services trade with Africa is roughly one-tenth of goods trade** - Detailed figures on the services trade between Flanders and Africa are lacking<sup>67</sup>. Belgium's export of services to Africa (Figure 4.5) amounted to approximately €2 billion annually between 2014 and 2023. Imports fluctuate between €1-2 billion, with a trade surplus of between €0-1 billion, which is significantly smaller than the €18 billion in goods exports and €10 billion in goods imports in 2023. The main sectors in 2023 were transport (about €1 billion in total volume), travel (about €0.7 billion) and communications and IT (about €0.4 billion). These services are mainly delivered to South Africa, Egypt and Morocco.

<sup>65</sup> Willemijns, L. (2024, 4 May). [Staatshoofden België en Namibië wonen eerste waterstoftankbeurt bij Cleanergy Solutions Namibia bij](#). DVO.

<sup>66</sup> Blanche. (2024, 22 May). [Belgium hosts Namibian Delegation as part of the Belgian-Namibian partnership on hydrogen and renewable energies](#). Enabel - Belgian Development Agency.

<sup>67</sup> In addition, figures on services are generally less reliable than goods trade, because a significant share is conducted online and, therefore, more difficult to monitor.

FIGURE 4.5 Belgian-African services trade in 2023



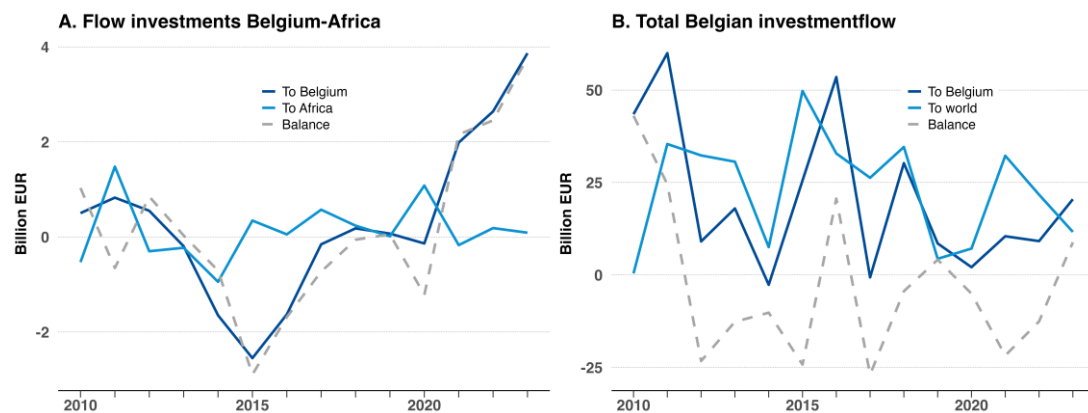
Source: Eurostat (2023). [International trade in services](#).

#### Investments by Belgian companies remain limited for now (but figures may be incomplete)<sup>68</sup>

- According to the National Bank of Belgium, Belgian companies (direct investment, total capital) annually invested an average of €123 million in Africa between 2010 and 2023, with a peak of €1.5 billion in 2020 (Figure 4.6). Overall, investments and losses fluctuate between €-1 and €1 billion per year. Compared to trade figures, there is no clear growth in this, which means that it is still a big step from trading to investing in the partner countries. African investments in Belgium more than double Belgian investments in Africa: an average of €310 million per year over the same period, with investment outliers of €2.6 billion in 2022 and €3.9 billion in 2023, and an outflow of €2.5 billion in 2015. Little information is available about these African investments in Belgium, but there are indications that some are linked to a capital flight by African elites to secure their wealth. Generally, it can be stated that the level of investment in Africa is lower than in other regions, such as Europe or Asia. Still, there is growing interest from Flanders to invest in Africa, especially in logistics and green energy.

<sup>68</sup> The National Bank's figures are probably incomplete as they differ greatly from publicly announced and realised investments. This is partly due to the complexity of ownership, establishment and origin of investments. For example, AB InBev acquired South African brewer SABMiller for US\$ 107 billion in 2016, a transaction which is not visible in Figure 4.6 because SABMiller's headquarters are located in the UK.

FIGURE 4.6 Investments between Belgium and Africa



Source: [NBB](#)

## 4.4 Flemish development cooperation

**Development cooperation has been an important part of relations between Africa and the Flemish public administration in recent decades.**

The present section discusses the geographical spread, the main beneficiaries and the thematic focus of total Official Development Assistance (ODA). Next, it briefly focuses on DKBZA's country programmes and actions within other policy areas. The final section pertains to civil society actions. The main focus is on projects created with Flemish ODA financing. They are explicitly mentioned in those sections, which also consider other sources of ODA financing.

### 4.4.1 Total Flemish ODA: facts and figures

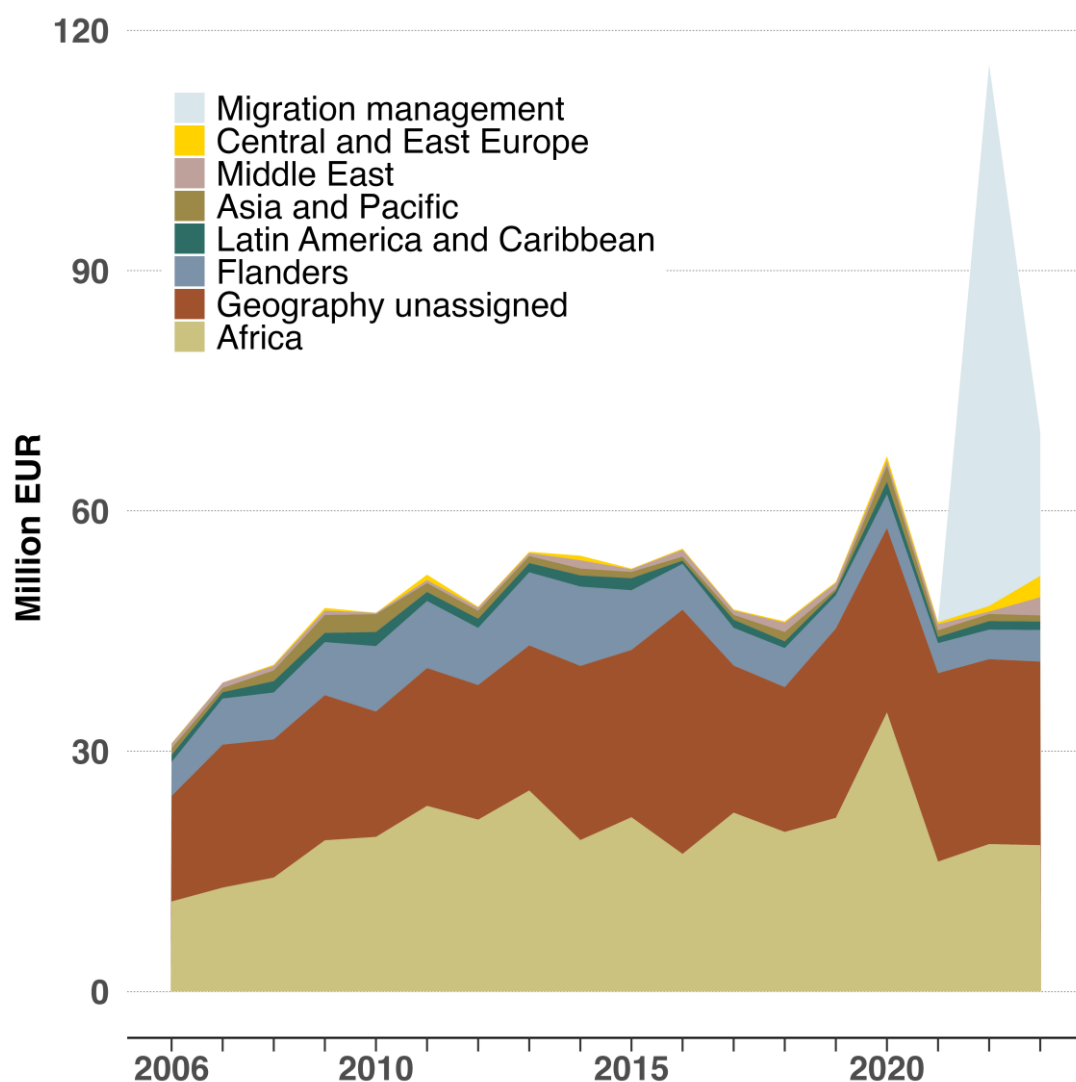
Total annual ODA hovered around €50 million in recent decades. Over the past period, however, Flemish ODA shot up due to spending on refugee reception. More recently, the Government of Flanders announced annual savings totalling €2 million in Flemish ODA financing (2024-2029). About half of the ODA is coordinated by DKBZA; the other half is contributed by other departments, with the Department of Education and Training, and the Department of Work, Economy, Science, Innovation and Social Economy making the largest contributions.

#### a. Geographical spread

**The focus is on a limited number of countries** - The Flemish public administration's development policy spans several regions and continents, but a significant share of resources is concentrated in a limited number of African countries. Because Flanders is a geographical region within a federal state structure, its ODA budget is substantially smaller than that of the federal level. In recent years, this reality has made the Flemish public administration opt for a geographical concentration on South Africa, Mozambique and Malawi. Recently, the ODA component of cooperation with South Africa was phased out, while a new programme was worked out with Morocco. Figure 4.7 shows the relatively large share for Africa compared to the other continents. Besides African aid, the large share of the 'geographically unearmarked' category stands out. Part

of the latter category also ends up in Africa, but the specific proportion cannot be deduced from the available data<sup>69</sup>.

