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Emerging Technologies, Innovation and Cultural Heritage in Kenya's Climate Diplomacy

The role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Internet of Things (IoT)



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Abstract

This paper explores the future of Kenya's climate diplomacy by examining the interplay between climate security, scientific innovation, and cultural heritage. It analyzes how Kenya is redefining climate diplomacy through active international engagement, policy frameworks, and strategic partnerships aimed at tackling environmental threats. A key focus is the integration of emerging technologies particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT) in enhancing climate monitoring, data analysis, and policy decision-making. These technologies are shown to be pivotal in transforming climate governance and supporting Kenya's adaptation and mitigation efforts. Additionally, the paper highlights the role of indigenous knowledge

and cultural practices in promoting climate stewardship and cross-border cooperation. Kenya's holistic approach, blending modern innovation with traditional systems, offers a unique model for sustainable climate action. By drawing insights from technology, diplomacy, and culture, the study provides practical recommendations for strengthening Kenya's leadership in regional and global climate diplomacy. Despite some reliance on secondary data, the paper offers a comprehensive, interdisciplinary framework for advancing climate governance in the 21st century.

Introduction

Kenya's climate diplomacy is becoming a central component in addressing both global and national challenges related to climate change, sustainable development, and resource management. As the effects of climate change become more pronounced, countries worldwide are increasingly prioritizing climate diplomacy as a means to foster collaboration and implement effective solutions. For Kenya, this entails not only engaging in international discussions and agreements but also crafting policies that align with its unique environmental and socio-economic contexts. By positioning itself as a proactive player in climate diplomacy, Kenya aims to tackle pressing issues such as biodiversity loss, deforestation, and water scarcity while simultaneously promoting sustainable economic growth (Maina et al., 2022; Njoroge, 2023).

A significant aspect of Kenya's climate diplomacy is its focus on climate security. This involves redefining diplomatic strategies to address emerging threats that pose risks to national and regional stability. Climate diplomacy in Kenya seeks to integrate environmental considerations into security strategies, recognizing that environmental degradation can intensify conflicts over resources and displace communities. By developing frameworks that prioritize climate adaptation and mitigation, Kenya is working to secure international support and resources to enhance its resilience against climate-related challenges. This includes participating in global initiatives and leveraging diplomatic efforts to enhance regional cooperation and secure funding for broader environmental projects (Muthoni, 2021; Wambua, 2024).

Science, technology, and innovation play a crucial role in advancing Kenya's climate diplomacy. With the advent of artificial intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things

(IoT), Kenya is harnessing these technologies to improve climate monitoring and data analysis capabilities. The integration of AI and IoT in climate change governance allows for real-time data collection and analysis, leading to more informed policy-making and efficient resource management. Furthermore, these technologies enable the identification of patterns and trends that can inform strategies for mitigating climate change impacts and promoting sustainability. In addition to technological advancements, Kenya's climate diplomacy also draws on cultural dimensions, recognizing the potential of its rich cultural heritage and community practices to foster climate stewardship and cross-border cooperation.

Through integrating these diverse elements, Kenya is poised to strengthen its leadership in environmental diplomacy and contribute to global efforts in addressing the complex climate related disasters being key challenges of the 21st century (Mwangi et al., 2023; Onyango, 2022).

Development of Climate Diplomacy in Kenya

Kenya's climate diplomacy initiatives are crucial in addressing both global and national climate change challenges. As a signatory to the Paris Agreement, Kenya has committed to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by 32% by 2030, relative to the business-as-usual scenario (Republic of Kenya, 2021). This commitment is supported by Kenya's National Climate Change Action Plan (NCCAP), which outlines strategic interventions to mitigate and adapt to climate impacts. The NCCAP emphasizes the importance of international collaboration and partnerships in achieving these goals, leveraging Kenya's diplomatic engagements to secure necessary resources and expertise (Government of Kenya, 2023). Kenya's active participation in global climate forums and negotiations underscores its commitment to international cooperation, aligning its policies with global efforts to limit temperature rise to well below 2 degrees Celsius (UNFCCC, 2020).

On the national level, Kenya's climate diplomacy facilitates access to climate finance, which is critical for implementing sustainable development projects. The country has been successful in securing funding from international mechanisms such as the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF). For instance, Kenya received \$34.5 million from the GCF to support the "Building Resilient Communities

and Ecosystems through Integrated Water Resources Management” project (Green Climate Fund, 2022). Such projects aim to enhance resilience to climate impacts by improving water resource management, promoting renewable energy, and supporting community-based adaptation initiatives. This financial support enables Kenya to implement its National Adaptation Plan, which outlines priority actions for building resilience across various sectors, including agriculture, water, and forestry (Republic of Kenya, 2022).

