



POLICY BRIEF

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Towards Strong Swiss–African Science Diplomacy

Amid shifting geopolitics and a strained multilateral system, science diplomacy emerges as a critical beacon for upholding international evidence-based cooperation and addressing pressing global challenges. It does so through research, partnership and dialogue. Where multilateral channels are gridlocked, well-designed bilateral science partnerships can deliver global public goods and foster trust.

The long-standing science partnership between Switzerland and South Africa, e.g., demonstrates how sustained, co-led investment in research capacity strengthens research and innovation systems on both sides. South Africa has benefited from capacity-building and joint research leadership, while Switzerland has gained strategic access to applied innovation and emerging markets driven by mutual policy alignment and sustained institutional commitment.¹ With a focus on clean technology, renewable energy and Medtech the collaboration highlights the potential of bilateral science diplomacy to address shared challenges and position Swiss engagement within a broader, evolving landscape of international scientific cooperation.

Swiss–African science diplomacy is at a critical inflection point. It has evolved through bilateral partnerships, research funding mechanisms and multilateral cooperation platforms. Yet, it remains vague, underleveraged and insufficiently integrated into the broader foreign policy goals. This Policy Brief provides an analysis of Swiss–African science diplomacy efforts to date and proposes pathways to strengthen and institutionalize cooperation at this level. It identifies key areas of activity, persistent barriers and emerging opportunities.

A more future-oriented and structured approach to Swiss–African science diplomacy is needed. Global science diplomacy is being redefined, as the European Union (EU) launches its first official guidance.² Simultaneously, geopolitical fragmentation, weakened multilateralism and cuts to development cooperation and research risk undoing decades of progress in international collaboration, scientific capacity strengthening and research driven impact.³

In this context, it is recommended that Switzerland and its African partners jointly develop a Swiss–African Science Diplomacy Framework. Such a framework can bridge national interests with global objectives, foster equitable partnerships and promote science, technology and innovation (STI)-driven development. In doing so, it strengthens resilience of both geographical areas in an era of instability.

Key messages

›Science diplomacy is a means to advance foreign policy and scientific cooperation in an unstable global era.

›Swiss–African science diplomacy is a powerful tool to drive innovation, sustainable development, peace and global resilience.

›Strengthening Swiss–African science diplomacy needs a framework and more coherent collaboration – backed by sustained investment in science, technology and innovation.

Recommendations for Swiss–African science diplomacy

1. Align strategies & clarify roles

--Develop a coherent Swiss–Africa science diplomacy strategy

--Launch a Swiss–African science diplomacy platform for coordination

2. Strengthen presence & secure funding

--Enhance Swiss science diplomacy representation in Africa and *vice versa*

--Shift to co-investment models with African partners and design joint instruments for cooperation

3. Drive learning

--Use evidence-based monitoring to adapt strategies and action



SWISS STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT WITH AFRICA

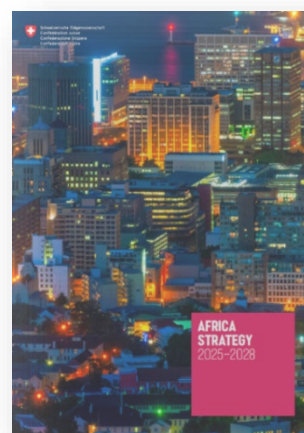
“A partnership of equals that advances sustainable development and stability is key to enabling positive long-term development on both sides. Africa is not a continent in crisis. It is a continent of the future. And Switzerland aims to play an active part in shaping this future.”

Federal Councilor Ignazio Cassis

For the first time, *Switzerland's Africa Strategy (2025–2028)* covers all five African regions, including Northern Africa.⁴ It builds on the Sub-Saharan Africa Strategy 2021–2024 and complements the ongoing Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Strategy.^{5,6} The decision to adopt a continent-wide approach reflects Africa's regional inter-connectedness through the African Union (AU), economic integration,⁷ shared natural resources, migration routes and joint peace and security efforts.

Africa is seen as an increasingly important strategic partner. By 2050, its population is expected to exceed 25% of the global total, alongside rapid urban growth and booming digital economies in countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda and South Africa. Switzerland aims to deepen cooperation in areas including trade, innovation, sustainability and climate resilience. Africa's raw materials make it vital for supply chains and supporting the global energy transition.

At the same time, there are myriad challenges such as political instability, violent extremism, economic dependency and climate vulnerability. The strategy promotes both humanitarian and preventive action, encouraging African ownership while supporting global peace and development.



