

University of Groningen comprehensive strategy for sub-Saharan Africa (2022-2026)

“Africa is the European Union’s natural partner and neighbour” (Ursula von der Leyen, March 2020)

1. Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is the future. It is a vast, diverse subcontinent that includes 48 countries and has a fast-growing population of over 1.1 billion people. The University of Groningen (UG) has been active in SSA for decades, and it now wants to step up its game and make a coordinated effort the way it has done before in Southeast Asia and Latin America. This memo describes the rationale for intensified engagement in/with the subcontinent, by analyzing the external environment and UG’s current position in SSA. Based on the conclusions drawn from the analysis, it proposes a comprehensive regional strategy for the coming years that includes overall and specific objectives, activities and the investments needed for UG’s education, research and societal impact.

2. UG strategic context

In its 2021-2026 Strategic Plan, UG formulated the following objectives for internationalization that are relevant for UG’s involvement with SSA:

- To prepare UG students for the world and international society by providing a global experience, whether this is via a study period abroad, online learning, or in UG's increasingly diverse and high-quality international classrooms. For this, the contacts with and input from SSA students and staff are indispensable;
- To contribute substantially and visibly to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);
- To attract and retain a talented and diverse community of international staff and students by ensuring that we are an attractive, competitive, inclusive and diverse university;
- To develop strategic alliances with a select group of European and global partners, including in SSA, leading to deeper relationships, education and research innovation and initiatives, diversified funding streams, opportunities for short study/research programmes, double degrees, and collaborations on PhD projects for our students and staff;
- Expand and diversify its portfolio of partners and activities by becoming more active in North America, South Asia, **Africa** and the UK.

3. Environment: developments and opportunities

The environment for collaboration with SSA for UG contains the following elements:

- Africa, including SSA, is facing tremendous demographic growth. It is expected that, by 2050, the SSA population will have doubled (to over 2.2 billion people). Hence, the demand for quality (higher) education - which is already high - will further increase;
- SSA is growing economically, and its political role in the world is changing. With its human and natural resources, it attracts interest from all over the world, from international stakeholders (e.g. China, Russia and the US), business, NGOs and universities;
- The African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) have set up a joint agenda and defined 5 priorities (in addition to Health), for which specific funding will become available: 1) Green Transition and Energy Access; 2) Digital Transformation; 3) Sustainable Growth; 4) Peace, Security and Governance, and 5) Migration and Mobility. (Higher) Education and research are seen as an important vehicle to address this agenda; In addition, the EU offers regular funding programmes that can also be used to finance cooperation with SSA, especially via networks;
- The new coalition government in The Netherlands has indicated that it will develop an Africa strategy in the coming period. The Ministry of Education, Science & Culture identified South Africa as a priority country, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs continues to run capacity building programmes. There is funding for cooperation with the subcontinent through NWO and the Orange Knowledge Programme (OKP), and through Dutch bilateral programmes (e.g. NRF-Nuffic PhD programme in South Africa);
- The Guild and African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA), as well as the Coimbra Group, call for joint efforts to strengthen sub-Saharan Africa's research infrastructure and work on the SDGs. ARUA has set up and will continue to establish Centres of Excellence (including at universities with which the UG already has ties) and focusing on themes that match UG's four interdisciplinary schools;
- SSA universities are increasingly acknowledged as drivers of innovation and key players for realizing the SDGs;
- There is a distinct movement away from Eurocentrism, and there is a global call to remove all remnants of colonialism. There is pressure on universities to walk the talk of inclusion.

4. Rationale for comprehensive regional strategy

Looking at the opportunities and challenges in SSA, the collaboration the UG already has and at UG's strategic goals, we propose a comprehensive regional strategy for actively engaging with sub-Saharan Africa for the period 2022-2026.

UG needs to step up its game and invest in its relations with SSA universities, academics and students. To do this, the UG can build on the relations it has developed in SSA over the past decades. Intensified collaboration with SSA would fit well with UG's 2021-2026 strategy and can contribute directly to the realization of our ambitions for education, research and impact. At the same time, we need to realize that developing productive partnerships takes time and that relationships created early on play a significant role in building successful sustainable networks abroad.

