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Brief

New Frontiers:
Estonia's Foreign Policy in Africa

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Building on a historical foundation, in recent years, Estonia has strategically enhanced ties with Africa across several areas, which reflects gradual and steady development. This policy brief traces this diplomatic trajectory and explores Estonia's historical and contemporary relations with Africa. In doing so, this brief outlines Estonia's 2020–30 regional strategy and bilateral action plans. It further discusses challenges and opportunities for mutually beneficial partnerships.

Historical Context

Before 1918, early Estonia-Africa links involved personal ties, missionary work, and academic interest, thereby shaping its understanding of African cultures. Arabic coins found in Vitsiku village suggest sporadic medieval African contact.[1] In the modern era, notable ties included Johan Philipp von Krusenstierna's 1656 and 1663 Gulf of Guinea visits; Ottho Ralungh's 1663 service at Cape of Good Hope with Dutch East India Company; and Abram Petrovitch Gannibal's residency in Pärnu and Tallinn.[2] The 19th century saw African studies advancements (notably, the reopening of the University of Tartu, 1802) and featured Estonians like Reinhold Nyländer (1806–25) and Hans Tiismann (1866–68) in foreign missions,[3] as well as a Maasai spelling book compiled by Leonhard Blumer.

From 1918–39, Estonia prioritised securing sovereignty and recognition, while its African relations focused on trade and protecting Estonians abroad. Egypt was Estonia's primary source of cotton, with imports peaking at 2 138 649 kg in 1938.[4] Similarly, in 1938, Estonia exported wool, animal skins, wood, and tobacco to South Africa. Trade with the key partners in Egypt and South Africa varied between 1935 and 1937, with imports totalling 1 811 000 and 235 000 kroons, and exports reaching 2 439 000 and 120 000 kroons, respectively.[5] Estonia also traded with British colonies (Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, and Kenya) in tropical Africa by importing palm oil and cocoa and exporting paper, aluminium, and confectionery.[6]

From 1944–91, Estonia was under Soviet occupation, and so support lent to African nations in their quest for independence was part of Soviet policies. After regaining independence, the country began to re-establish diplomatic presence and economic ties globally; in 2010, Estonia opened its first African embassy in Cairo in 2010.[7] Egypt became a significant market for Estonian wood and paper, with exports reaching €5.6 million in 2004.[8] Estonia also appointed a non-resident ambassador to Morocco in 2001 and accredited a chargé d'affaires at the African Union (AU) in Ethiopia in 2020.[9]

From 1925–27, Estonian emigration to Africa surged, with fishermen forming a colony in Belgian Congo, while missionaries operated in Egypt and East Africa. The largest expat community was born in South Africa and driven by a Päevaleht newspaper article promoting migration to Africa. To protect citizens and boost trade amid the Great Depression, Estonia expanded its consular network, growing it from 119 consular agents in 1929 to 140 in 1932.[10] In 2020, around 130 Estonians resided in places like Egypt, South Africa, and Tanzania.[11] Many have been moving to Estonia to pursue higher education: Tallinn University reports that in 2011 alone, over 200 Africans enrolled in Estonian universities.

Engagement Strategy, Objectives, and Achievements

Since 2017, Estonia has boosted its engagement with Africa, especially during its EU presidency and UN Security Council membership campaign. However, a cohesive national approach to Africa only emerged in 2021 when the regional strategy was unveiled, suggesting directions and action plans for Estonia-Africa relations for 2021–25.[12] This strategy covers foreign policy, security, economy, development cooperation, and support for Estonians abroad.

Ensuring stability in the Sahel is a top priority for Estonia due to its impact on security in Europe

Tallinn has significantly boosted collaboration with Africa in its security policies. As an EU member, Estonia participates in the Union for the Mediterranean, which fosters regional cooperation. Ensuring stability in the Sahel is a top priority for Estonia due to its impact on security in Europe, evidenced by its participation in the France-led anti-terrorism Operation Barkhane and Takuba Task Force in Mali (both missions concluded in 2022). Estonian involvement extends to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission and the European Union Training Mission in Mali. In 2014, Estonia contributed 50 soldiers to the European Union Military Operation in the Central African Republic.[13] Additionally, in 2020, Estonia approved its Defence Forces' participation in the EU Naval Force Mediterranean Operation IRINI meant to enforce the UN arms embargo on Libya.[14]

In its economic policy, Estonia supports Africa in achieving digital transformation

In its economic policy, Estonia is among the founders of the D4D Hub, which supports Africa in achieving digital transformation. This Hub functions as a strategic tool to promote multi-stakeholder partnerships and investments in Africa's digital economy. Estonia also advances the AU's African Digital Single Market initiative aimed at boosting economic integration and development. Sharing its e-governance and e-service expertise, Estonia has recently formalised several agreements with Africa, including a memorandum of understanding with the AU Commission (2017) and the East African Science and Technology Commission (2020).[15] Tallinn aids Uganda's digital transformation by hosting its civil servants to explore digital advancement opportunities; and in April 2023, it initiated digital cooperation with Angola.

Estonian global tech companies (e.g., Bolt, Erply, Pipedrive, and Transferwise) have entered the African market. In April 2023, Tallinn established a trade office in Nairobi, with eight companies (e.g., Cybernetica) announcing entry into Kenyan markets.[16] Additionally, Cybernetica collaborated with Namibia to implement the Nam-X e-government interoperability system (2015-21). The Estonian e-Governance Academy shares its expertise in digital transformation, e-governance and cybersecurity. Estonian Information and Communications Technology Cluster has organised workshops, such as a Dubai EXPO 2020 e-governance event with Smart Africa in 2021, and provided e-justice solutions to Tanzania, as well as budget and HR systems to Nigeria.