Regionally, Kenya engages with neighboring countries through platforms like the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) to promote collective action on climate change. These regional collaborations focus on sharing best practices, strengthening climate governance, and addressing transboundary climate challenges such as water scarcity and desertification. By fostering diplomatic relations and participating in regional climate initiatives, Kenya enhances its ability to address the impacts of climate change while contributing to regional stability and development (African Union, 2023). Additionally, Kenya's leadership in initiatives like the Africa Adaptation

Initiative (AAI) and the African Group of Negotiators on Climate Change highlights its commitment to advancing climate resilience across the continent (African Group of Negotiators, 2022).

Harnessing Science, Technology, and Innovation in Kenya's Climate Change Governance

Technological advancements have substantially contributed to enhancing Kenya's climate diplomacy by improving the capacity for climate monitoring and policy-making. The adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT) in Kenya has enabled more accurate and real-time data collection, which is crucial for addressing emerging challenges including climate change. For instance, AI-powered systems are employed to analyze satellite imagery for detecting changes in land use and deforestation patterns. According to the World Resources Institute (2021), AI models can identify deforestation hotspots with an accuracy of over 90%, aiding Kenya in monitoring its forest cover and implementing effective conservation strategies. Furthermore, IoT sensors placed in key environmental



H.E. the President of Kenya and Chairman of CAHOSCC leads Heads of State and Government in unveiling the Africa Leaders Nairobi Declaration on Climate Change and Call to Action on September 6, 2023. (Photo Credit: FSD Africa)



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sites collect real-time data on air and water quality, which supports the development of more precise policies and regulations (United Nations Environment Programme, 2023).

The integration of AI and IoT in Kenya has enhanced climate policy-making by providing actionable insights and predictive analytics. AI algorithms analyze vast amounts of data from various sources, such as climate models and sensor networks, to forecast climate change trends and potential impacts. This capability is instrumental in evaluating the effectiveness of Kenya's climate policies and adaptation strategies. For example, AI-driven tools are used to assess the impact of Kenya's National Climate Change Action Plan, which aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase climate resilience (Kenya Ministry of Environment and Forestry, 2022). The use of AI and IoT in monitoring emission levels and climate variables has led to more informed and responsive policy adjustments, supporting Kenya's commitment to international climate agreements like the Paris Agreement (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2018).

The role of AI and IoT in enhancing Kenya's climate diplomacy extends to international collaboration and data sharing. Kenya broadly participates in global environmental initiatives where data transparency and accuracy are critical. Through leveraging AI and IoT technologies, Kenya can contribute valuable data to international databases and networks, such as the Global Forest Watch and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) platforms. These technologies enable Kenya to align its climate policies with global standards and collaborate with other nations to address transboundary environmental issues (International Union for Conservation of Nature, 2022). According to the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data

(2021), Kenya's adoption of digital technologies has improved its data reporting capabilities, enhancing its role in global climate diplomacy and fostering stronger international partnerships.

Additionally, technological advancements, particularly AI and IoT, have enhanced Kenya's ability to meet its mitigation goals (such as the NDCS) and uphold commitments to international agreements. For instance, the application of IoT technologies in monitoring and managing Kenya's water resources has been critical in addressing challenges related to water scarcity and quality (World Bank, 2023). IoT devices track water levels and quality in real-time, enabling more effective management of water resources and improved response to drought conditions. Furthermore, Kenya's participation in the African Union's Great Green Wall initiative benefits from AI and IoT technologies that support the monitoring of reforestation efforts and land restoration progress. According to the African Union (2022), these technologies play a vital role in achieving the initiative's goal of combating desertification and restoring 100 million hectares of land across the Sahel region, including Kenya (African Union, 2022).

Bridging Science and Policy: Think Tanks in Climate Diplomacy

The science-policy interface plays an important role in promoting climate diplomacy by facilitating the translation of scientific knowledge into actionable policy decisions. This interface involves collaboration between scientists, policymakers, and stakeholders to address complex environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. According to a report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), effective science-policy interfaces enhance decision-making by providing credible, relevant, and timely information (UNEP, 2019). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is a key example, that has the mandate of synthesizing scientific research to inform global climate policy. As of 2024, the IPCC's assessment reports have significantly influenced international treaties like the Paris Agreement, which aims to limit global warming to below 2 degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial levels.

Various think tanks in the field of climate change play an instrumental role in the science-policy interface by conducting research, analyzing policy implications, and advocating for sustainable solutions. These organizations

bridge the gap between science and policy, providing evidence-based recommendations that particularly shape and enhance climate diplomacy. The World Resources Institute (WRI), for instance, is a leading global think tank that produces influential reports on issues such as deforestation, water scarcity, and clean energy transitions. According to WRI, their research has contributed to policy changes in over 50 countries, including the development of climate adaptation strategies and renewable energy policies. Through providing expertise and fostering dialogue among stakeholders, think tanks enhance the capacity of governments and international bodies to address actual or potential impacts climate related calamities and challenges effectively (WRI, 2022).