FIGURE 4.7 Geographical breakdown of Flemish ODA (in million euros, current prices)\*



\* In 2022 and 2023, €67.6 million and €17.9 million of Flemish ODA were spent respectively on refugee management.  
Source: DKBUZA

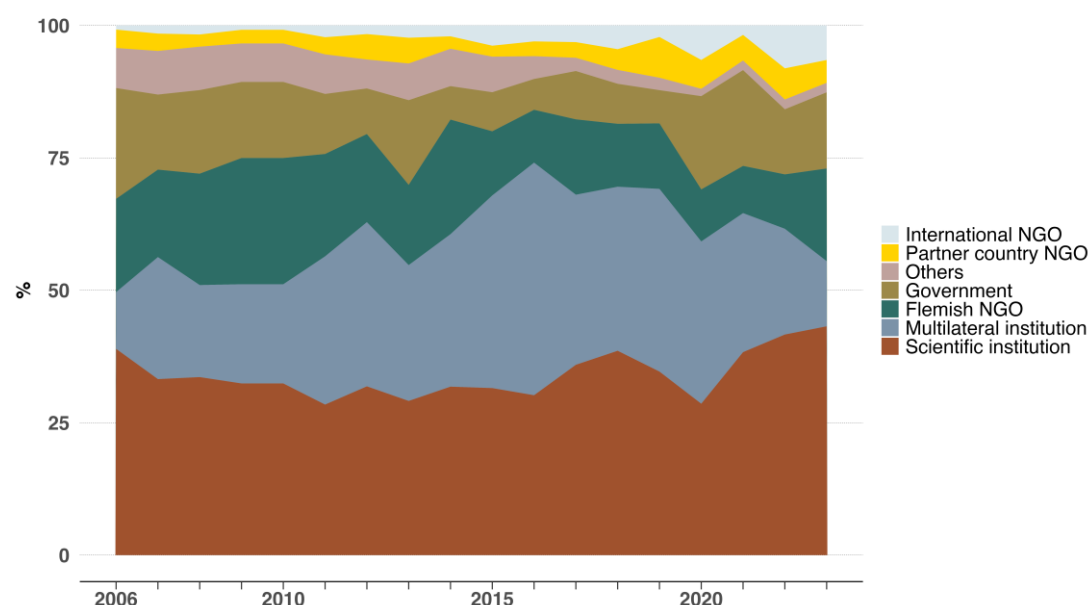
## b. Main implementing partners

**Knowledge institutions and multilateral institutions are the leading partners in the Flemish public administration's development policy** - Over the past decade, knowledge institutions have been the main beneficiaries of Flemish ODA financing. This share even rose to almost 43% of total ODA in 2023 (Figure 4.8). Multilateral institutions are also an important partner but their share dropped substantially in recent years, from 44% in 2016 to 12% in 2023. Possible

<sup>69</sup> This category includes ODA-able expenditure by other departments and services of the Flemish public administration in the form of projects, programmes or funds and core funding for multilateral organisations.

explanations for these drops are the shift in financing towards climate finance and direct cooperation with partner countries through country strategy papers. Although the share for Flemish NGOs and NPOs fluctuated over time and still accounted for around 24% of ODA financing in 2009 and 2010, it dropped to less than 9% in 2021. However, their share increased again in 2023. For a number of years now, a limited share of 5% to 8% of ODA has been allocated to international and local NGOs in developing countries.

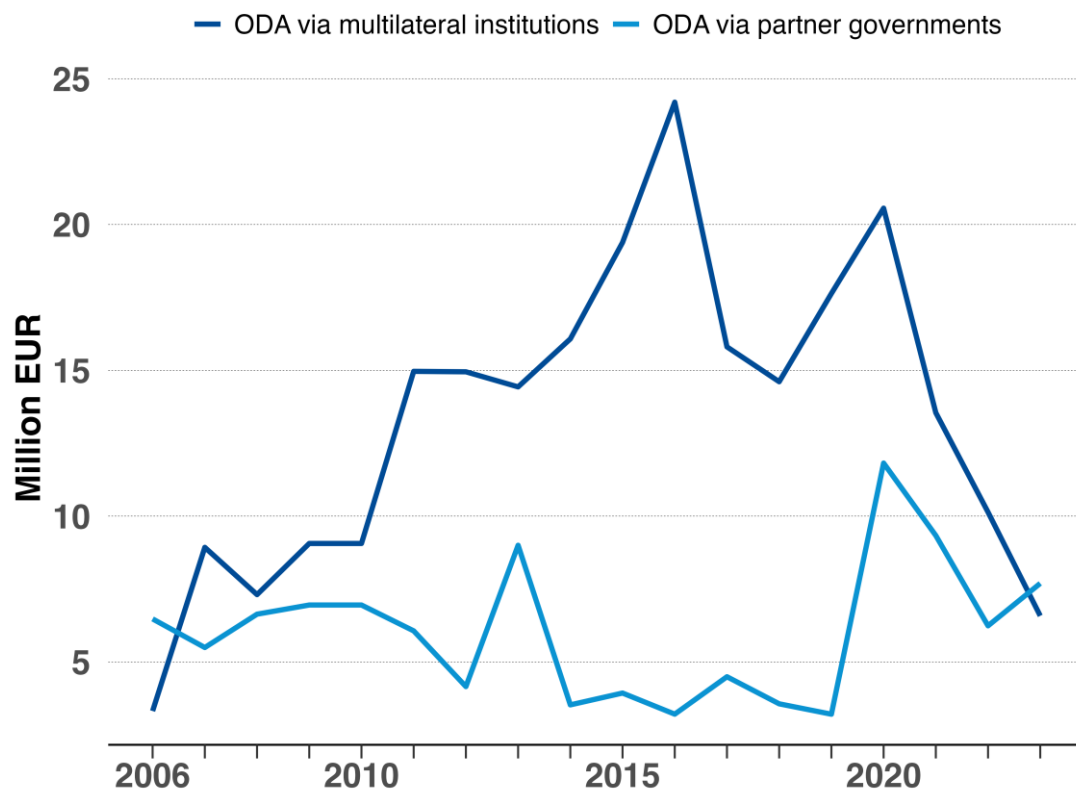
FIGURE 4.8 Flemish ODA by implementing partner (% of total ODA)\*



\* In 2022 and 2023, €67.6 million and €17.9 million of Flemish ODA were spent respectively on refugee management. This expenditure is not included in this analysis.  
Source: DKBZA

Figure 4.9 compares ODA spent through multilateral institutions versus ODA to governments in the partner country. UNESCO, the FAO, the WHO and the ILO were the main multilateral partners. Apart from the temporary peaks for multilateral financing in 2016 and 2020, which may be linked to climate finance provided by the Flemish public administration during those periods, the sharp decline after 2020 is striking, both in absolute (Figure 4.9) and relative terms (Figure 4.8). This can partly be explained by the decision to spend the climate finance budget through project calls and to explicitly earmark it for Flemish partners from 2021 onwards. In addition, greater priority was given to country strategy papers.

FIGURE 4.9 Flemish ODA through multilateral institutions and partner country governments (in million euros, current prices)



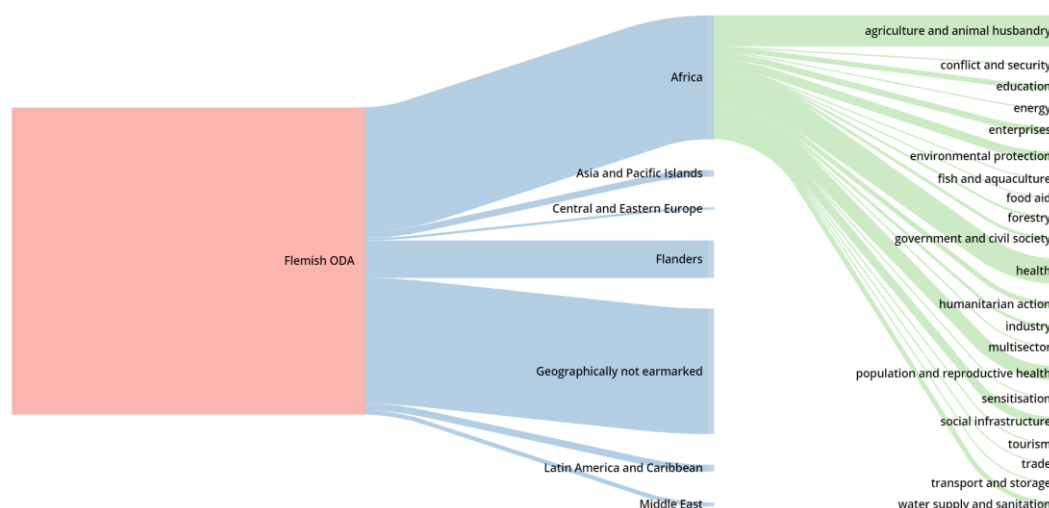
\* In 2022 and 2023, €67.6 million and €17.9 million of Flemish ODA were spent, respectively, on refugee management. This spending is not included as the figure would be distorted by these spikes in spending in Flanders.

Source: DKBZA

### c. Thematic focus

**Agriculture and livestock farming, healthcare and reproductive health have been the main sectors of Flanders's development policy in recent years** - Figure 4.10 shows the key sectors of Flemish ODA for Africa. Between 2006 and 2023, agriculture and livestock farming (24%) were particularly prominent, followed by healthcare (20%), and population and reproductive health (11%). New themes like climate change and green economy jobs and entrepreneurship have also gained importance in recent years. This is specifically the case for the emerging cooperation with Morocco and South Africa, although the development cooperation component of the latter is being phased out. A 2008 study by the SARiV advisory council found that Flemish development cooperation at the time was mainly committed to traditional themes, such as agriculture and healthcare, in which many large donors are active. They recommended seeking greater alignment with areas in which Flanders has unique expertise, such as regional development, SMEs and innovation.

FIGURE 4.10 Flemish ODA by sector (total between 2006 and 2023)\*



\* In 2022 and 2023, €67.6 million and €17.9 million of Flemish ODA were spent, respectively, on refugee management. This expenditure is not included in this analysis.  
Source: DKBZA

#### 4.4.2 DKBZA: four country programmes

This section briefly outlines the history and substantive choices of Flemish government cooperation with Africa. Since the mid-1990s, Flanders has been expanding bilateral development cooperation, initially with three partner countries in Southern Africa, recently joined by Morocco. Flanders always uses country strategy papers created in consultation with the partner governments. In addition, more recent papers gradually paid growing attention to the involvement of other stakeholders such as civil society, academia, the private sector, international organisations and local communities.