Switzerland's “Africa Strategy 2025–2028” identifies four priority areas

-  Peace and security
-  Prosperity and competitiveness
-  Environment
-  Democracy and governance

While the strategy aims for a deeper engagement with Africa, the prominence of science diplomacy has notably diminished compared to previous years. Both the Sub-Saharan Africa and MENA Strategies (2021–2024) explicitly identified science diplomacy as a key channel of engagement with Africa, particularly in digitalisation and innovation. In contrast, the 2025–2028 Africa strategy mentions science diplomacy only once, briefly noting that Switzerland “pursues interests in science diplomacy” and refers to ongoing scientific cooperation through bilateral programmes, participation in the Square Kilometre Array Observatory in South Africa and partnerships related to education, research and innovation. It highlights areas such as health, climate change, water management and sustainable agriculture, where Swiss academic institutions have significantly contributed to individual and institutional capacity strengthening and long-term cooperation. The Federal Strategy for Education, Research and Innovation 2025–2028 remains largely consistent with its predecessor, with limited explicit reference to Africa-related activities.⁸

However, this general framing underrepresents the breadth and depth of the Swiss–African science diplomacy ecosystem, including the role of historically active institutions such as the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute (Swiss TPH) and the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland (HES-SO). Both host the “Leading House” for Africa and the MENA region (see next page) building on their extensive research and partnership networks in these respective regions.

✦ **Strategic risk:** The downscaling of science diplomacy as a strategic pillar of engaging with Africa, risks sidelining a powerful tool for equitable partnerships, global problem-solving and one of Switzerland's most distinctive assets in African cooperation.

CURRENT STRENGTHS & SUCCESSES

Institutional Research Partnerships

African Research centres, established through bilateral cooperation and **long-term institutional partnerships** with Switzerland, are leading efforts in health and land and water management.⁹ These collaborations merge Swiss expertise with local leadership to advance joint research, policy engagement and capacity strengthening. Beyond that, these institutions increasingly serve as platforms for “One Switzerland” delegations and high-level official missions, supporting Switzerland’s integrated presence abroad.

Recent delegation visits include:

2025 Federal Councillor Elisabeth Baume-Schneider visits the Centre Suisse de Recherches Scientifiques in Côte d’Ivoire, discussing One Health and global health challenges.

Bilateral Diplomatic Instruments

Switzerland’s first **Science and Technology Counsellor** in Africa, appointed in 2010 in Pretoria, South Africa, represents a formal diplomatic commitment to science diplomacy in South Africa. Acting as a liaison between Swiss science policy and South African science ecosystems, the counsellor works across education, research and innovation, which may include multilateral cooperation. The role has driven bilateral research programmes and the strengthening of institutional partnerships.

2024 State Secretary Martina Hirayama leads a scientific delegation to Kenya and the Ifakara Health Institute in Tanzania to reinforce research and innovation cooperation.

Bilateral Research, Education and Innovation Programmes

Leading House Africa provides research funding, mobility schemes and joint research calls with African funders, including the South African Technology Innovation Agency. It also fosters collaboration in technology and innovation through initiatives such as academia–industry training programmes.

Lead Agency Agreement between the South African National Research Foundation and the Swiss National Science Foundation for coordinating research funding.

The **Transnational Red Sea Center** exemplifies Swiss science diplomacy by uniting Red Sea nations to protect climate-resilient coral reefs. Through collaborative research and regional engagement, it fosters environmental cooperation.

Leading House MENA supports bilateral research and academic mobility to strengthen scientific collaborations between Switzerland and countries of the MENA region.

Excellence in Africa includes “100 PhDs for Africa”, mentorships and digital infrastructure, notably in Morocco.

The Swiss Government Excellence Scholarships (**ESKAS**) support African PhD and postdocs in Switzerland.

The **Blue Peace** initiative demonstrates Swiss science diplomacy in West Africa by fostering transboundary water cooperation among members.

Multilateral Science Diplomacy Mechanisms and Platforms

Switzerland is a donor to the European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership – **EDCTP** pursuing clinical trials and research capacity strengthening in African countries. Within this framework, Swiss and African institutions collaborate on diagnostics, drugs and vaccines for key diseases.

The Geneva Science and Diplomacy Anticipator – **GESDA** – foresight and anticipatory diplomacy actor, engages African partners in discussions on future technologies and post-2030 agenda design.

Science Diplomacy Capital for Africa – a regional hub for African-led science diplomacy, promoting collaboration and evidence-informed policy through forums. It is supported through informal cooperation with GESDA and Geneva-based diplomacy platforms and acts as bridge between African science diplomacy actors and global multilateral networks.