Conferences, seminars, and policy dialogues serve as essential platforms for advancing climate diplomacy by facilitating the exchange of ideas, experiences, and best practices among diverse actors. Events like the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UNFCCC annually bring together representatives from nearly 200 countries to negotiate and implement global climate agreements.

The COP26, held in 2021, resulted in commitments from countries to accelerate climate action and mobilize financial resources to support developing nations. Other key area of interest for COP 28 held in 2023 has been to address the issue of transitioning away from fossil fuels to renewable energy solutions. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) hosts biennial conferences that focus on conserving biodiversity and ensuring its sustainable use. These gatherings provide opportunities for countries to collaborate, build consensus, and strengthen international cooperation on broader environmental issues (UNFCCC, 2021). The integration of scientific knowledge into climate policy is vital for achieving sustainable development goals and addressing global challenges. Effective science-policy interfaces, supported by think tanks and facilitated through conferences and dialogues, enhance the capacity of countries to engage in climate diplomacy.

Sports as a Catalyst and Promoter of Climate Diplomacy

Sports have emerged as a powerful platform for promoting climate diplomacy, leveraging their global reach and influence to address critical emerging challenges. International sporting events, such as the Olympics and FIFA World Cup, bring together diverse nations and audiences, providing

unique opportunities to promote sustainable practices. For instance, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has integrated sustainability into its Olympic Agenda 2020+5, emphasizing the need for climate action and environmental responsibility in hosting the games (International Olympic Committee, 2021). The Tokyo 2020 Olympics, despite facing challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, implemented several green initiatives, such as using hydrogen-powered vehicles and renewable energy sources, setting new benchmarks for sustainability in sports (Organizing Committee of the Tokyo 2020 Games, 2021).

One of the key aspects of using sports as a catalyst for climate diplomacy is the establishment of partnerships and collaborations between sports organizations, governments, and environmental agencies. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has partnered with sports entities through the Sports for Climate Action Framework, which aims to support and guide sports organizations in achieving climate neutrality by 2050 (United Nations Climate Change, 2018). By signing this framework, sports organizations commit to reducing their carbon footprint and promoting climate awareness among fans and athletes. As of 2023, over 300 sports organizations, including FIFA and the International Olympic Committee, have joined this initiative, demonstrating the sector's commitment to climate sustainability (United Nations Climate Change, 2023).

Statistics and facts further underscore the potential of sports in advancing climate diplomacy. According to a report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), sports events can generate up to 7.5 million tons of CO₂ emissions annually (United Nations Environment Programme, 2019). This highlights the urgent need for sustainable practices in sports to mitigate the climate change impacts. In response, initiatives like the UEFA Green Football Weekend have been launched, encouraging football clubs and fans to engage in eco-friendly activities and reduce their carbon footprint during match days. These efforts not only contribute to environmental conservation but also foster international cooperation and dialogue on sustainability issues, positioning sports as a vital player in global diplomacy (UEFA, 2022).

Furthermore, sports can drive policy changes and influence public attitudes toward environmental conservation. Through showcasing successful



Leveling the Playing Field: Beyond national-level transformation, sport is renowned for its capacity to foster bilateral and multilateral cooperation and Inspiring Change (Photo Credits: United Nations)

sustainability initiatives in sports, such as the use of recycled materials in athletic gear or the implementation of zero-waste policies in stadiums, policymakers can be inspired to adopt similar practices in other sectors. The increasing visibility of conservation initiatives in sports has also led to greater public awareness and engagement. A survey conducted by Nielsen Sports revealed that 64% of sports fans are interested in sustainability and expect sports organizations to take meaningful action to address these pressing issues. This growing demand for sustainable practices in sports reflects a broader trend towards environmental consciousness, underscoring the role of sports as a catalyst for climate diplomacy (Nielsen Sports, 2020).

Cultural Factors in Enhancing Climate Diplomacy and Stewardship

Kenya's cultural heritage and community practices play a vital role in enhancing climate stewardship by integrating traditional knowledge with contemporary conservation efforts. Indigenous practices, such as the Maasai's management of grazing lands and the Kikuyu's protection of sacred groves, have historically contributed to sustainable resource management. For example, the Maasai's rotational grazing systems are designed to prevent overgrazing and maintain ecological balance

(Kipkeu et al., 2023). This practice not only supports the preservation of native plant species but also aligns with the goals of international treaties such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which emphasizes sustainable land management. By incorporating traditional practices into modern environmental policies, Kenya can leverage its cultural heritage to promote more effective and culturally sensitive stewardship (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2018).