**South Africa** - Official cooperation between Flanders and South Africa started in 1994 with the end of Apartheid. Cooperation took place through small projects and initiatives supported by a wide range of actors (e.g. government departments, NGOs, universities and private actors) and covered various themes (e.g. projects on democratisation, culture and poverty reduction). From 2000, cooperation became more coherent and concentrated on three South African provinces with a strong focus on the role of the private sector: SME development, food security and agribusiness. This thematic focus was maintained in the 2012-2016 Country Strategy Paper<sup>70</sup>. The focus of the latest 2017-2021 Country Strategy Paper shifted to climate change and green economy. Within this collaboration, Flanders supports the private sector and social innovations to address societal challenges, such as the impact of climate change on vulnerable groups<sup>71</sup>. Since 2022, this programme has been in transition, phasing out development cooperation and focusing more on economic, cultural and diplomatic ties. Such transitions are part of a broader dynamic within EU

<sup>70</sup> Vaes, S., De Bruyn, T. & Huyse, H. (2016). [Flemish Cooperation with South Africa Post 2016: What role for ODA?](#) HIVA-KU Leuven.

<sup>71</sup> Government of Flanders (2017). [Country Strategy Paper Flanders - South Africa 2017 - 2021](#).



development cooperation, which is increasingly presented as mutually beneficial and related to European interests, and gradually moves away from the traditional donor-recipient relationship<sup>72</sup>.

**Mozambique** - Cooperation with Mozambique began in 2002 with an initial focus on HIV/AIDS prevention through small-scale projects, further complemented by initiatives within mainly technical and vocational education. Over time, healthcare and policy were more exclusively focused on, with specific attention to promoting the sexual and reproductive health and rights of disadvantaged groups, among others. In 2021, both sides negotiated a new country strategy paper for the 2022-2025 period, with the health sector and sexual and reproductive health once again featuring as the central axis in the cooperation.

**Malawi** - Since 2007, Flanders has maintained cooperation with Malawi based on four successive country strategy papers, each focusing on two pillars: the agricultural sector and women and youth emancipation. They are seen as levers for reducing poverty, achieving food security and boosting the economy in general. The latest 2024-2028 Country Strategy Paper builds on both pillars, but devotes specific attention to the inclusion of secondary cities in rural development, the commercialisation of agriculture, and climate-smart agricultural practices. This new paper also provides support for the decentralisation process in Malawi.

**Morocco** - Cooperation with Morocco was recently formalised in a country strategy paper<sup>73</sup>. Flanders and Morocco wish to cooperate in the future to boost green jobs and pursue innovative solutions to joint challenges in the areas of water scarcity, circular economy and renewable energy. The cooperation contributes to reducing poverty and inequality, specifically for youth and women. Between 2024 and 2028, the Government of Flanders will invest €25 million in cooperation with Morocco<sup>74</sup>.

#### BOX 11: INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO THE PARTNERSHIP WITH MOROCCO

Cooperation with the middle-income country Morocco marks a shift to a more partnership-oriented approach, with development objectives going hand in hand with economic, educational and cultural cooperation.

Flanders and Morocco aim for a more balanced partnership that focuses on mutual knowledge exchange, among other things. The topics of renewable energy, circular economy and water scarcity, which resonate strongly in both countries, provide a sound basis for cooperation and create new opportunities to internationalise expertise from Flanders. For instance, Flanders's waste management expertise can be used for the circular economy. Morocco, on the other hand, plays a leading role in renewable energy, offering Flanders an opportunity to gain expertise. Besides contributing to sustainable development, this also creates opportunities to strengthen economic cooperation. This approach contrasts with the more traditional donor-recipient relationship with low-income countries Mozambique and Malawi.

Both access to decent work and climate change have a demonstrable impact on human mobility. By focusing on the development of the green economy and the creation of local employment Morocco and Flanders seek to address the root causes of migration specifically.

<sup>72</sup> Sherriff, A. & Veron, P. (2024). [What is driving change in Europe's international cooperation agenda?](#) Part 1. ECDPM.

<sup>73</sup> Vlaamse Regering. (2024). [Landenstrategienota Vlaanderen-Marokko 2024-2028](#).

<sup>74</sup> Flanders Chancellery & Foreign Office. (2023, 23 February). [New partnership Flanders-Morocco: green economy and sustainable energy \(fdfa.be\)](#)

As a middle-income country with a relatively stable political and economic climate, Morocco has a number of preconditions in place to build a long-term partnership with a win-win perspective. The renewed partnership with Morocco is still in its early stages, with pilot projects being used to test the new cooperation model. For example, a project by VITO and MASEN<sup>75</sup> aims to increase energy flow capacity in rural areas using microgrids. The increased capacity should boost local industry and economic activities. The Adelphi-SEED project focuses on green entrepreneurship and job creation in Morocco by supporting small businesses in their transition to a green economy and increased employment capacity in regions with high unemployment.

### 4.4.3 Other Flemish policy areas

The following sections discuss ODA actions by other policy areas, specifically:

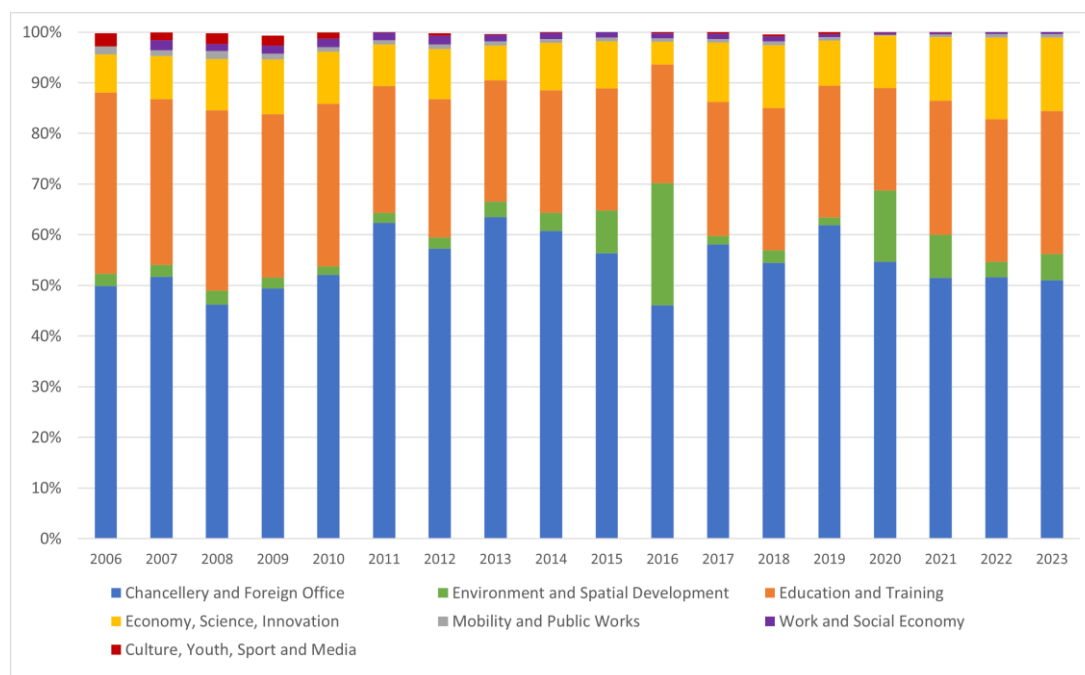
- Education and Training
- Work, Economy, Science, Innovation and Social Economy
- Environment
- Culture, Youth and Media

A broader approach is also taken, considering financing from the federal government, among others, because those sources make up a substantial share of actors within the education sector (VLIR-UOS and VVOB).

In 2023, DKBZA, on the one hand, and the other policy areas, on the other, each accounted for half of Flemish ODA. The share of the different policy areas fluctuated over the years, but Education and Training represented the largest share on average (varying between 20 and 35%; Figure 4.11).

<sup>75</sup> Flanders Chancellery & Foreign Office. (2022, 10 June). [Morocco: pilot projects green economy and employment](#)

FIGURE 4.11 Flemish ODA for other Flemish policy areas<sup>76</sup> compared to ODA financing from DKBZA\*



\* In 2022 and 2023, €67.6 million and €17.9 million of Flemish ODA were spent respectively on refugee management. This spending is not included as the figure would be distorted by these spikes in spending in Flanders.

Source: DKBZA

#### a. Education and Training

The **Education and Training policy area has the largest ODA spending after the Flanders Chancellery and Foreign Office** - The Department of Education and Training does not have a specific internationalisation strategy, but builds its international component through policy lines and collaborations with the EU, multilateral organisations (e.g. OECD, UNESCO and the Council of Europe) and bilateral relations with several partner countries. In the past, the Department of Education and Training funded projects in South Africa, Morocco and Mozambique. Today, the department's financing focuses entirely on supporting specialised Flemish institutions active in Africa or working on themes directly relevant to Africa through education, research and awareness-raising. Funds are mainly allocated to the Institute of Development Policy and the Institute of Tropical Medicine Antwerp (ITM) for scientific research, service delivery and post-initial education (see next section). Additionally, the Flemish Higher Education Council (VLUHR) receives financial support for its mobility grants aimed at international students enrolled in a Flemish master's programme. The VVOB receives support from Flanders for its SchoolLinks awareness programme, which promotes educational and cultural exchanges and world citizenship education.

The department's international efforts, which are not ODA-able, mainly include promoting student mobility within and outside Europe through the Brains on the Move programme<sup>77</sup>. Lastly, the

<sup>76</sup> Since these figures pertain to the period before 2025, they still refer to the EWI department, which has meanwhile been transformed into WEWIS.

<sup>77</sup> Departement Onderwijs en Vorming. (2013). [Brains on the move! Actieplan Mobiliteit 2013](#).

department also provides a budget for specific education projects from multilateral organisations such as the OECD, but even that financing is not specifically targeted at Africa.

**The VVOB focuses on strengthening the quality of education in seven African countries, and can rely, among other things, on federal financing to do so** - The VVOB was founded in the early 1980s as an employment agency for teachers and technical experts, in close cooperation with the Flemish Department of Education and Training. In the 1990s, the VVOB's operation evolved to a project-based approach and later on to a comprehensive programme approach aimed at building the capacity of education actors in low-income countries. In Africa, the VVOB is active in the DRC, Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe and works together with local governments, networks and educational organisations on access to quality education. The VVOB is classified under institutional actors because of its ties with the Flemish public administration and structural cooperation with the federal government. As an institutional actor, the VVOB, like VLIR-UOS, has access to multi-annual financing from Belgian development cooperation, from which the organisation draws 40-45% of its total funds<sup>78</sup>. Other sources of financing include foundations, corporations and public sector bodies.