The proposed strategy covers education, research and societal impact, and it seeks to engage UG stakeholders at all levels, internally and externally. For this reason, the SSA strategy has been widely discussed with internal stakeholders at central and faculty level (students and staff), as well as with external stakeholders, including partner universities in the Netherlands, Europe and sub-Saharan Africa, the Coimbra Group, The Guild, Nuffic and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The strategy aims to create more opportunities for contacts between UG and SSA students in the international classroom, via (online) projects, joint educational programmes, and through study abroad. The perspectives of SSA students and staff will enrich the learning and teaching experience of UG students and staff, and vice versa, and will prepare all students for the world of tomorrow. Having more degree and exchange students from SSA at the UG and sending more UG students to SSA should diversify the international classroom in Groningen and Leeuwarden, and in SSA. This will develop the capacity of all individual students involved and, through knowledge sharing, the capacity of the countries they represent.

One of the key priorities for the UG is its contribution to solving the global societal challenges through the stimulation of interdisciplinary research. At the same time, SSA universities are key players for realizing the SDGs. Therefore, our goal is to offer more academics from SSA and the UG the possibility to connect and carry out joint research on the SDGs or in specific fields, start joint PhD supervision, and exchange postdoctoral students. UG and SSA academics will be facilitated in contributing to developing (joint) interdisciplinary curricula, for instance in doctoral schools in SSA or in the interdisciplinary Centres of Excellence as planned by the ARUA. UG's four interdisciplinary schools will play an important role in this. The intensified collaboration with SSA will further position the UG as a leading, inclusive and socially responsible university.

5. What does the UG want to achieve with SAA?

The proposed strategy links opportunities to UG's strategic priorities for education, research and societal impact. It builds on UG's long-standing experience in cooperating with SSA (as shown by UG's many best practices), and uses the 2020 situation as a benchmark for defining four interrelated, overall objectives for 2026:

- **General:** In 2026, and using its current network as a stepping stone, UG will have identified strategic partners in 4 or 5 different countries in different parts of SSA. In addition, UG will (have) be(en) active in several externally (EU/AU/other) funded projects and programmes. This should provide a solid foundation for the UG to make the next step in its collaboration with SAA in the next strategic plan period (2026-2031).
- **Education:** In 2026, students and staff from Sub-Saharan African countries are better represented in UG's teaching and learning environment in Groningen and Leeuwarden, contributing to the quality of our international classroom. African perspectives are reflected/offered in relevant UG educational programmes at home and abroad, and a substantial percentage of UG (PhD) students and staff is getting a global experience by teaching, studying, doing fieldwork or an internship, in or with sub-Saharan Africa. In 2026, the UG can engage with a solid network of alumni in / from SSA.
- **Research:** In 2026, sub-Saharan Africa is visibly represented in UG's research efforts, contents-wise (fundamental and applied research, including, but not limited to, SDG-related research): people/network-wise (in sub-Saharan Africa and in Europe), and at all levels (PhD students, postdoctoral fellows, visiting researchers / professors), as a result of UG's efforts to facilitate people to people contacts and build networks in sub-Saharan Africa and Europe.
- **Societal impact:** In 2026, the UG is a well-known partner in Afro-European partnerships and networks contributing in a range of fields to the SDGs, the solution of local and global challenges, specifically in the strategic subject areas as identified for UG's four interdisciplinary schools.

These **4 overall objectives** consist of a series of **24 specific objectives**, which are all made up of several activities and include steps that can and will be taken in the shorter term (taking consequences of Covid-19 into account). The overall and specific objectives have been discussed with many UG stakeholders.

6. Proposed budget and approach

The UG will fund its comprehensive strategy for sub-Saharan Africa for 2022-2026 by:

- a) Making use of/shifting regular internal budgets and existing UG policies, projects and instruments;
- b) Maximizing the use of external funding, especially. looking at EU instruments;
- c) Investing an additional UG budget of K€150/year as follows:
- d)
 - K€45/year for education
 - K€75/year for research
 - K€30/year for societal impact

The additional UG budget would go towards:

1. Stimulating people-to-people contacts (students and staff);
2. Engaging in (new) partnerships and networks;
3. Boosting educational and research innovation and co-creation;
4. Boosting (interdisciplinary) contributions towards an enhanced research infrastructure in SSA and towards achieving the SDGs;
5. Promoting sub-Saharan Africa locally and connecting (SSA) students and staff with local stakeholders, and lastly
6. Positioning the UG and its activities in / with SSA locally and internationally.

The budget will mainly be used in support of the general objective to work towards strategic partnerships in a limited number of countries. The relationships should lead to collaboration in externally funded projects.

7. Organisation and monitoring

An institutional UG sub-Saharan Africa advisory committee representing a diverse group of academics, support staff and (PhD) students will monitor progress. There will be separate sub-committees for Education, Research and Societal Impact. The Department of International Strategy and Relations (ISR) will coordinate the implementation of the regional strategy.

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