Cultural factors significantly enhance cross-border cooperation on wider environmental issues by bridging cultural divides and fostering mutual understanding. Kenya's cultural heritage facilitates collaborative initiatives with neighboring countries to address shared environmental challenges. An example is the East African Community's (EAC) collaborative efforts in managing the Lake Victoria Basin, where cultural insights are integrated into the management of shared water resources (East African Community, 2023). The EAC's approach aligns with the Nile Basin Initiative, which promotes regional cooperation for sustainable water management across multiple countries. Culture enhances these collaborations by fostering trust and encouraging member states on shared goals to curb climate change, demonstrating how

cultural understanding can support effective regional cooperation (Nile Basin Initiative, 2023).

Community-based conservation efforts in Kenya highlight the practical application of cultural heritage in achieving climate sustainability. For instance, Kenya's community conservancies, which incorporate traditional knowledge from local communities, play a crucial role in wildlife conservation and sustainable land management. The Maasai Mara Conservancies, managed by local communities, have seen a significant increase in wildlife populations and have contributed to eco-tourism (Kenya Wildlife Service, 2023). These efforts support Kenya's adherence to international agreements like the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which aims to ensure that international trade does not threaten species survival. Through integrating community practices into conservation strategies, Kenya enhances its role in global governance (CITES, 2022).

Cultural heritage has been a powerful tool in fostering inclusive and effective climate policies. Traditional practices provide valuable understanding into sustainable resource management and community engagement, which are essential for addressing contemporary environmental issues. The African Union's Great Green Wall initiative, which aims to combat desertification and restore degraded lands across the Sahel region, including Kenya, incorporates traditional knowledge from various cultures to enhance its effectiveness. This initiative demonstrates how aligning environmental policies with cultural values can lead to more sustainable outcomes and promote cross-border cooperation in addressing common challenges (African Union, 2022).

Kenya's Diaspora as Engine for Promoting Kenya's Climate Diplomacy

Kenya's diaspora, comprising millions of Kenyans living abroad, plays a significant role in promoting the country's climate diplomacy. These individuals, through their connections and networks in host countries, have the potential to influence environmental policies and foster international collaborations. The Kenyan government has recognized the diaspora's contributions and established frameworks to harness their influence for sustainable development. For instance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Diaspora Policy emphasizes the need to engage the diaspora in environmental initiatives as well as climate

change related projects, acknowledging their capacity to mobilize resources and expertise for conservation efforts (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kenya, 2014).

One of the key areas where the Kenyan diaspora contributes to climate diplomacy is through knowledge and technology transfer. Many Kenyan expatriates work in fields related to climate science, engineering, and renewable energy, gaining valuable expertise that can be shared with their home country. Through initiatives like the Kenya Diaspora Alliance, professionals abroad collaborate with local institutions to implement sustainable technologies and practices in Kenya. For example, diaspora-led projects have focused on enhancing renewable energy access in rural areas, helping to reduce carbon emissions and promote sustainable energy solutions. These efforts not only contribute to environmental sustainability but also strengthen Kenya's position as a leader in regional climate diplomacy (Kenya Diaspora Alliance, 2022).

Financial remittances from the Kenyan diaspora also play a crucial role in supporting projects and initiatives. According to the Central Bank of Kenya, diaspora remittances reached a record high of USD 4 billion in 2022, with a significant portion directed towards development projects, including those focused on environmental conservation. These financial contributions have facilitated the implementation of community-based conservation projects, reforestation efforts, and wildlife protection initiatives. By investing in such projects, the diaspora helps Kenya achieve its environmental goals and strengthens its commitment to international agreements, such as the Paris Agreement and the Convention on Biological Diversity (Central Bank of Kenya, 2023).

Moreover, the Kenyan diaspora serves as ambassadors for Kenya's climate diplomacy by raising awareness and advocating for climate issues on global platforms. Many diaspora organizations participate in international conferences and forums, where they highlight Kenya's environmental challenges and successes. For instance, Kenyan diaspora members have actively participated in the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) conferences, advocating for policies that address climate change and biodiversity loss in Kenya (UNEP, 2021). Through leveraging their global presence, the diaspora enhances Kenya's visibility and influence in international environmental diplomacy, helping to forge partnerships and secure support for environmental initiatives.

Climate Security and Diplomacy in Kenya: Strategies and Implications

Climate security diplomacy is being redefined to address the growing recognition that environmental threats pose significant risks to national and global security. Traditional security paradigms, focused on military threats, are expanding to include climate-induced challenges such as resource scarcity, extreme weather events, and displacement of populations. The United Nations Security Council has increasingly acknowledged climate change as a security issue, recognizing its potential to intensify conflicts and destabilize regions (UN Security Council, 2021). This redefinition is reflected in national security strategies that integrate climate risks, such as the United States' National Defense Strategy, which highlights climate change as a critical factor influencing global security dynamics. Through broadening the scope of security diplomacy, countries are better equipped to address the complex and interconnected challenges posed by climate change (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022).