#### BOX 12: INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT POLICY

The Institute of Development Policy (IOB)<sup>79</sup> at the University of Antwerp is a multidisciplinary institute dedicated to academic education, scientific research and community service. Its activities cover a wide range of economic, political and social aspects of development policy and management.

The academic programmes attract a diverse audience of students from Europe and the Global South, fostering intercultural exchange of knowledge and experiences. The international mix of students promotes a broad perspective on development issues.

The IOB's research focuses on development policy and is conducted at the local, national and international levels. It also actively influences policy advice and devotes special attention to the African Great Lakes region. The institute maintains partnerships with local academic institutions in countries such as the DRC, Uganda, Burundi and Tanzania. The IOB Great Lakes of Africa Centre embodies this focus and strengthens regional research efforts and partnerships.

The support from the Flemish public administration is of vital importance to the IOB's financial sustainability. In the past, core funding from the Flemish public administration amounted to about two-thirds of the IOB's total revenues<sup>80</sup>. The share of external financing through tertiary bodies increased sharply to around half of total revenues in recent years.

#### b. Universities and other research institutions

**Flemish education and research institutions have active partnerships with various African partners** - These are committed to knowledge exchange and capacity building, but also focus on direct cooperation through education programmes, research and joint publications. Academic

<sup>78</sup> Communication FIABEL.

<sup>79</sup> [Institute of Development Policy | Institute of Development Policy | University of Antwerp](#).

<sup>80</sup> Institute of Development Policy. (2023a). [Annual Report 2023](#). And Institute of Development Policy. (2023b). [Self Evaluation Report](#).

cooperation is an important component in Flanders's relations with Africa, as highlighted recently during a visit by the Government of Flanders and an academic delegation to South Africa<sup>81</sup>.

Financing for the international actions of research institutions and universities in Africa differs between institutions and is quite diverse. The federal level is the main source of financing for university development cooperation with Africa<sup>82</sup>, alongside other channels such as the EU, foundations and the private sector.

**The majority of Flemish funds contribute to the international actions of VITO, ITM and IOB**

- The Flemish Institute for Technological Research (VITO) is involved in the implementation of Flanders's country strategy papers and contributes to projects on microgrids, energy storage and sustainable agricultural interventions. The research institution also has several Pan-African projects ongoing. VITO receives financing from the Environment Department for climate-related projects. It maintains close collaboration with FIT to include Flemish companies in FIT's network and to mobilise them in Africa, and it provides scientific support for FIT's activities. Furthermore, VITO collaborates with spearhead cluster initiatives such as FLUX50 and Catalisti and supports the international leg of these collaborations. These strategic partnerships aim to strengthen Flanders's position in sustainable technologies and innovations.

The ITM operates in ten African countries across West, East and Southern Africa, where it participates in institutional capacity building. Support from Flanders is concentrated on two ITM projects in Mozambique. Apart from financing these actions, Flemish financing for the ITM also contributes to sustainable development in Africa through its education programmes, since African students make up the largest group in the ITM's international programmes. The ITM mainly receives structural, long-term financing from the federal government for actions in Africa, through successive five-year programmes with relevant institutions and governments in Guinea, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, the DRC and South Africa. In addition, the institute participates in international education projects and networks through close collaborations, such as tropED and the Alliance for Education in Tropical Medicine and International Public Health.

The previous section on the Department of Education and Training discussed support for the IOB. Flemish research institutes also participate in Flemish calls for multistakeholder projects, for example through the Flanders International Climate Action Programme.

**With an annual budget of about €33 million, however, the federal programmes of VLIR-UOS are by far the largest source of financing for university development cooperation**

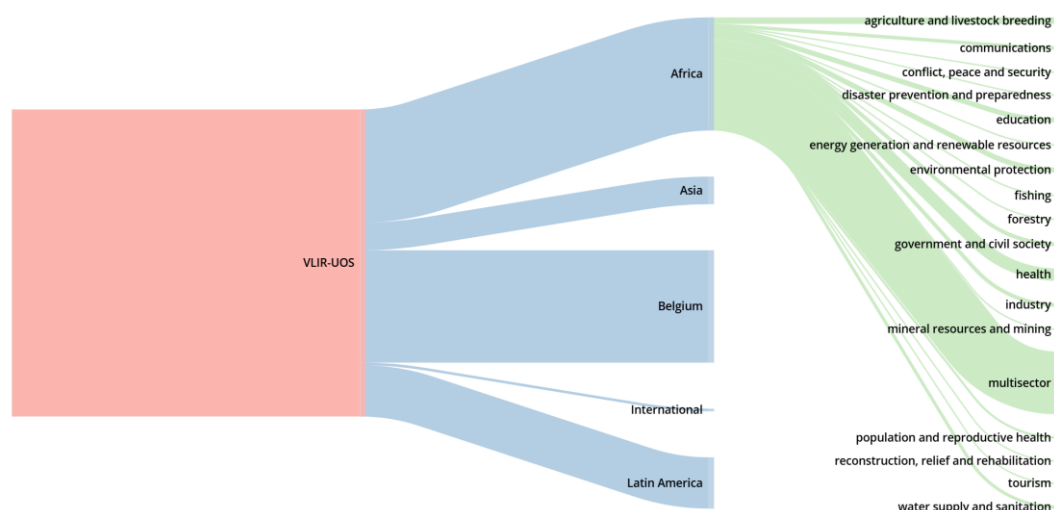
- These federal programmes are implemented in Flanders through VLIR-UOS, a specialised entity of the Flemish Interuniversity Council. VLIR-UOS receives its financing mainly from the federal ODA budget to set up interventions with partner institutions in the Global South. It is committed to building capacity among African university institutions using various instruments. In addition to financing for foreign students in Belgium, financing is mainly used for university cooperation with institutions in Africa (Figure 4.12). The DRC appears to be the most important African partner by far for VLIR-UOS for the 2000-2023 period, followed in the second instance by four countries in East Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda), and South Africa (Figure 4.13A). These

<sup>81</sup> Flanders Representative - South Africa. (2023). [Flemish Minister Matthias Diependaele visits Southern Africa](#). *Delegation of Flanders in Southern Africa*.

<sup>82</sup> One exception is the structural Flemish grant for the Institute of Development Policy (IOB) of the University of Antwerp.

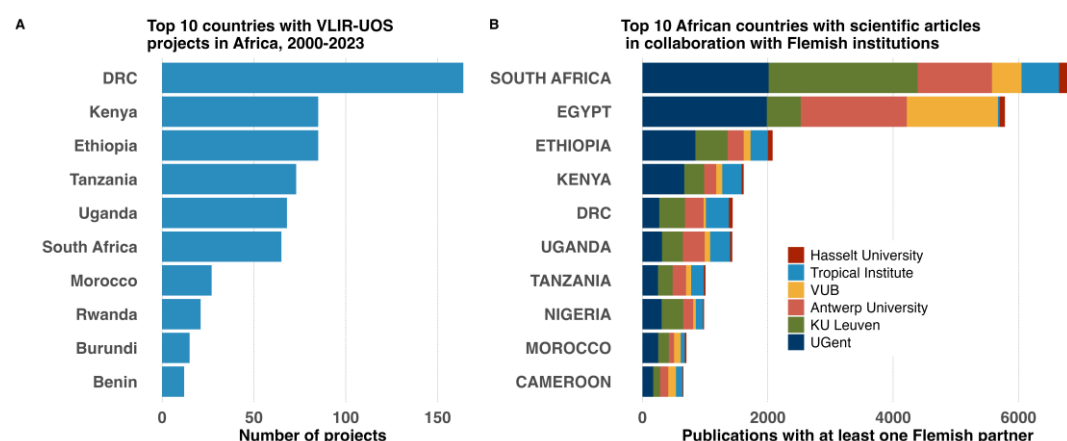
actors also use a wide range of other financing channels for their cooperation with Africa (e.g. the EU, foundations and private sector).

FIGURE 4.12 VLIR-UOS budget by geography and sector



Source: VLIR-UOS database

FIGURE 4.13 A. VLIR-UOS projects in Africa for the 2000-2023 period B. Scientific collaboration between African countries and Flemish researchers



Source: VLIR-UOS database and Clarivate InCites, 2010-2024

**Internally, universities organise themselves in specialised university-wide collaborations and working groups, as well as in research groups with a specific focus on Africa** - In recent years, Flemish universities developed specific strategies and structures for strengthening cooperation with Africa as a continent, for specific regions in Africa, and/or for specific countries. One example of the first form of collaboration is Ghent University's Africa Platform, which is mainly

dedicated to bringing together expertise on Africa and facilitating collaboration with African research institutes, especially in the fields of agriculture and healthcare. KU Leuven further built its Africa policy through internal working groups with a regional focus on Central and East Africa to attract international students and boost international collaboration, among other things. Lastly, research groups are in place that focus on one or more specific countries in Africa, such as KU Leuven's Sustainable Food Economies Research Group (SFERE).

**The number of African students has increased sixfold since 2002** - The internationalisation efforts of Flemish universities have pushed up the number of foreign students almost tenfold since 2002<sup>83</sup>. Although the number of African students increased by a factor of six since 2002 to 3,717 in 2023, this remains far below the number of Asian students (11,882 in 2023). African students come from all over Africa, but the top five countries of origin are Cameroon, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Egypt and Morocco.

**South Africa and Egypt stand out head and shoulders in terms of joint scientific publications with Flemish researchers** - The international database of scientific publications provides an additional perspective on academic relations between Flanders and Africa (Web of Science database). Figure 4.13B shows how university institutions in South Africa and Egypt are absolute frontrunners in joint scientific publications with Flemish universities. The main research themes for South Africa are related to public health, infectious diseases and environmental sciences. For Egypt, these are particle physics, astronomy, astrophysics and nuclear physics. Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania are at some distance from the two leaders. The top five countries are largely similar for KU Leuven, Ghent University, the VUB and UHasselt. The DRC and Uganda are in the top five for the University of Antwerp and the ITM, while Egypt is the most important African country by far for publications with researchers from the VUB and the University of Antwerp.

