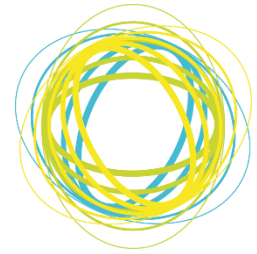


DISCUSSION PAPER

Finland's Africa Strategy



Introduction

The Finnish University Partnership for International Development (UniPID) is a network of Finnish universities¹ that supports higher education institutions in bringing global responsibility and Global South perspectives into their education, research, and societal impact activities. UniPID actively engages with policy makers, advocating for research-informed policies and stressing the importance of higher education and research in facing global challenges.

In March 2021, the Finnish government approved its first-ever strategy for diversifying and deepening Finland's relations with African countries, the African Union (AU), and regional organizations. The strategy, entitled *Finland's Africa strategy – Towards strong political and economic partnership*², focuses on political and economic relations and on expanding the relationships from development cooperation into other forms of cooperation.

The approval of this strategy represents a new phase in Finland's relationship with African countries, the AU, and regional organizations and in the way cooperation with African partners is seen within the Finnish government. However, the implementation of this strategy, including the methods used and the resourcing, are not yet defined and need careful consideration in order to ensure the best possible outcomes for Finland and our African partners. In order to find sustainable and mutually beneficial ways to implement the strategy, we would like to take a moment to reflect on its future development and implementation.

This paper is intended to spark critical thinking and discussion around the implementation of Finland's Africa Strategy. We highlight three crosscutting themes that should remain at the core of the Strategy's implementation: equal, mutually beneficial, and reciprocal partnerships; increasing awareness of African countries; and research and innovation. Within the frame of these themes, we pose questions for consideration to some of the Strategy's key implementing actors: the Finnish government, in particular Finnish ministries; Higher Education Institutions (HEIs); civil society; and the private sector. With this paper, we aim to contribute to the broader discussions and planning around the Strategy and its implementation, and in particular, in the development of ministries' implementation plans. Furthermore, UniPID hopes to further the objectives of the Strategy by helping to answer the question, Finland has an Africa Strategy – so what?

¹ Aalto University, Tampere University, University of Eastern Finland, University of Helsinki (coordinating member), University of Jyväskylä, University of Lapland, University of Oulu, University of Turku, Åbo Akademi University

² <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/162978>

Equal, mutually beneficial, and reciprocal partnerships

“The concept of reciprocity and mutual interests must provide the basis for Finland’s Africa policy.” (Finland’s Africa Strategy, pg. 4)

Reciprocity, equality, and mutual benefit are emphasized throughout the Africa Strategy; however, there is little mention of how to ensure and achieve these. Alignment to regional and national policies is not enough. Rather, a decolonial approach³ must be taken in the implementation of the Strategy and the design of ministerial action plans. In practice, this means actively working to understand the historical developments that also explain the existing power relationships between Finland and partner countries in Africa, dismantling the biases that exacerbate power imbalances, and designing policies and collaboration that are respectful and formed on equal terms, taking particular care not to replicate unequal or biased structures. Critical to this is recognizing and acknowledging the institutional and individual expertise and knowhow in Africa and in the African diaspora, on issues related to local, national, or regional contexts, but also on global issues.

Equal, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial policies, partnerships, and collaboration are built together, in dialogue. It is essential that the implementation of this Strategy is designed with early and meaningful input from African partners, including governments, science and innovation actors, civil society, and the private sector, and the African diaspora in Finland. Ministries and other government actors must create and utilize existing fora for this dialogue.

HEIs have long experience undertaking collaboration with African partners, based on principles such as academic integrity and responsible research and innovation, which can serve as a good basis for creating responsible partnerships. However, academic partnerships do not always bring mutual benefit, nor are they always formed on equal terms. Finland-Africa higher education partnerships and collaboration must be guided by ethical principles that are developed jointly with (all of the) partners. As funding for strategic partnerships with Africa is allocated to universities, spending must be transparent and utilized for the development of these partnerships and jointly designed activities.

Despite the call for reciprocity and mutual benefit to serve as the basis for the Strategy, many of the measures planned for trade, investments, and growth focus on outcomes for Finnish companies, rather than on measures that can provide mutual benefit. The implementation of this Strategy demands measures that facilitate positive outcomes not only for Finland, but also for African countries and partners.

Questions for consideration for key actors

For the Finnish Government

- How will African partners and stakeholders be consulted in the implementation of the Strategy? How will Finnish stakeholders be consulted? What kinds of fora will be utilized or established to support dialogue?
- How will reciprocity and mutual benefit be built into the action plans designed for the implementation of the Strategy?