The **Spiez Laboratory** supports global health security by strengthening biosecurity capacity and enabling equitable access to biological materials for African countries through its hosting of the WHO BioHub and its support for a Biological Weapons Convention laboratory network and confidence-building measures.

Switzerland is a long-standing supporter of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research – **CGIAR** – the world’s largest agricultural research partnership promoting food systems research and development in Africa. CGIAR promotes data-driven policy-making and hosts innovation platforms.

Switzerland facilitates African participation in **CERN** and is a **Square Kilometre Array** observer, bolstering big science.



GAPS & CHALLENGES

Regional and Global Challenges and Limitations

POLICY BOTTLENECK

Despite various Swiss–African science diplomacy initiatives and the central role of research in Switzerland’s Africa Strategy 2025–2028, the absence of formal science diplomacy frameworks or guidelines in both Switzerland and Africa limits coherence and impact.¹⁰ Ongoing discussions have yet to produce actionable guidance and to foster more palpable bilateral and trilateral (including EU countries) engagements. The EU’s Science Diplomacy Framework has set a benchmark.²

Call for action: Africa and Switzerland must now define complementary approaches to ensure strategic alignment and avoid fragmentation

FUNDING INSTABILITY AND DONOR RETRENCHMENT

Cuts to development and global health budgets by high-income countries, including Switzerland, are creating uncertainty around long-term science diplomacy investments. This financial instability constrains the scale and ambition of initiatives with Africa, leaving research-for-development partnerships at risk just as global challenges demand greater collaboration.

Main Limitations on Swiss Side

LACK OF A COHERENT SCIENCE DIPLOMACY STRATEGY FOR AFRICA

Switzerland’s Africa Strategy references science diplomacy only vaguely and lacks dedicated instruments such as a Swissnex Africa office (see map at the top of the page) or STI representation outside South Africa. Existing programmes are fragmented across ministries, agencies and academic actors, with no central coordination or focused strategic approach to science diplomacy with Africa.

UNEVEN GEOGRAPHICAL REACH

Swiss science diplomacy engagement is concentrated in a few African countries – mainly South Africa, Kenya, Côte d’Ivoire, Tanzania and Ethiopia, while Central and North Africa and fragile states remain formally under-engaged. Francophone and Lusophone regions are underrepresented. Political instability limits outreach, and there are few STI focal points at Swiss embassies to coordinate broader engagement.

EXCLUSIVE SCIENCE DIPLOMACY

Swiss initiatives like GESDA have primarily engaged high-income frontier STI partners, limiting inclusion of African countries. While there are efforts to engage with the Global South, African participation remains modest, highlighting the need for a more deliberate and inclusive approach to science diplomacy.

Main Limitations on African Side

LIMITED RECOGNITION OF SCIENCE DIPLOMACY AS A POLICY TOOL

The concept of science diplomacy remains underdeveloped across most African countries, with few national strategies addressing it effectively. Diplomatic training largely omits STI, science attachés and interministerial coordination mechanisms are rare and private sector and civil society actors are not systematically integrated into science diplomacy efforts.

WEAK UPTAKE OF SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE INTO GLOBAL POLICYMAKING

Weak integration of scientific evidence into multilateral and global policy processes limits the strategic use of research in addressing shared challenges. Despite growing recognition, innovation uptake remains low due to inadequate mechanisms for translating local scientific knowledge into global decision-making and limited inclusion of Southern perspectives in international fora.

CAPACITY CONSTRAINTS OF AFRICAN RESEARCH FUNDING INSTITUTIONS

Many African research funding bodies face resource and capacity constraints. As a result, their ability to effectively co-manage funding programmes with Swiss or other international partners may be constrained.

STRENGTHENING SWISS–AFRICAN SCIENCE DIPLOMACY

Five priority actions are proposed to reinforce Swiss–African science diplomacy: (1) building a strategic foundation; (2) improving coordination; (3) deepening networks; (4) strengthening bilateral representation; and (5) ensuring adequate funding mechanisms.

1. ESTABLISH A COHERENT POLICY BASELINE

Global competition in science diplomacy is accelerating, yet Switzerland still lacks a formal framework to guide its international engagements. Establishing a Swiss science diplomacy guideline and co-developing a Swiss–African roadmap – aligned with both Switzerland’s foreign policy priorities and the AU Agenda 2063⁶ – would enhance strategic coherence. These steps would support the structured integration of Swiss–African science diplomacy into broader policy frameworks and foster mutually beneficial cooperation.