**The partner countries of VLIR-UOS differ from the countries with the highest number of joint publications** - When comparing the top ten countries with joint publications (Figure 4.13B) with the top ten countries with the highest number of VLIR-UOS projects (Figure 4.13A), it is striking that Egypt does not feature concerning VLIR-UOS and that South Africa scores much lower. The intensity of collaboration, on the other hand, is similar for countries in East Africa. The differences can largely be explained by the criteria used by VLIR-UOS for the country selection. There seems to be a connection between the countries of origin of African students studying in Flanders and the countries with researchers co-publishing with Flemish researchers. The top five countries bringing in students are all represented in the top ten of African countries with the highest number of joint publications (Figure 15B). However, among these, only Ethiopia is also an important partner country for VLIR-UOS projects.

### **c. Work, Economy, Science, Innovation and Social Economy**

The Department of Work, Economy, Science, Innovation and Social Economy (WEWIS)<sup>84</sup> is the third most important policy area for Flemish ODA financing. Although the department does not have its own international strategy related to Africa, its Strategy and Coordination Division works closely together with DKBZA, other Flemish departments, federal institutions such as DGD, the

<sup>83</sup> Statistisch Jaarboek van het Vlaamse Onderwijs 2002-2003 en 2022-2023 (Statistical Yearbook of Flemish Education 2002-2003 and 2022-2023), double counts are possible as students may be enrolled in more than one programme.

<sup>84</sup> The Department of Economy, Science and Innovation (EWI) was expanded in early 2025 to include Work and Social Economy.

EU and multilateral organisations, and WEWIS contributes to various projects in and with Africa. **The focus is mainly on themes such as the Flanders/UNESCO Science Trust Fund (FUST), the green transition and the circular economy and digital transformation.** Although the importance of Africa is growing slightly for WEWIS, a strategic approach is often lacking, with projects often being ad hoc and not always fitting within a broader policy framework.

An important component of the WEWIS Department's work is the Flanders/UNESCO Science Trust Fund (FUST). The FUST initiatives, including the Ocean InfoHub, the UNESCO Global Geoparks and the Be Resilient Project in Southern Africa, focus on sustainable technology development and promoting knowledge sharing with African partners. The Ocean InfoHub facilitates access to global ocean information and supports the protection of marine and geological resources, with a dedicated network in Africa (ODINA)<sup>85</sup>. Founded in 2004, the Global Geoparks Network, which has only one geopark in Africa (Ngorongoro Lengai in Tanzania), works on capacity building for local communities and site managers<sup>86</sup>. In 2021, WEWIS collaborated on the Be Resilient Project, which was born out of the needs assessment for climate services in the Zambezi river basin. This assessment identified gaps in climate data and policy processes, and the project provided solutions for improved water management in vulnerable regions of Southern Africa<sup>87</sup>.

One of WEWIS's spearheads is the circular economy, a top priority at both European and Flemish levels. In 2020, a new circular economy action plan was launched at European level as part of the Green Deal, focusing on sectors such as electronics, batteries, cars and the construction sector<sup>88</sup>. Circular Flanders, a partnership of government, companies and knowledge institutions, is working towards realising a fully circular economy by 2050<sup>89</sup>. The WEWIS department, together with the Public Waste Agency of Flanders and the Environment Department, plays a key role in this, focusing in particular on the bioeconomy and manufacturing industry. In addition, the department monitors developments within the Horizon Europe programme for innovative solutions in the field of circular economy. With this expertise and networks, WEWIS can play an important role in possible future partnerships with Africa in the field of circular economy.

In addition, WEWIS is active in global health through the Global Health EDCTP3 partnership, which joins the forces of Belgian and sub-Saharan experts against infectious diseases. Belgium, which has been a member again since 2022, is working with 35 European and African countries to accelerate the clinical evaluation of therapies, vaccines and diagnostics in Africa. This programme plays a key role in implementing the EU Global Health Strategy. Flanders's engagement within EDCTP3 and the support of the Institute of Tropical Medicine Antwerp (ITM) strengthen Belgium's contribution to the global health agenda<sup>90</sup>.

#### **d. Environment**

**The Environment Department receives project financing for multi-stakeholder projects through the Flanders International Climate Action Programme** - In the 2004-2021 period, the

<sup>85</sup> [The Ocean Data and Information Network for Africa](#). (2024).

<sup>86</sup> FUST. (2023). [Integrate Africa's rich geological heritage into the UNESCO Global Geoparks Network: promoting the concept and building capacity for local communities and site managers](#).

<sup>87</sup> FUST. (2022). [BE-RESILIENT](#).

<sup>88</sup> European Commission (2023). [Circular economy action plan](#).

<sup>89</sup> OVAM. (2024). [Circular Flanders](#).

<sup>90</sup> Departement EWI. (2022). [Belgische en sub-Saharaanse experten in mondiale gezondheid bundelen krachten tegen infectieziekten](#).



Environment Department co-financed about 80 projects in total in Africa for the sustainable provision of clean water and water and sanitation through the Flemish Partnership Water for Development. This partnership is a network of Flemish education and research institutions, NGOs, local governments, private companies and public (drinking) water companies. Since 2021, the focus has shifted to climate themes through successive calls for adaptation and mitigation projects in developing countries, with an annual budget of €15 to €17 million. The Flanders International Climate Action Programme, coordinated by the Environment Department and G-STIC<sup>91</sup>, focuses on sustainability challenges through a multi-stakeholder approach, involving Flemish private sector actors, scientific institutions and possibly civil society, in cooperation with international or local partners. Each year, 13 to 19 projects lasting three to four years are supported. VITO coordinates about eight of these projects, making it by far the most involved partner. Unlike DKBZA's development policy that focuses geographically on three countries,<sup>92</sup> projects in 27 countries are eligible for this climate finance, including 17 in Africa. The Environment Department seeks alignment with FIT's investment policy, policy coherence and cooperation, and complementarity with DKBZA, which is less the case with other departments' policies. Opportunities are available to achieve structural cooperation between DKBZA, FIT and the Environment Department for climate-related initiatives.

Since 2022, the Environment Department has also invested in **international biodiversity finance**, which will likely become even more important in the coming years. That same year, the department contributed €250,000 to projects in Malawi through the United Nations Development Programme BIOFIN<sup>93</sup>. The department is also involved in multilateral engagements (e.g. treaty work programmes) related to chemicals and wetland protection, among other things.

#### e. Youth, culture and media

**Flanders's international cultural policy in Africa focuses on South Africa and Morocco and is characterised by strengthening Flanders's international position and cultural image. Although action plans and policy frameworks are in place to allow for dialogue and exchange, their implementation poses practical challenges.**

Another important aspect of Flanders's foreign powers is the implementation of an international cultural policy (ICP). The current guideline for Flanders's ICP is the Strategic Framework for International Cultural Policy (2021-2025)<sup>94</sup>. This policy framework is a cross-sectoral strategy aimed at strengthening the international position of cultural actors, stimulating cooperation and networking, and raising Flanders's profile worldwide. In response to the financial challenges in the cultural sector and the temporary constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic on the internationalisation of the cultural sector, the international cultural policy framework was fine-tuned and updated, resulting in a 'Field Drawing of the International Cultural Policy from Flanders', with areas for improvement in various cultural subsectors<sup>95</sup>. The adjustments focus on bridging the gap between policy frameworks and practice, developing a transparent long-term vision and promoting cooperation. It sets sector-specific goals for the whole culture area and emphasises the need for

<sup>91</sup> [The Global Sustainable Technology & Innovation Community \(gstic.org\)](https://www.gstic.org).

<sup>92</sup> Shift of development cooperation from South Africa to Morocco.

<sup>93</sup> The department also supported BIOFIN in 2014 and 2017.

<sup>94</sup> Departement Cultuur, Jeugd & Media. [Internationaal cultuurbeleid: algemeen](#).

<sup>95</sup> IDEA Consulting. (2024). [Field Drawing of the International Cultural Policy from Flanders](#). Commissioned by the Department of Culture, Youth and Media.

strategic vision development, investment in knowledge building and practical cooperation within the ICP. Foundations can be laid for stronger support by involving stakeholders such as superstructure organisations, various government agencies, foreign offices of diplomatic delegations, VISITFLANDERS and FIT early on in the process of vision and strategy development. It also stresses the importance of actively considering the needs and requests of international partners, with a balanced focus on what Flanders has to offer and the expectations of these partners. One example of such a demand-led approach is the 2023-2024 Action Plan for Cultural Cooperation with South Africa.

**There is no overarching coordination by one department for international cultural policy -**

Implementation takes place through cooperation between the departments of Culture, Youth and Media, DKBUZA, VISITFLANDERS, FIT and the umbrella platform Flanders Culture, and in close collaboration with European initiatives such as the Belgian Presidency of the European Council, the European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC) and Creative Europe<sup>96</sup>. Under the current policy, efforts are being made to develop a more structured approach with a long-term focus. However, implementation clashes with practical challenges such as ad hoc decision-making and the lack of strong coordination between government agencies and the various cultural sectors. Policymakers aim to balance top-down and bottom-up approaches to achieve effective cultural projects and collaborations<sup>21</sup>.

**Flanders's international cultural policy for Africa focuses on South Africa and Morocco -**

One of the factors for this selection is Flemish foreign policy priorities. The cooperation with South Africa is laid down in the 2023-2024 Action Plan for Cultural Cooperation<sup>97</sup>, which was developed with attention to the demand side and with the ambition to maximise interest in art and culture from Flanders in South Africa and vice versa. Examples of positive and close cooperation include the joint projects of the Delegation of Flanders in South Africa, the Department of Culture, Youth and Media and the National Youth Development Agency, as well as the work of organisations such as the South African Centre for the Netherlands and Flanders, Flanders Literature and the Union for the Dutch Language. Flanders's international cultural policy concerning Morocco (which has existed formally since the 1975 cooperation agreement) is still being shaped by the Darna<sup>98</sup> Flemish-Moroccan cultural centre. However, Darna's current format will be replaced by a new concept. It will become a cultural festival instead of a permanent cultural centre.

#### 4.4.4 Civil society organisations, and cities and municipalities

**One quarter of Flemish ODA funds is allocated to civil society organisations. Their operation focuses mainly on Central and West Africa, with federal aid and in-house fundraising as the main sources. Fourth Pillar initiatives are concentrated in the same countries but operate primarily based on funds they acquire themselves. Local governments also contribute to international solidarity through federally financed town twinning activities aimed at capacity building and knowledge exchange with African cities. The spread of these actors in Africa does not necessarily follow the geographical focus of the Flemish public administration.**

<sup>96</sup> Departement Cultuur, Jeugd & Media. (2023). [Jaarverslag Departement Cultuur, Jeugd en Media](#).