Historically, Estonia's development and aid programmes have focused on its neighbourhood, with only recent initiatives involving Africa.[17] Recent efforts prioritise governance, education, healthcare, and entrepreneurship. In 2018, the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs allocated €133 000 to support Africa's e-governance.[18] In 2020, Tallinn appointed a UN Environment Programme representative to Nairobi and participated in the EU's Cyber-4Dev project. Estonia also supports UN and Red Cross initiatives, with NGOs like Mondo and e-Governance Academy collaborating on development and humanitarian aid efforts in Ghana, Uganda, and Kenya. For instance, in 2014, Estonia donated €50 000 to the ICRC and the UNHCR to assist the displaced persons in the Central African Republic.[19]

A newly established and government-funded Estonian Centre for International Development (ESTDEV) is another milestone. The agency already supports Kenya, Uganda, Namibia, and Botswana in achieving sustainable development goals, promoting educational innovation, digital and green transition, and business growth. As of September 2022, ESTDEV's portfolio in Africa included 20 projects totalling €3.2 million.[20]

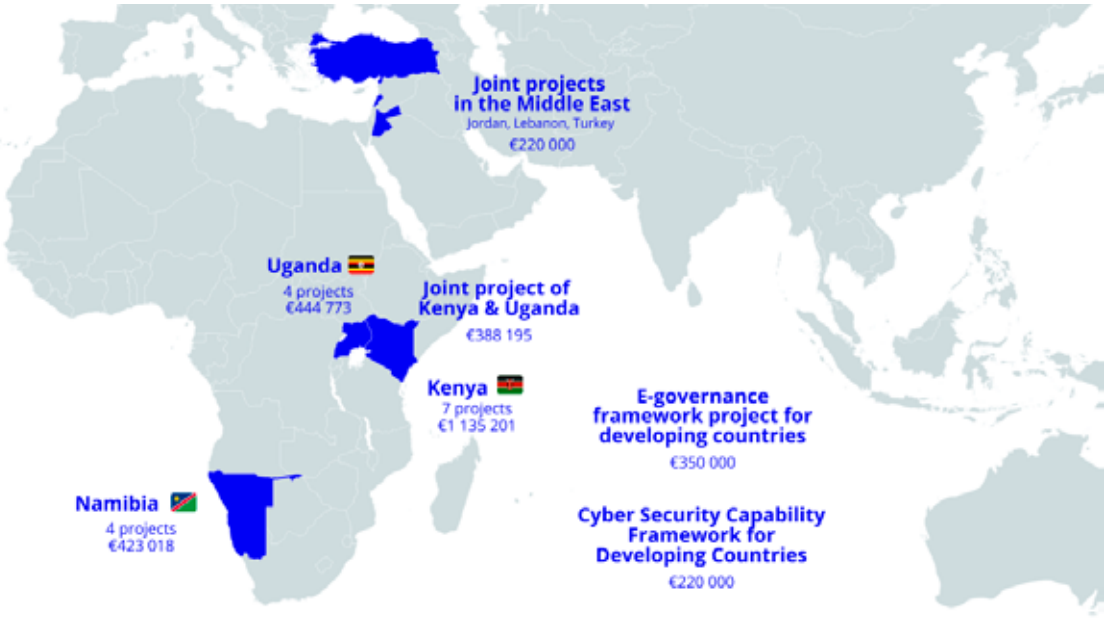

Image 1. ESTDEV in Africa. *Source*: ESDTDEV.

Challenges, Opportunities, and Prospects

Estonia's African foreign policy faces intricate challenges, of which the following are worth describing in detail.

- First, African digitalisation faces scepticism due to challenges in electricity access. In 2022, Africa had 40% internet coverage, with Nigeria seeing a drop in subscriptions.[21] Rural areas pose challenges as limited internet access and high data costs hinder innovative solutions despite high mobile internet usage. Poor digital infrastructure complicates e-governance, especially in underserved regions.

- Second, tailored engagement strategies are required, including the need to adapt to political and economic dynamics. As a small country, Estonia may be challenged by competition from bigger nations in its foreign policy efforts. However, Estonia's unique expertise in digitalisation – a key interest for African countries in the 21st century – sets the country apart and can be leveraged to its advantage.

- Third, corruption, financial constraints, and bureaucratic hurdles hinder cooperation. Unequal funding distribution among stakeholders and divergent priorities often lead to conflicts in strategy implementation. International factors like foreign investments and multinational interests add layers of competition and influence dynamics, making collaboration more complex.

A consultative framework for regular dialogues with Africa could be established in the form of an annual video conference that facilitates comprehensive discussions on development, diplomacy, and security cooperation. This would ensure constant communication, providing a feedback loop to adapt future strategies to Africa's evolving needs.

Investing in accessible education and training can equip Africans with digital and e-governance skills, fostering innovation and progress. Public diplomacy campaigns can nurture a two-way dialogue and engage both Estonia's and Africa's home audiences, thus conveying goals more transparently. Furthermore, leveraging the expertise and insights of the diasporas can help strengthen connections and enhance the impact of Estonia's initiatives in Africa. It can facilitate a more comprehensive and collaborative approach to achieving mutual goals. Cultural exchanges can promote mutual understanding and people-to-people connections while transcending geographical boundaries and strengthening diplomatic ties.

To strengthen ties with Africa, Estonia must commit to continuous engagement, thus fostering mutual trust for a lasting partnership.

Of essence today is the recognition of Africa's potential as its demographic growth, rapid economic development, and expanding IT markets will boost its global influence. As Africa gains more weight in international affairs, Estonia can engage in this mutually beneficial exchange. Africa's prospective influence and Estonia's existing expertise lay the foundation for a partnership that fuels innovation and drives progress for all partners.

Endnotes

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