³ Yunana Ahmed (2021) Political discourse analysis: a decolonial approach, *Critical Discourse Studies*, 18:1, 139-155.

- What kind of measures will be taken to support the initiation of respectful collaboration, built on equal terms?
- How to implement long-lasting actions, extending over government terms, together with African partners, which also support Finland's engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals?
- How can Finland ensure a stable transition from a development-oriented relationship with African countries to one based on mutual benefit? What measures will be taken to ensure mutual benefit? How will expectations be adjusted?
- How to ensure that the local needs are being heard and met in the implementation?
- How to balance the aims to attract talents to Finland and to build capacity in Africa?

For HEIs

- How can existing partnerships be improved? How can future partnership building be improved? What role does the Strategy play in the definition and design of institutional partnerships?
- What measures will be put in place to assure ethical, mutually beneficial partnerships?
- How can funding for partnerships be made more transparent?
- The strategy focuses on diplomatic and economic partnerships. What is the role of universities in those themes? What could universities/academia bring into the table?
- How can HEIs ensure that the local needs are being heard and met in the cooperation with the African partners?

For Companies

- What measures are needed for more reciprocal, mutually beneficial commercial partnerships?
- How can collaboration with research and innovation actors, such as universities, support mutually beneficial outcomes?
- How can Finland ensure a stable transition from charity or purely commercial benefit to mutual benefit?
- How can private sector actors ensure that the local needs are being heard and met in the cooperation with the African partners?

For Civil Society

- How can existing partnerships be improved? How can future partnership building be improved?
- What measures will be put in place to assure ethical, mutually beneficial partnerships?
- How can collaboration with research and innovation actors, such as universities, support mutually beneficial outcomes?
- How can civil society actors ensure that the local needs are being heard and met in the cooperation with the African partners?

Updating perceptions

“Impressions often lag behind reality and are in need of updating.” (Finland's Africa Strategy, pg. 2)

Updating perceptions, impressions, and knowledge of African countries is critical. Using research-based information as the foundation for this goes a long way in creating a more accurate, informed understanding of historical developments as well as the current trends of the African continent and its

people, perspectives, and events. Anti-racist, decolonial and critical approaches should be utilized for undertaking and communicating research, education, and the provision of other information on Africa. HEIs, as producers of knowledge and as active partners in research-based collaboration with African institutions, are key actors in a continuous and reflective process of updating perceptions.

While there is a need to update perceptions of Africa in Finnish society more broadly, specific efforts should also be made to reach Finnish actors who have existing collaboration with African partners. Together we should aim to ensure that civil servants, politicians, researchers and university leaders, and private sector actors are provided with the opportunity to have updated and accurate understanding of the reality in African context(s), in addition to the media, teachers, and the general public mentioned in the Strategy. Networks like UniPID can facilitate processes for updating information in cooperation with researchers and other actors producing new or updated knowledge on Africa. Moreover, the African diaspora in Finland, many of whom are part of the HEI community, should play a central role in this.

Students graduating from Finnish HEIs should be equipped with competencies in global cooperation, including the ability to understand different realities and contexts, and the complexities that arise from globalization. Perspectives from the Global South, and in this case especially from Africa, should be integrated into the teaching, and supported by student and researcher mobility, as part of these efforts.

Questions for consideration for key actors

For the Finnish Government

- What measures will be taken to update perceptions and understandings of Africa within the Finnish government? How can a continuous learning process be designed and implemented?
- How can the research and policy-making community best communicate with one another? What measures will be put in place to support science-policy collaboration? Who is responsible for such measures?
- How can self-reflection be included in the implementation processes of the Strategy?

For HEIs

- How can more African voices be included in Finland's academia? How to ensure these voices are included from the beginning and in strategic fora?
- What measures will be taken to update perceptions and understandings of Africa within the science community and leadership? How can a continuous learning process be designed and implemented?
- What measures will be taken to guarantee that all the students in higher education gain sufficient competence for global cooperation, including the ability to understand and work with different realities and contexts, such as the African contexts?
- How can the research and policy-making community best communicate with one another? What measures will be put in place to support the communication of research-based information? Who is responsible for such measures?
- How can research and private sector actors best communicate with one another? What measures will be put in place to support science-private sector collaboration? Who is responsible for such measures?

For Companies

- What measures will be taken to update perceptions and understandings of Africa within the private sector? How can a continuous learning process be designed and implemented?
- How can research and private sector actors best communicate with one another? What measures will be put in place to support the communication of research-based information? Who is responsible for such measures?