<sup>97</sup> Departement Cultuur, Jeugd & Media. (2024). [Bilaterale Samenwerking - Zuid-Afrika](#).

<sup>98</sup> Darna vzw. (2024). [Darna vzw](#).

When discussing these actors, we also consider other sources of financing for their operations in Africa in addition to Flemish financing.

In recent years, a substantial share (between 15% and 27%) of Flemish ODA funds was allocated to civil society actors and in particular to Flemish civil society organisations. This includes support for the Belgian Red Cross Flanders and UNICEF, among others.

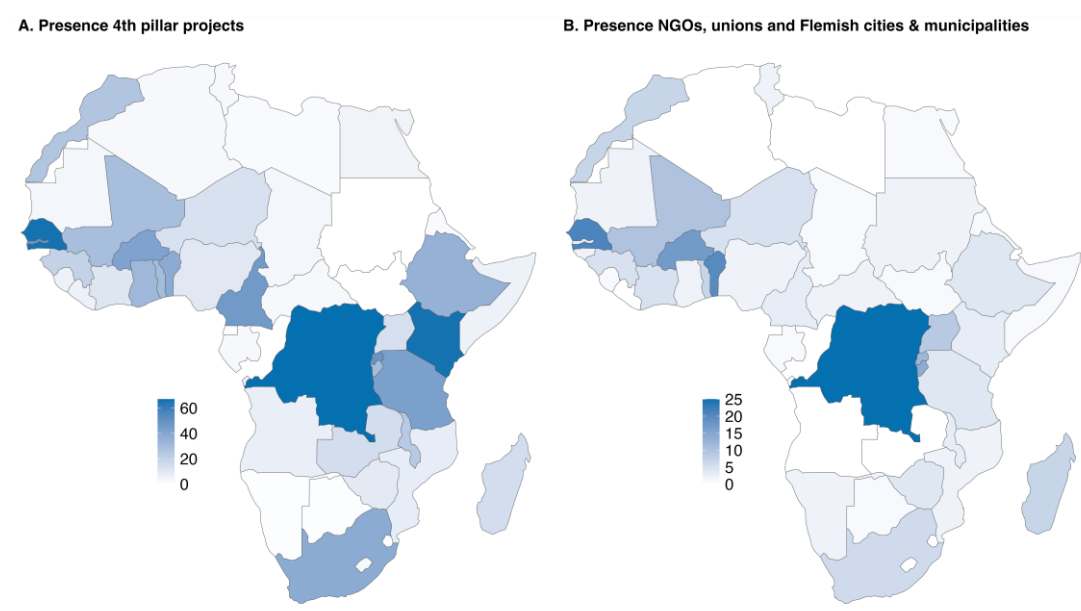
However, Flemish ODA represents only a small part of the financing for actions of Flemish and Belgian civil society organisations (NGOs and trade unions). To complete the picture, Figure 4.14B gives an overview of the geographical spread of the actions of Flemish civil society organisations in Africa. Financing for these actions is a mixture of federal ODA financing (the largest volume for most NGOs and trade unions), own fundraising, and other sources.

Central Africa has the highest concentration of civil society organisations, with the DRC in an outlier position. Second, many actions are taken in West Africa (Senegal, Benin and Burkina Faso) and, to a lesser extent, in East and Southern Africa. The geographical choices of civil society organisations, to some extent, follow the federal government's geographical priorities. Although NGOs and trade unions need not limit themselves to the priority countries of the federal government's bilateral channel, some form of geographical convergence with this channel seems to take place in reality.

There has been growing attention in Flanders and the Netherlands to Fourth Pillar initiatives in recent decades. This is a diverse group that includes citizens, businesses, organisations, schools and migrant groups who are active in international solidarity. The Flemish public administration finances the Fourth Pillar Support Centre, which supports these initiatives through a help desk as a platform for networking, training, advice and promotion. In early 2024, 968 initiatives were registered on the Fourth Pillar platform. The geographical spread of Fourth Pillar initiatives is largely similar to that of civil society organisations, with the exception of several countries in East and West Africa (Figure 4.14A).

Figure 4.14B also considers Flemish cities and municipalities, a third group of actors active in international solidarity and sustainable development in Africa for many years. They usually do so through partnerships with African cities and villages, known as town twinning, focusing on capacity building and exchanging experiences. These actions are mainly financed by federal funds coordinated by the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG). Most federally supported town twinning activities are concentrated in eastern and southern parts of Africa. Although the Flemish public administration collaborates with the VVSG through the Agency for Home Affairs regarding the implementation of the SDGs, the geographical focus of this programme is mainly in Flanders and the funds are not charged as ODA financing.

FIGURE 4.14 Presence of Flemish/Belgian NGOs and trade unions and Fourth Pillar initiatives, and cooperation from Flemish cities and municipalities



Source: 11.11.11 (2024); NGO-Openbook (2022); VVSG (2024)

## 4.5 Other dimensions

### 4.5.1 Migration, remittances and diaspora organisations

In 2023, Flanders was home to more than 400,000 citizens with an African migration background. Many of them are migrant workers who, in addition to contributing to Flanders's economy, provide an important source of external financing to their country of origin through remittances and entrepreneurship.

The Federal Planning Bureau predicts that net migration (immigration minus emigration) will be the 'sole driver of population growth' from 2040 onwards<sup>99</sup>. The largest African groups in the diaspora in Flanders are of Moroccan origin (250,000), followed by a much smaller group of Congolese origin (nearly 40,000). Ghana, Tunisia and Algeria follow with diaspora communities of between 11,000 and 17,000 people<sup>100</sup> (Figure 4.15A).

With the exception of Morocco, the Government of Flanders pays limited attention to these countries in its foreign policy. Multifaceted cooperation is currently being set up with Morocco.

<sup>99</sup> Federaal Planbureau. (2024, 13 February). [Bevolkingsvooruitzichten België: vanaf het einde van de jaren 2040 neemt de bevolking enkel in Vlaanderen nog toe](#) [Press release].

<sup>100</sup> The data includes all newcomers after 1945, including the grandchildren of grandparents who obtained the Belgian nationality.

Algeria is an important trading partner for Flanders economically. Interactions with other countries with a large diaspora community in Flanders are limited to stand-alone projects funded by the Flemish public administration.

As labour migration is an important form of migration from outside the EU<sup>101</sup>, Flanders invests in various collaborations with African countries. For instance, Flanders has initiated projects around legal labour migration, including the THAMM project<sup>102</sup>, which focuses on Morocco and Tunisia, and the MATCH project, which is concentrated<sup>103</sup> in Senegal and Nigeria. The THAMM project focuses on intra-African migration and labour mobility, as well as migration towards Europe, through regional dialogue and cooperation. The MATCH project supports the development of skills in young migrants to enhance their employability, address labour shortages in Europe and, in the long term, boost the development of Nigeria and Senegal by transferring knowledge through their diaspora. Other examples include the PALIM project<sup>104</sup> between Belgium and Morocco and the DT4E project, which connects people in need of international protection in Jordan and Lebanon with employers in Belgium, Ireland, Portugal and the UK<sup>105</sup>. These projects are coordinated and supported by the VDAB and Voka. The Agency for Integration and Civic Integration, together with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), is running a pilot project to have the civic integration process start in the country of origin<sup>106</sup>. These pathways aim to provide newcomers with societal orientation and, if necessary, to then guide them towards a suitable job.

**Diaspora communities and migration are closely linked to remittances**<sup>107</sup> - Reliable country-specific data on remittance volumes are limited, and even the data from the World Bank and IMF contain several inaccuracies. Remittances are often made through informal channels, but the actual amounts of the transfers through formal channels are also frequently underestimated<sup>108</sup>. The World Bank estimates that remittances from Belgium exceeded US\$7 billion in 2022, of which about US\$1.4 billion was sent to Africa. The largest recipient countries closely match the countries of origin of the largest diaspora communities in Flanders (Figure 4.15B). Again, Morocco (US\$796 million) and the DRC (US\$148 million) stand out, followed by Nigeria (US\$92 million), Ghana (US\$60 million) and Egypt (US\$48 million)<sup>109</sup>. Remittances are the largest source of external financing for several developing countries, even larger than ODA flows. For some countries like Gambia, such international remittances account for almost one-third of GDP<sup>110</sup>. Remittances help fight poverty by purchasing consumer goods or covering expenses on education and healthcare<sup>111</sup>. For example, they can also benefit the whole community by investing in schools and hospitals.

<sup>101</sup> Family reunification and international students rank first and second, respectively. Statutory refugees share third place with labour migrants.

<sup>102</sup> VDAB. (2023, 11 October). [Tweedaags bezoek van Marokkaanse delegatie aan VDAB](#).

<sup>103</sup> [MATCH | IOM Belgium and Luxembourg](#).

<sup>104</sup> [Open.Enabel - Belgian Development Agency](#). (no date). [Open.Enabel](#).

<sup>105</sup> [Displaced Talent For Europe \(DT4E\) | IOM Belgium and Luxembourg](#). (2024, 9 October).

<sup>106</sup> Agentschap Integratie & Inburgering. (2024, 18 January). [Inburgeringstraject starten vanuit het buitenland](#).

<sup>107</sup> We describe remittances as cross-border financial transfers by migrants and people with a migration background to their countries of origin. Remittances thus include money sent by the diaspora of a particular country, regardless of the sender's current nationality.

<sup>108</sup> Data are not available at the Flemish level.