- Finalize and publish Switzerland’s Science Diplomacy Guidelines as a foundation for structured, coherent bilateral and trilateral science diplomacy engagements
- Develop a Swiss–African Science Diplomacy Roadmap aligned with AU strategies and Switzerland’s foreign policy priorities and leverage existing bilateral agreements

2. CLARIFY RESPONSIBILITIES AND MANDATES

Switzerland’s decentralised science diplomacy approach creates strength but risks fragmentation without a clearer definition of roles, responsibilities and coordination. Clarifying mandates would better mobilize Swiss expertise to support STI advancement, evidence-to-policy flows and new models of development assistance.

- Map mandates of key actors regarding science diplomacy collaboration with Africa
- Assign clear lead responsibilities and coordination to avoid overlap and maximise complementarity

3. DEEPEN ROOTS, GROW CONNECTIONS: BUILD A SWISS–AFRICA SCIENCE DIPLOMACY PLATFORM

Like the *Digital Tree* illustrated alongside, symbolising growth, innovation and interconnection, Swiss–African science diplomacy needs deeper roots and stronger branches. Currently, there is no dedicated mechanism for regular exchange or systematic monitoring. A joint platform would foster structured collaboration, knowledge-sharing, opportunity identification and evidence-based adaptation.

- Launch a Swiss–Africa Science Diplomacy Platform to integrate cutting edge science and development cooperation in Africa by linking and mobilizing governments, start-ups and private sector, academia and diaspora scientists
- Establish an Africa–EU–Swiss Science Diplomacy Observatory within the platform to map initiatives and analyse trends guiding strategies and future programming
- Host regular innovation dialogues, roundtables and knowledge exchanges to cultivate shared progress



STRENGTHENING SWISS–AFRICAN SCIENCE DIPLOMACY – CONTINUATION

4. STRENGTHEN BILATERAL REPRESENTATION WITHIN A MULTILATERAL CONTEXT

Switzerland's science diplomacy presence in Africa is limited and uneven, while African STI representation in Switzerland remains rare. Strengthening reciprocal STI focal points would accelerate mutual learning and deepen partnerships. At the same time, anchoring these efforts within multilateral and regional frameworks – such as the AU, the EU or regional economic communities – can help align bilateral initiatives with broader continental priorities.

- Appoint STI Focal Points across Africa's regions, embedded in the network of Swiss Embassies and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation offices
- Encourage African governments to deploy STI attachés or focal points to Switzerland
- Facilitate joint working programmes between Swiss and African science diplomats
- Engage with regional and continental organisations – such as the EU Science Diplomacy Alliance – to ensure bilateral actions complement wider multilateral agendas

5. CO-CREATE FLEXIBLE AND STRATEGIC FUNDING MECHANISMS


Traditional donor-driven models are increasingly unsustainable. To remain relevant and impactful, Switzerland must adopt more agile and responsive collaboration instruments. Co-investment frameworks with African institutions can strengthen ownership, resilience and long-term sustainability in science diplomacy. This requires moving beyond rigid funding structures and instead plugging into national priorities, centres of excellence and existing research platforms across Africa. Only through such alignment can Switzerland fully tap into African scientific leadership and co-create solutions to global challenges. Otherwise, engagement risks remaining limited in scope and disciplinary range.

- Develop joint science diplomacy seed funds between Swiss and African institutions and establish synergetic funding mechanisms aligned with the EU science diplomacy initiatives
- Move beyond traditional donor–recipient models towards co-investment frameworks that support long-term, co-led partnerships in STI
- Prioritise flexible funding approaches that can integrate with national systems and enable Switzerland to respond dynamically to emerging opportunities across the continent

CONCLUSION AND POLICY OUTLOOK

Swiss–African science diplomacy is at a crossroads. Amid rapidly shifting global dynamics, both sides have an opportunity to redefine their cooperation through a more structured, inclusive and forward-looking approach. While a rich ecosystem of partnerships, programmes and platforms already exists, engagement remains fragmented and underleveraged and science diplomacy insufficiently integrated into broader foreign and education, research and innovation policy strategies.

Switzerland's Africa Strategy 2025–2028 provides a timely foundation for action but underrepresents the strategic value of science diplomacy. In parallel, global developments such as the EU's Science Diplomacy Framework and growing geopolitical fragmentation demand that Switzerland and its African partners build science diplomacy as a core pillar of cooperation.

 **Strategic opportunity:** By acting decisively and collaboratively, Switzerland and African countries can elevate science diplomacy to a strategic driver of shared development, innovation and global resilience

Editorial

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POLICY BRIEF

This Policy Brief builds on recommendations from our earlier brief on [Swiss Science Diplomacy](#) and reflects the updated Africa Strategy 2025–2028.⁴

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