For Civil Society

- How can more African voices be included in Finnish civil society? How to ensure these voices are included from the beginning and in strategic fora?
- What measures will be taken to update perceptions and understandings of Africa within the civil society community and leadership? How can a continuous learning process be designed and implemented?
- How can research and civil society actors best communicate with one another? What measures will be put in place to support the communication of research-based information? Who is responsible for such measures?

Research & Innovation

*“Finland is facing new competition when developing its relations with Africa.”
(Finland’s Africa Strategy, pg. 2)*

Research and innovation have a critical role to play in the implementation of the Strategy and can bring value to all of the objectives identified. Finland should further strengthen its expert base with knowledge, skills, and expertise in Africa also in the future. This requires strategic investment in research and innovation collaboration, student and staff mobility, and inclusion of a research component in private-public partnerships. Ensuring students are equipped with global competencies is critical for developing a new generation of experts.

Furthermore, low-threshold support for partnership building is needed to develop expertise, as are scholarships for student and staff mobility at HEIs. Although the digital divide has grown smaller since the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic, face-to-face connections are still needed to build equal, mutually beneficial, and reciprocal partnerships. Funding for mobility is critical and, along with other forms of low-threshold support for partnership building, should be included in the implementation and linked to the Global Responsibility funding instrument being developed by MINEDU.

The impact of research to bring valuable contributions to the implementation of the Strategy is threatened by the substantial budget cuts planned for 2023 on. Adequate resourcing must be made available to ensure science actors, including HEIs and research institutes, are able to undertake the research needed to support the implementation of the Strategy and have the capacity to contribute as foreseen in the Strategy.

Multidisciplinary research that includes social and cultural sciences perspectives bring real added value and is important for holistic understanding of contexts and phenomena. Worryingly, social and cultural sciences have thus far have been overlooked in the Strategy. Ensuring the inclusion of these

in the Strategy's implementation is essential for creating well-rounded and sustainable perspectives, responses, and approaches to collaboration with African partners.

Moreover, partnerships that are multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder in nature are needed for the implementation of the Strategy. Collaboration between sectors and stakeholders supports knowledge sharing and the achievement of strategic objectives. However, attention as well as measures must be put in place to support this collaboration as working across sectors can be challenging.

HEIs are already actively collaborating with African partners, in a number of settings and in different ways. Not only do HEIs have institutional partnerships, but they participate in formal (such as UniPID, SANORD⁴, SAFINET⁵, EDUCase Network and the Finland-Africa Platform for Innovation) and informal networks as well. Researchers and lecturers are also active in developing personal and professional relationships that can lead to long-term collaboration. Existing collaboration needs to be utilized in the implementation of the strategy, while also identifying ways to expand and diversify collaboration.

Questions for consideration for key actors

For the Finnish Government

- How is financing for research and innovation foreseen for the implementation of the Strategy? How can adequate resourcing for science and innovation for the Strategy be assured?
- What measures will be taken to support the inclusion of research and innovation actors in the implementation of the Strategy?
- What measures will be taken to support mobility at HEIs?
- How will social and cultural sciences be included in the implementation of the Strategy? How will the inclusion of social and cultural sciences be included in long-term planning and thinking around the contributions of science, technology, and innovation to policymaking? What measures will be put in place to support multidisciplinary research collaboration?
- How can multi-sector, multi-stakeholder partnerships be supported in the implementation of the Strategy? What measures will be put in place to support these?
- How can existing collaboration be utilized for the implementation of the Strategy? What measures will be put in place to support diversification of collaboration?

For HEIs

- How will social and cultural sciences be included in the implementation of the Strategy? What measures can universities put in place to better include and value social and cultural sciences in (political) decision-making? What measures will be put in place to support multidisciplinary research collaboration?
- What measures will be taken to encourage student and staff mobility and to offer studies that develop global competences?
- How can multi-sector, multi-stakeholder partnerships be supported in the implementation of the Strategy? What measures will be put in place to support these?
- How can existing collaboration be utilized for the implementation of the Strategy? What measures will be put in place to support diversification of collaboration?

For Companies

- How can multi-sector, multi-stakeholder partnerships be supported in the implementation of the Strategy? What measures will be put in place to support these?

⁴ <https://sanord.uwc.ac.za/>

⁵ <https://www.tuni.fi/en/services-and-collaboration/international-tampere-university/safinet>

- What measures will be put in place to support multidisciplinary research collaboration?

For Civil Society

- How can civil society and HEIs effectively cooperate and share knowledge?
- How can multi-sector, multi-stakeholder partnerships be supported in the implementation of the Strategy? What measures will be put in place to support these?
- What measures will be put in place to support multidisciplinary research collaboration?