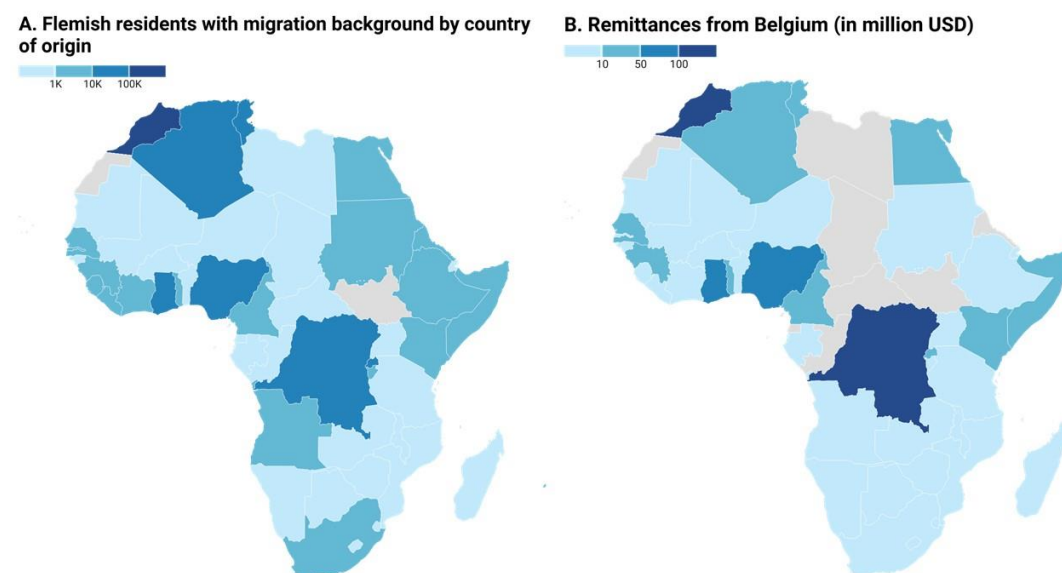
<sup>109</sup> We use the IMF's definition. Remittances comprise compensation of employees and personal transfers. "Compensation of employees refers to the income of border, seasonal, and other short-term workers who are employed in an economy where they are not resident and of residents employed by nonresident entities." "Personal transfers consist of all current transfers in cash or in kind made or received by resident households to or from nonresident households."

<sup>110</sup> OECD. (2023, 23 May). [Non-ODA flows to developing countries: remittances](#). And World Bank Group. (2024). [Database World Development Indicators](#) [Dataset].

<sup>111</sup> Adams and Page in International Migration and the Millennium Development Goals. Selected Papers of UNFPA Expert Group Meeting. (2005).

Despite the volume of remittances, the development potential is often hampered by high transaction costs<sup>112</sup>.

FIGURE 4.15 A. Flemish residents with a migration background by country of origin \* B. Remittances from Belgium (in million US\$)



\* The data largely correspond to official statistics from Statbel. Detailed country-level information is not available from Statbel.

Source: NPdata (2023); KNOMAD/World Bank (2022)

**Diaspora communities play a comprehensive role beyond sending remittances to their countries of origin** - Diaspora organisations invest in businesses and set up SMEs in the communities of their countries of origin, which can play a prominent role in alleviating poverty as an alternative to remittances. They are also committed to improving international trade in their countries of origin by promoting innovation, investment and the development of new markets<sup>113</sup>. Some diaspora organisations in Belgium are committed to fostering entrepreneurship among diaspora youth through training and mentoring programmes and networking opportunities. A Seat At The Table and the YABs Network are diaspora organisations that advance young talent by promoting academic activities, leadership, entrepreneurship and mentoring programmes. Several initiatives, such as Maghrib Belgium Impulse and African Professionals, are committed to supporting African diaspora entrepreneurs in addressing the difficulties with which they are faced.

LEVL is the mouthpiece within the Flemish public administration for people with a migration background. It represents other umbrella associations, such as the Federation for Global and Democratic Organisations (FMDO) and SANKAA. The FMDO coordinates more than 200 diaspora organisations and aims to strengthen the diaspora's voice in society through dialogue and encounters. SANKAA, on the other hand, focuses specifically on associations linked to African communities and works around themes like global citizenship, solidarity and the empowerment of disadvantaged groups. There are also Pan-European initiatives such as the Africa-Europe

<sup>112</sup> 11.11.11. (2019). [Rapport Internationale Solidariteit 2020 Bijlage Financiering voor ontwikkeling](#).

<sup>113</sup> Zaman, A. (2019, 18 June). [Diaspora holds huge potential to facilitate trade and investment](#). UN Trade & Development.

Diaspora Development Platform (ADEPT), which seeks to increase the representation of the African diaspora on both continents.

In addition, African alumni who return after their studies have a significant impact on the development of their countries of origin. They contribute to economic progress by using their skills and networks to grow businesses, foster technological innovation and stimulate international collaborations. They play a key role in social transformations, for example by supporting inclusive policy measures and promoting equal access to education and employment. In higher education, alumni strengthen research infrastructures and academic programmes, often by introducing new knowledge and international standards. Politically, alumni contribute to reforms by spreading democratic values like transparency, good governance and human rights, especially when they studied in democratic host countries. However, these contributions depend on the context of the country of origin: political stability, institutional support and a culture that encourages innovation and change will determine success. Despite challenges such as corruption and lack of resources, African alumni demonstrate how international education can further sustainable development and social progress in their home countries<sup>114</sup>.

#### 4.5.2 Tourism

Flemish-African tourism offers significant cultural and economic opportunities. Yet, the number of African tourists in Flanders remains relatively limited. In 2023, 68,327 tourists from Africa arrived in Flanders (including Brussels; 10.6% increase compared to 2022), representing about 0.5% of the total number of tourists arriving that year. The largest group came from Morocco (12,790), followed by South Africa (9,708) and the DRC (6,454), which is probably due in part to the role of the diaspora. However, Morocco ranks only 47th among the countries of origin of tourists in Flanders. Although figures have gone upwards again after the COVID-19 pandemic, they still remain below pre-pandemic levels. Only a small proportion of African tourists find their way to Flanders; two-thirds spend the night mainly in the Brussels-Capital Region<sup>115</sup>. Due to the limited number of tourists and the often complex visa procedures, Africa does not seem to be an immediate priority for Flanders's tourism sector. Nevertheless, VISITFLANDERS contributes to Flanders's international cultural policy in Africa and is a partner of the AfricaMuseum, where they contribute to dialogue with the African diaspora in Flanders. This may allow VISITFLANDERS to play a role, after all, in developing and implementing an integrated Flemish Africa policy. Some African countries run tourism promotion campaigns in Flanders to brand themselves as attractive destinations. For example, Morocco launched a campaign in Belgium, among other countries, under the banner 'Kingdom of Light'<sup>116</sup>. Another example is Wesgro, the investment company of the South African Western Cape province, which promotes tourism in addition to investment and trade because of the synergies between these domains within its remit. VISITFLANDERS, on the other hand, has not yet launched a campaign for Africa, possibly because of the visa problems many Africans face when travelling to Europe. Still, tourism is sometimes integrated into FIT's

<sup>114</sup> Campbell, A.C., Kelly-Weber, E. & Lavalée, C.A. (2020). University teaching and citizenship education as sustainable development in Ghana and Nigeria: insights from international scholarship programme alumni. *Higher Education*, 81, 129-144. Campbell, A.C. (2021). International Scholarships and Sustainability. *International Perspectives on Education and Society*. Wang, Z., Hanley, N., Kwak, J., Vari-Lavoisier, I., Al Hussein, M., Tyson, L.S., Akkad, A. & Chankseliani, M. (2024). How do international student returnees contribute to the development of their home countries? A systematic mapping and thematic synthesis. *International Journal of Educational Research*.

<sup>115</sup> <https://toerismevlaanderen.be/nl/cijfers/cijfers/overnachting-aankomstcijfers/toerisme-cijfers-xl>. VISITFLANDERS. (2023). Toerisme in Cijfers XL.

<sup>116</sup> Visit Morocco. (2024). [Kingdom of Light](#).



economic trade missions. For example, tourism played a role in the run-up to the 2025 UCI Cycling World Championships during a mission to Rwanda in December 2024.

At the same time, there are indications that Flanders's tourism sector is beginning to recognise the opportunities of African tourism. Africa's growing middle class and the expected rise in the number of African tourists could generate significant economic opportunities<sup>117</sup>. Brussels Airlines is capitalising on this by positioning Brussels as a major hub for passenger flights between North America and sub-Saharan Africa. With eighteen destinations in Africa, the airline is anticipating the growing demand and strengthening its competitive position in the European market<sup>118</sup>.

<sup>117</sup> European Commission. International tourism trends in EU-28 member states - Current situation and forecasts for 2020-2025-2030

<sup>118</sup> Brussels Airlines. (2024). [Brussels Airlines expands its fleet and invests in new cabin interior](#).



# PART 38 APPENDIX



## Appendix 1 Overview of other Africa Strategies

Country	Thematic priorities	Geographical priorities
Denmark (2024) <a href="#">Africa's century</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investments and strengthened trade cooperation</li> <li>• Climate adaptation and green growth</li> <li>• Efforts for technology and innovation in Africa</li> <li>• Migration - a common interest that requires new solutions</li> <li>• African solutions to peace and conflict</li> <li>• An international architecture for the world of today</li> </ul>	<p>In principle, the strategy covers the entire African continent.</p> <p>The new strategy also includes opening embassies in Senegal, Tunisia and Rwanda. The Danish Government also intends to strengthen diplomatic staff and resources at the embassies in Egypt, Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria and Ghana.</p>
Norway (2024) <a href="#">Strategy for Norwegian engagement with African countries</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partnership, dialogue and cooperation</li> <li>• Multilateral and regional cooperation</li> <li>• Engagement in security and peace efforts</li> <li>• Democracy, human rights and gender equality</li> <li>• Cooperation in the business, clean energy and knowledge sectors</li> <li>• Climate and environmental issues, food security and health</li> </ul>	<p>In principle, the strategy covers the entire African continent, focusing on specific countries by thematic sector and countries where Norway has a diplomatic presence.</p>