Diplomatic efforts play an important role in fostering international collaboration for climate adaptation and mitigation. The Paris Agreement, adopted in 2015, exemplifies a global commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and enhancing adaptive capacity (UNFCCC, 2021). This landmark treaty, signed by 196 parties, emphasizes the importance of international cooperation in achieving climate goals and encourages countries to submit Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) that outline their climate action plans. The establishment of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the Green Climate Fund (GCF) provides financial support to developing countries for implementing adaptation and mitigation projects, facilitating technology transfer and capacity building. These diplomatic initiatives underscore the significance of collective action and resource-sharing in addressing the multifaceted challenges of climate change (Green Climate Fund, 2022).

The impact of diplomatic efforts in climate security is evident in the increased collaboration among countries and international organizations to address environmental threats. The African Union (AU) has launched the African Climate Change Strategy, which aims to enhance resilience across the continent by promoting sustainable land management, water resource management, and climate-

smart agriculture. Regional cooperation is also evident in the Pacific Islands, where countries have formed alliances to advocate for stronger climate commitments and secure international support for adaptation measures. These initiatives demonstrate how diplomatic engagements facilitate the sharing of knowledge, resources, and best practices, ultimately strengthening global resilience to climate impacts (African Union, 2023).

Even with these measures in place, challenges remain in aligning national and international priorities, particularly in balancing economic development with environmental sustainability. The lack of binding commitments and enforcement mechanisms in international treaties can hinder progress, as countries may prioritize short-term economic gains over long-term climate objectives. Moreover, geopolitical tensions and competing interests can complicate diplomatic negotiations, as seen in recent climate summits where disagreements over financial contributions and emissions targets have delayed decision-making. To overcome these challenges, climate security diplomacy must continue to evolve, fostering greater collaboration among governments, private sectors, and civil society to develop innovative solutions that address both environmental and security concerns (UN Climate Change Conference, 2023).

AI and IoT: Revolutionizing Climate Diplomacy in Kenya

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT) provide groundbreaking opportunities for achieving sustainable environmental outcomes in Kenya by significantly enhancing climate monitoring, data analysis, and policy implementation. AI systems facilitate the analysis of large volumes of data, enabling more accurate assessments and predictions related to climate change, deforestation, and biodiversity loss. For example, AI algorithms are employed to analyze satellite imagery for monitoring forest cover changes in Kenya's national parks, helping to address deforestation and land degradation (Hansen et al., 2023). This technology supports Kenya's commitment to international agreements such as the Paris Agreement, which aims to limit global warming and promote sustainable land management practices (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2018).

IoT technologies play an important role in Kenya by providing real-time data collection and monitoring

capabilities, which are essential for effective climate change governance. IoT sensors are used to monitor air and water quality, track wildlife, and manage natural resources. In Nairobi, for example, IoT-based air quality monitoring systems have been implemented to measure pollution levels and inform public health policies (Nairobi City County, 2022). These systems have enabled more effective responses to air quality issues, supporting Kenya's efforts to comply with international treaties such as the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2021).

Case studies in Kenya demonstrate the practical applications of AI and IoT in addressing environmental challenges. The Wildlife Conservation Society has leveraged AI to enhance wildlife protection in Kenya's national parks, using machine learning algorithms to analyze data from cameras and sensors to monitor animal populations and prevent poaching (Wildlife Conservation Society, 2023). This approach has led to a notable reduction in poaching incidents and improved conservation outcomes. Furthermore, IoT technology is used in Kenya's water management sector to optimize water usage and address water scarcity issues. For instance, IoT-based smart irrigation systems in Kenya's agricultural sector have reduced water consumption by up to 30% while maintaining crop yields (World Bank, 2023).

AI and IoT also support Kenya's adherence to international environmental agreements by improving data accuracy and reporting capabilities. The integration of these technologies into Kenya's environmental monitoring systems enhances the country's ability to track and report progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 6 on clean water and sanitation and Goal 15 on life on land (United Nations, 2022). Through providing reliable data on environmental conditions, AI and IoT help Kenya fulfill its obligations under treaties such as the Convention on

Biological Diversity, which aims to conserve biological diversity and ensure sustainable use of natural resources (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022).

Interdisciplinary Approaches in Kenya's climate Diplomacy: Challenges and Opportunities

Integrating diverse domains in climate diplomacy involves combining insights and methods from various disciplines to create comprehensive strategies for addressing complex environmental issues such as climate change. A comprehensive framework for this integration should include collaborative efforts among climate science and other disciplines. For instance, incorporating economic analysis into climate policy can enhance understanding of the financial implications of climate regulations and facilitate the development of cost-effective solutions (World Bank, 2023). Through combining ecological data with economic assessments, policymakers can design interventions that balance climate protection with economic growth. This interdisciplinary approach supports international agreements such as the Paris Agreement, which emphasizes the need for holistic strategies to mitigate climate change impacts (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2018).

