



# Current Path

## Africa's Diversity

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Last updated 14 December 2024 using IFs 8.34

## Africa's Diversity

Africa is a continent of profound diversity. Home to 54 sovereign countries (55 if Western Sahara/Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic is included) of which 46 are considered to be in sub-Saharan Africa. With a 2023 population exceeding 1.4 billion people, more than 3 000 [languages](#) are spoken in Africa, most of which have roots in seven major language families.

Using the 2024/5 income classification of the World Bank, Africa has 22 low-income countries, 24 lower-middle-income countries, eight upper-middle-income countries and one high-income country, Seychelles.

Africa is the world's most tropical continent, with the equator dividing it in two - a symmetrical division with half of the continent lying north and half lying south of the equator. Around this stable equatorial region, the climate further afield varies widely, ranging from hot deserts to icy glaciers, and from rainforests to grassy plains. The central part of Africa has a wet tropical climate with heavy rainfall, while regions like the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Eritrea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and South Sudan) experience longer dry periods and occasional droughts. The Sahara Desert in the north has little to no rainfall, whereas the Kalahari Desert in the south receives a little summer rainfall due to cool and moist air masses from the Atlantic ocean. The northern and southern edges of the continent have a Mediterranean climate characterised by hot dry summers and moist winters.

**Chart 1: Population distribution map for Africa**

Chart goes here

Central to Africa's economic narrative are its regional economic communities (RECs). The African Union recognises eight, the Southern African Development Community ([SADC](#)), the East African Community ([EAC](#)), the Economic Community of

West African States (ECOWAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD). The RECs should play crucial roles in facilitating economic cooperation, trade, and regional integration, fostering a spirit of unity and collective growth. However, some, such as CEN-SAD and AMU, are effectively moribund, others, such as IGAD, hamstrung by conflict or disputes amongst members while ECOWAS is faced with the potential withdrawal of some of its members following a spate of coups in the region.

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Chart 2: Regional Economic Community membership



AMU ▼

AMU



Source: African Futures team

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All African states are members of the African Union (AU) which drives the continent's agenda for peace, security, political integration, economic growth and sustainable development. Its flagship initiative, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), operational since 2021 (but remains in the early stages of full implementation), aims at fostering economic integration and boosting intra-African trade, creating the world's largest free trade area when considering the number of countries involved. This monumental effort seeks to catalyse economic growth, enhance competitiveness, and lift millions out of all forms of poverty by boosting intra-African trade, diversifying exports away from commodity goods and attracting investment.

It is ironic that Africa's status as the origin of the human species constrained its subsequent development. Once homo sapiens left the continent, they multiplied and developed, competed and multiplied whilst Africa's high disease burden meant that it was unable to gain the population densities that drove development elsewhere. Even today, the continent is more rural compared to other regions and its infectious disease burden is still the highest globally. Among other considerations, this has had significant effects on the provision of basic infrastructure such as safe water and improved sanitation as well as the development of sectors such as manufacturing and agriculture.

Instead, Africa served as a source of slaves and riches for successive centuries that fueled development elsewhere. Collectively, the indigenous, Arab, European and Transatlantic slave trades, from the mid-7th century to the 19th century,

had a devastating impact on the African continent. Slavery and imperialism meant that African societies remained more dispersed and mobile than others, allowing the continent to be colonised and divided. That most famously occurred with the 1884/5 Berlin Conference during which it was partitioned into spheres of influence for various European powers, ignoring existing African boundaries and kingdoms. Although subsequent colonialism was relatively brief, it left an indelible imprint.

Decolonisation and independence marked a period of struggle for African nations as they sought to reclaim sovereignty and build cohesive states amidst the challenges left by colonial rule. The Cold War Era added further complexity, turning Africa into a battleground for superpower rivalries, exacerbating conflicts and shaping governance models.

More than half a century after the end of colonialism, most African states continue to struggle with their artificial origins - the African state being an external imposition and not having been established as a result of domestic processes that would have forged national identities.

Political instability, conflict and governance issues pose substantial obstacles to development given the extent to which the continent served as a pawn in global politics. Moreover, today [climate change](#), to which Africa has contributed little, impacts threaten agriculture, water resources and livelihoods, exacerbating food security concerns and displacement.

In the 21st century Africa continues to face ongoing challenges but also significant opportunities such as its recent membership of the Group of 20. African voices in the media, the digital revolution and cultural movements are transforming Africa's role in global affairs, enhancing its influence and fostering greater unity across the continent.

The African Futures and Innovation program focuses on producing tailored, data-driven forecasts for each African country and region across multiple sectors. We provide:

- Individual forecasts and scenario reports for each African country,
- regional reports for North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and Africa as a whole,
- reports for all eight Regional Economic Communities,
- a report that compares the four country income groups, and
- seventeen thematic and impact reports, such as on [Education](#), [Work/Jobs](#) and [Africa in the World](#).

In the next section we start with a brief review of economic size, using Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It is the total monetary or market value of all the finished goods and services produced within a country's borders in a specific time period. GDP is a comprehensive measure of a nation's overall economic activity and is often used to compare the economic performance of different countries. The forecasts of GDP used on this website include estimates as to the contribution of the informal sector which may be modelled or initialised from official data.

Then, we review GDP per capita and extreme poverty, two useful macro-indicators of economic progress at national level and discuss the relationship relating to inequality and the contribution made by trade and globalisation.

In this discussion we review trends since 1960, generally considered the start of Africa's independence period, and use 1990, 2023 and a forecast to 2043 (our forecast horizon, which is the end of the third 10 year implementation plan of the African Union Agenda 2063) as key data points, where possible.

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Jakkie Cilliers (2024) Current Path. Published online at [futures.issafrica.org](https://futures.issafrica.org). Retrieved from <https://futures.issafrica.org/thematic/01-africas-current-path/> [Online Resource] Updated 14 December 2024.



## About the authors

Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees and head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the Institute. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, *Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution* (March 2020), *The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities* (April 2021), and *Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity* (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

## About African Futures & Innovation

Scenarios and forecasting can help Africa identify and respond to opportunities and threats. The work of the African Futures & Innovation (AFI) program at the Institute for Security Studies aims to understand and address a widening gap between indices of wellbeing in Africa and elsewhere in the world. The AFI helps stakeholders understand likely future developments. Research findings and their policy implications are widely disseminated, often in collaboration with in-country partners. Forecasting tools inspire debate and provide insights into possible trajectories that inform planning, prioritisation and effective resource allocation. Africa's future depends on today's choices and actions by governments and their non-governmental and international partners. The AFI provides empirical data that informs short- and medium-term decisions with long-term implications. The AFI enhances Africa's capacity to prepare for and respond to future challenges. The program is headed by Dr Jakkie Cilliers.