<p>The Netherlands (2023-2032)</p> <p><a href="#">The Africa Strategy of the Netherlands 2023-2032</a></p>	<p>Economic development on equal footing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A leap in prosperity with the private sector, knowledge and expertise as drivers</li> <li>• Economic ties and the African Continental Free Trade Area</li> <li>• Sustainable and responsible trade and value chains</li> <li>• Accessing critical raw materials and making supply chains sustainable Just and inclusive energy transition</li> <li>• Safe, inclusive digitalisation</li> </ul> <p>Security and stability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working together on peace and security</li> <li>• Effective and inclusive governance at national and local level</li> <li>• Safeguarding civic space, human rights and inclusion</li> <li>• Effective multilateralism</li> </ul> <p>Migration, reception and return</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Migration cooperation</li> <li>• Sustainable reception in the region</li> <li>• Effective humanitarian response</li> </ul> <p>Poverty reduction, food security and inclusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contributing to Africa's climate resilience</li> <li>• Combining trade, development and investment</li> </ul> <p>Stronger financial and institutional frameworks in Africa and at multilateral level</p>	<p>In principle, the strategy covers the entire African continent, focusing on specific countries by thematic sector.</p>
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<p>Italy (2020)</p> <p><a href="#">A Partnership with Africa</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peace and security</li> <li>• Governance and human rights</li> <li>• Migrations and mobility</li> <li>• Commercial partnerships and investments</li> <li>• Sustainable development, development cooperation and fight against climate change</li> <li>• Cultural and scientific cooperation</li> </ul>	<p>The strategy distinguishes between different approaches in specific regions but covers the whole continent.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mediterranean Africa</li> <li>• The Horn of Africa and the Red Sea</li> <li>• The Sahel</li> <li>• Southern Africa</li> </ul>
<p>Spain (2021-2024)</p> <p><a href="#">Third Africa Plan</a></p>	<p>Strategic objectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peace and security</li> <li>• Sustainable development, inclusive and resilient economic growth</li> <li>• Institutional strengthening</li> <li>• Safe, orderly and regular movement</li> </ul> <p>Cross-cutting principles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principle of differentiation</li> <li>• Partnership principle</li> <li>• Multilateralism</li> <li>• Promotion and protection of human rights and gender equality</li> </ul> <p>Unity of action abroad</p>	<p>The focus is on countries in sub-Saharan Africa, with a distinction between priority and preferential partners.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Priority partners: South Africa, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Angola and Senegal</li> <li>• Preferential partners: Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Côte d'Ivoire and Tanzania</li> </ul>

<p>Germany (2023)</p> <p><a href="#">Shaping the future with Africa The Africa Strategy of the BMZ</a></p>	<p>Sustainable economic development, employment and prosperity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Just transition: social and environmental transformation of the economy, conservation of vital natural resources, energy and infrastructure</li> <li>• Employment, fair trade, migration and digital transformation</li> </ul> <p>Overcoming poverty and hunger and building social protection</p> <p>Health and pandemic prevention</p> <p>Feminist development policy and gender equality</p> <p>Rule of law, democracy, human rights and good governance Peace and security</p>	<p>The BMZ's work focuses on its 33 African partner countries. Special attention is also devoted to approaching African regional organisations.</p>
<p>Ireland (2019-2025)</p> <p><a href="#">Global Ireland - Ireland's Strategy for Africa to 2025</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peace, security and respect for human rights and the rule of law</li> <li>• Inclusive economic growth and mutually beneficial trade and investment</li> <li>• Working with Africa to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals</li> </ul>	<p>The strategy links several thematic priorities to specific countries and regions. Peace and security are mainly relevant in North Africa and the Sahel, whereas the strategy mainly focuses on Southern Africa for trade and investment.</p>
<p>Malta (2020-2025)</p> <p><a href="#">Malta and Africa: A Strategy for Partnership 2020-2025</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multilateral and diplomatic relations</li> <li>• Trade and economic relations</li> <li>• A development partnership (including humanitarian aid and migration)</li> </ul>	<p>The strategy proposes further expansion of the diplomatic presence in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania, Libya, Ghana, Ethiopia and South Africa. It explicitly states that these countries serve as a platform for hub-and-spoke activity across the continent of Africa.</p>

<p>Finland (2019)</p> <p><a href="#">Finland's Africa Strategy: Towards a stronger political and economic partnership</a></p>	<p>Political cooperation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peace and security</li> <li>• A multilateral rules-based order and regional integration</li> <li>• Climate-resilient and low-emission development and circular economy</li> <li>• Human rights, democracy, the rule of law, equality and women's rights</li> <li>• Education, skills, knowledge and cooperation in the field of research and innovation</li> <li>• Institution building and governance</li> </ul> <p>Trade (other areas)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digitalisation</li> <li>• Circular economy</li> <li>• Bioeconomy, waste management and renewable energy</li> </ul> <p>Relations between peoples and communities</p> <p>Women and youth</p>	<p>The strategy does not address specific regions or countries, but it does identify the Horn of Africa, Sahel and Libya as the key areas on the continent from the security perspective, or countries from which there is migration to Finland.</p>
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<p>Estonia (2020-2030)</p> <p><a href="#">Estonia's strategy for Africa</a></p>	<p>Foreign and security policy</p> <p>Economic cooperation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• African digital single market</li> <li>• E-governance</li> <li>• Global digital businesses</li> </ul> <p>Development cooperation and humanitarian aid</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good governance</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Healthcare</li> <li>• Entrepreneurship</li> <li>• Innovation</li> <li>• Cyber resilience</li> </ul> <p>Humanitarian assistance</p>	<p>Regional approach to Africa: North Africa with the establishment of Estonia's first embassy in Cairo</p> <p>Appointment of non-resident Ambassadors to Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria</p> <p>Wider cooperation objectives are also set for Eastern, Southern and Western Africa with a heightened focus on Kenya, Namibia and Mali. Deepening cooperation with the Africa Union remains of high importance.</p>
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<p>Switzerland (2021-2024)</p> <p><a href="#">Swiss Sub-Saharan Africa Strategy</a></p>	<p>Peace, security and human rights</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Civilian and military peacebuilding</li> <li>• Human rights and compliance with international humanitarian law</li> <li>• Democratisation and the rule of law</li> <li>• Humanitarian aid</li> </ul> <p>Prosperity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic education and vocational training</li> <li>• Supporting the provision of basic services</li> <li>• Combating transnational organised crime</li> <li>• Trade diplomacy</li> </ul> <p>Sustainability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Combating climate change</li> <li>• Urbanisation</li> </ul> <p>Digitalisation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of digital tools</li> </ul> <p>Digital governance</p>	<p>Several thematic priorities are linked to different countries and regions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Sahel, the Greater Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes: peacebuilding, humanitarian actions and development cooperation</li> <li>• Lion economies: Digitalisation and economic and financial interests</li> <li>• Southern Africa: economic and financial interests</li> </ul> <p>The strategy also takes transregional and continental dynamics into account and sets out the broad lines of Swiss foreign policy in sub-Saharan Africa, defining objectives and measures for each geographical priority.</p>
<p>Switzerland (2021-2024) <a href="#">Swiss MENA strategy</a></p>	<p>Peace, security and human rights</p> <p>Migration and protection of people in need</p> <p>Sustainable development</p> <p>Economic affairs, finance, science</p> <p>Digitalisation and new technologies</p>	<p>This strategy applies only to North African countries: Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia.</p>

<p>Czech Republic (2022)</p> <p><a href="#">Engaging in Africa: Czechia's Strategy</a></p>	<p>Stability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building the capacity and competence of African partners' security and defence forces</li> <li>• Counter-terrorism</li> <li>• Countering disinformation</li> <li>• Cyber security</li> <li>• Forced displacement and irregular migration</li> </ul> <p>Prosperity and sustainability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthening trade cooperation and promoting investment, private sector development, and jobs for the younger generations</li> <li>• Sustainable agriculture and rural development</li> <li>• Climate change and access to green energy</li> <li>• Supporting the development of Africa's raw materials industry, strengthening the Czech Republic's raw materials security</li> <li>• Promoting good governance, development of civil society and respect for human rights, with an emphasis on women's empowerment</li> </ul> <p>Health</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthening the capacities of healthcare systems</li> <li>• Promoting academic, scientific and technical cooperation</li> </ul> <p>Strategic Communication:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating an image of the Czech Republic as Africa's respected partner</li> <li>• Developing the Czech Republic's public diplomacy in Africa</li> <li>• Use the Czech Republic's public diplomacy to better inform our non-African partners about our activities in Africa</li> <li>• Promoting a balanced image of Africa in the Czech Republic</li> </ul>	<p>The strategy focuses primarily on countries where the Czech Republic has embassies: Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, the DRC, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Mali, the Republic of South Africa, Senegal and Zambia.</p> <p>In addition, the Czech Republic sees the greatest potential for the development of bilateral relations with Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Sudan, Rwanda and Angola.</p>
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	Promoting a debate on and coordination of activities in Africa across the Czech public administration system	
Catalonia (2020-2023) <a href="#">Africa Plan</a>	<p>Presence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extend the Government of Catalonia's presence throughout Africa south of the Sahara</li> <li>• Position Catalonia as an independent actor with its own voice in relations with the African continent</li> </ul> <p>Synergy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinate the activities of the Catalan Government and Catalan society in Africa south of the Sahara</li> <li>• Promote the creation of knowledge alliances between Catalonia and Africa</li> </ul> <p>Influence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote peace and democracy by reinforcing the rights of the African peoples</li> <li>• Push the gender-focused approach to increase participation and empowerment among the more vulnerable sections of African society</li> </ul> <p>Commitment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Align our interventions with the SDGs and promote sustainable development</li> <li>• Reinforce Catalonia's image as a host nation</li> </ul>	<p>This strategy covers sub-Saharan African countries, specifically focusing on several regions, priority countries and preferential countries.</p> <p>West Africa and the Sahel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Priority countries: Senegal, Gambia and Ghana</li> <li>• Preferential countries: Mali, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria</li> </ul> <p>East Africa and the Great Lakes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Priority countries: Kenya and Ethiopia</li> <li>• Preferential countries: Uganda, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo</li> </ul> <p>Southern Africa</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Priority countries: South Africa and Mozambique</li> <li>• Preferential countries: Angola</li> </ul>

<p>Bavaria (2021)</p> <p><a href="#">Der Beitrag Bayerns zu Stabilität und Entwicklung in Afrika</a></p>	<p>Economic relations and vocational training</p> <p>Education and science</p> <p>Agriculture and environment</p> <p>Public administration</p>	<p>The strategy focuses on several partner countries in which Bavaria is investing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tunisia</li> <li>• Senegal</li> <li>• Ghana</li> <li>• Cameroon</li> <li>• Togo</li> <li>• Ethiopia</li> <li>• Uganda</li> <li>• Tanzania</li> <li>• Malawi</li> <li>• Kenya</li> <li>• South Africa</li> </ul>
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