Interdisciplinary strategies are crucial for addressing 21st-century challenges, which are often complex and diverse. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion require solutions that span multiple fields of expertise. For example, the integration of climate science with urban planning and public health research can lead to more effective strategies for building climate-resilient cities (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022). The use of integrated assessment models, which combine climate science with economic and social factors, helps in predicting future scenarios and crafting policies that address both immediate and long-term challenges. Such interdisciplinary approaches

The African Union (AU) has launched the African Climate Change Strategy, which aims to enhance resilience across the continent by promoting sustainable land management, water resource management, and climate-smart agriculture

... interdisciplinary approaches enhance global environmental governance by fostering collaboration among nations and sectors. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations reflect the need for integrated strategies to achieve environmental sustainability, economic development, and social inclusion

ensure that policies are robust and adaptable to evolving and abrupt climatic conditions (Nature Climate Change, 2023).

The importance of interdisciplinary strategies is evident in the implementation of international climate treaties, which often require coordination across various sectors. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), for instance, involves collaboration between environmental scientists, policymakers, and local communities to achieve its goals of conserving biodiversity and ensuring sustainable use of natural resources. Effective implementation of the CBD's objectives necessitates input from ecological researchers, socio-economic experts, and indigenous knowledge holders. This collaborative framework enhances the treaty's effectiveness and ensures that conservation strategies are grounded in a comprehensive understanding of ecological, economic, and social factors (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022).

Furthermore, interdisciplinary approaches enhance global environmental governance by fostering collaboration among nations and sectors. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations reflect the need for integrated strategies to achieve environmental sustainability, economic development, and social inclusion. For example, SDG 13 on climate action requires contributions from climate scientists, engineers, policymakers, and community leaders to implement effective mitigation and adaptation measures. Through embracing interdisciplinary collaboration, countries have developed more innovative and effective solutions to global environmental challenges, ultimately contributing

to a more sustainable and resilient future (United Nations, 2022).

Resource Management and Sustainability in Kenya's Climate Diplomacy

Sustainable resource management through diplomatic channels involves utilizing international cooperation and negotiations to address global resource challenges and promote sustainable practices. Key strategies include forming bilateral and multilateral agreements to manage shared resources, enhancing transboundary cooperation, and setting global standards for resource use. For example, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize the importance of collaborative efforts in managing water resources, with SDG 6 focusing on clean water and sanitation (United Nations, 2022). Diplomatic agreements such as the Transboundary Water Cooperation Framework help countries manage shared water bodies sustainably by establishing cooperative mechanisms and shared data systems. These strategies are crucial for maintaining resource availability and ensuring equitable access, aligning with international treaties that aim to achieve sustainable development (Global Environment Facility, 2023).

Climate diplomacy is the corner stone of sustainable development goals (SDGs) by fostering international cooperation and implementing agreements that address environmental issues. The Paris Agreement, for instance, represents a global commitment to limit climate change and promote sustainable practices. It requires countries to set and achieve Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2018). The agreement's success relies on diplomatic negotiations and collaborative efforts among nations, demonstrating how environmental diplomacy supports the achievement of SDG 13 on climate action. Through promoting cross-border cooperation and sharing best practices, climate diplomacy enhances the capacity of countries to achieve sustainable development outcomes.

The impact of climate diplomacy on sustainable development goals can be observed through successful international agreements that integrate resource management and conservation strategies. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) provides a framework for conserving biodiversity and ensuring the sustainable use of natural resources. The CBD's Aichi Biodiversity Targets,

for example, have been instrumental in guiding national policies and actions to protect ecosystems and species. The agreement encourages member states to implement strategies that align with SDG 15, which focuses on life on land. Through facilitating international cooperation and setting measurable targets, climate diplomacy helps drive progress towards achieving these goals and promoting global sustainability (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022).

Effective climate diplomacy also influences sustainable development by facilitating the exchange of knowledge and technology among nations. Initiatives like the Global Environment Facility (GEF) support projects that address global issues and promote sustainable resource management. For instance, the GEF's support for integrated land and water management projects helps countries implement sustainable practices and address challenges such as land degradation and water scarcity. Providing financial and technical assistance, the GEF enables countries to achieve their environmental goals and contribute to SDGs such as SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG 15 (Life on Land). This collaborative approach underscores the importance of climate diplomacy in fostering sustainable development through resource management and international cooperation (Global Environment Facility, 2023).

Strengthening Kenya's Climate Diplomacy

Strengthening Kenya's climate diplomacy involves enhancing its role in international climate agreements and fostering cooperation with global and regional partners. One effective strategy is to actively participate in key international treaties, such as the Paris Agreement and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Kenya's commitment to the Paris Agreement includes setting ambitious Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 32% by 2030 compared to business-as-usual levels (Republic of Kenya, 2022). Such commitments align Kenya with global climate goals and demonstrate its leadership in climate action. By continuing to actively engage in and fulfill its international obligations, Kenya can bolster its position in global environmental diplomacy and contribute to collective efforts to combat climate change (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2018).

Regional cooperation is also crucial for strengthening Kenya's role in climate diplomacy, particularly in managing transboundary resources and addressing shared challenges. The East African Community (EAC) provides a platform for regional collaboration on issues such as water resource management and biodiversity conservation. For instance, the EAC's efforts in managing the Lake Victoria Basin highlight Kenya's commitment to regional transboundary resource governance. Collaborative initiatives such as the Lake Victoria Environmental Management Project aim to address pollution, overfishing, and ecosystem degradation in a coordinated manner. Strengthening such regional frameworks can enhance Kenya's ability to tackle such challenges that cross national boundaries and promote sustainable development in the region (East African Community, 2023).

Enhancing public-private partnerships (PPPs) is another key aspect of strengthening Kenya's climate diplomacy. PPPs can drive innovation and investment in sustainable technologies and practices. For example, Kenya's adoption of solar energy projects through collaborations between the government and private sector firms has significantly increased access to clean energy and reduced reliance on fossil fuels. Through fostering partnerships that focus on climate sustainability, Kenya can leverage private sector expertise and resources to achieve its NDC goals. These partnerships can also enhance Kenya's diplomatic efforts by showcasing its commitment to sustainability and attracting international support and investment (International Renewable Energy Agency, 2023).

Integrating indigenous knowledge and local community practices into climate policies can strengthen Kenya's climate diplomacy by ensuring that policies are culturally sensitive and effective. Traditional ecological knowledge, such as the Maasai's rotational grazing practices, has proven effective in maintaining ecological balance and promoting sustainable land use. Incorporating such knowledge into national climate change plans, strategies and policies, Kenya can enhance the relevance and effectiveness of its diplomacy efforts. This approach not only respects and preserves cultural heritage but also fosters greater community involvement and support for sustainable initiatives, which is essential for successful climate diplomacy (Kipkeu et al., 2023).

Focusing on the effectiveness of existing policy frameworks, several enhancements are needed. Strengthening mechanisms for compliance and enforcement of international agreements is essential, as many countries face difficulties in meeting their climate related commitments due to inadequate monitoring and accountability. Implementing stricter reporting requirements and establishing penalties for non-compliance could significantly bolster frameworks such as the Paris Agreement. Additionally, increasing transparency in progress reporting and data sharing among countries can foster trust and drive more ambitious climate actions (UNFCCC, 2023).

Conclusion

Kenya's climate diplomacy embodies a dynamic and diverse approach that integrates policy, technology, and cultural dimensions to address the urgent issues of climate change and sustainable development. The country has shown significant leadership by actively engaging in international agreements and frameworks such as the Paris Agreement, reflecting its commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and enhancing climate resilience.

However, for these policies to be more effective, there is a crucial need for stronger compliance mechanisms, more rigorous reporting requirements, and greater transparency. Implementing these measures will ensure more robust adherence to international commitments, build trust with global partners, and foster enhanced collaborative efforts in climate action. In the realm of technology, Kenya's adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT) represents a transformative leap in addressing climate change and policy-making. These advanced technologies provide essential tools for improving climate monitoring, data collection, and analysis. AI-driven analytics and IoT sensors offer real-time insights into climatic conditions, facilitating more informed and responsive policy decisions. Integrating these technologies into its climate change governance framework, Kenya not only strengthens its ability to address immediate threats but also establishes itself as a leader in innovative climate solutions on the global stage.

Culturally, Kenya's rich heritage and community practices are integral to its climate diplomacy. The incorporation of indigenous knowledge and traditional practices into contemporary climate strategies emphasizes

the importance of cultural dimensions in achieving sustainable outcomes. Embracing these cultural insights, Kenya fosters a more inclusive approach to climate stewardship that resonates with local communities and enhances cross-border cooperation. This cultural engagement enriches the national policies and improves the effectiveness of international partnerships by aligning global initiatives with local values and practices. Kenya's climate diplomacy represents a comprehensive and evolving framework that leverages the synergies between policy, technology, and culture to address complex challenges led by climate changes. The need for an interdisciplinary approach that integrates scientific innovation, technological advancements, and cultural inclusivity is crucial. Through continuing to advance in these areas, Kenya can effectively tackle the diverse nature of climate change and sustainability, setting a precedent for other nations aiming to enhance their climate diplomacy and achieve sustainable development goals.

Policy Recommendations

1. Policymakers and technologists should prioritize the development and implementation of advanced data collection and monitoring systems. Utilizing satellite technology, remote sensing, and artificial intelligence can provide real-time data on climate changes and resource usage. This data is crucial for informed decision-making and effective management of natural resources. By investing in these technologies, Kenya can improve its climate monitoring capabilities, leading to more accurate assessments and timely interventions to address issues such as deforestation, water scarcity, and wildlife conservation.
2. To achieve effective climate diplomacy, it is essential to promote collaboration among various sectors, including government agencies, private enterprises, NGOs, and local communities. Establishing inter-agency task forces and public-private partnerships can facilitate coordinated efforts to tackle complex environmental challenges. For instance, combining resources and expertise from different sectors can enhance the implementation of conservation programs and sustainable development initiatives. By fostering such collaborations, Kenya can leverage diverse expertise and resources to achieve its environmental goals.

3. Cultural practitioners and policymakers should work together to integrate indigenous knowledge and practices into climate management strategies. Indigenous communities possess valuable insights into local ecosystems and sustainable resource use that can complement scientific approaches. Incorporating traditional practices, such as community-led conservation and land management techniques, can improve the effectiveness of climate policies and foster greater community engagement. This integration not only respects cultural heritage but also enhances the resilience and sustainability of conservation efforts.
4. Kenya should continue to strengthen its regional cooperation on early warning systems and climate change disaster management by participating actively in regional initiatives and agreements. Collaborative efforts with neighboring countries on transboundary resource management, such as shared water bodies and migratory wildlife corridors, are crucial for addressing these challenges that extend beyond national borders. Engaging in regional platforms, such as the East African Community (EAC) and the Nile Basin Initiative, can facilitate joint actions and promote sustainable management practices across the region.
5. Increasing public awareness and education on climate change issues is vital for building a culture of climate stewardship. Policymakers and cultural practitioners should develop educational programs and campaigns that inform the public about the importance of conservation, sustainable practices, and the impacts of environmental degradation. Schools, community centers, and media outlets can play a key role in disseminating information and encouraging community participation in climate change education initiatives. By fostering a well-informed and engaged public, Kenya can drive collective action towards sustainability.
6. Adaptive management practices should be adopted to address the dynamic and abrupt nature of climate change. This approach involves continuously monitoring climatic conditions, evaluating the effectiveness of policies and interventions, and making adjustments based on new data and changing circumstances. Policymakers should incorporate flexibility into climate regulations and management plans to adapt to evolving conditions and emerging threats. Adaptive management ensures that strategies remain relevant and effective in the face of uncertainties and rapid changes.
7. Technologists and policymakers should encourage innovation and facilitate the transfer of climate friendly technologies. Supporting research and development in clean technologies, renewable energy, and sustainable agriculture can drive progress towards climate sustainability. Additionally, promoting technology transfer agreements with other countries and international organizations can help Kenya access cutting-edge solutions and best practices. By embracing innovation and technology, Kenya can enhance its environmental performance and achieve its sustainability objectives.
8. To maximize the impact of climate diplomacy, it is important to ensure policy coherence and integration across different sectors and levels of government. Climate change policies should be aligned with broader development goals, such as poverty reduction, economic growth, and social equity. Policymakers should work to integrate such considerations into national development plans, sectoral policies, and local regulations. This holistic approach ensures that national goals are systematically addressed and supported by a cohesive policy framework, leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes.



Increasing public awareness and education on climate change issues is vital for building a culture of climate stewardship. Policymakers and cultural practitioners should develop educational programs and campaigns that inform the public about the importance of conservation, sustainable practices, and the impacts of environmental degradation

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Between the Global South and the New West: Geopolitical Positioning of East African States in an Emerging Multipolar World Order

By: Laurence Jost

Abstract

This paper examines the evolving geopolitical agency of East African states in an increasingly multipolar international order. Against the backdrop of declining Western dominance and the rising influence of BRICS+ actors, East African countries are no longer passive recipients of foreign agendas but are engaging in strategic and differentiated foreign policy behaviour. The analysis explores the structural pressures and domestic determinants shaping alignment choices, with particular attention to postcolonial legacies, institutional capacity, and the appeal of alternative governance platforms. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from neoclassical realism, postcolonial theory, and geopolitical analysis, the paper develops a conceptual framework to understand East Africa's positioning amid global realignments. While not grounded in empirical fieldwork, the study offers strategic hypotheses and scenario-based insights that inform both scholarly debate and policy discourse. The findings suggest that East African foreign policy is increasingly issue-based, pragmatic, and marked by a growing assertion of strategic autonomy.

Introduction

In recent years, the global geopolitical landscape has undergone profound transformation, marked by the rise of influential actors from the Global South. This development signals a broader shift from a unipolar to a multipolar world order. Western states have, to varying degrees, scaled back their engagement in former colonies—reducing both soft-power projection and hard-power interventions—thereby creating opportunities for other powers to fill the resulting vacuum. The growing influence of emerging powers, particularly those grouped under the BRICS and BRICS+ umbrella, represents a challenge to the normative dominance of the Western liberal consensus (Armijo & Roberts, 2014). These developments can be framed as indicative of a “post-Cold War” moment, characterized by fluid alignments and intensified competition over the rules and institutions of global governance.

East Africa, long viewed as a peripheral arena for external influence, is increasingly asserting itself as an autonomous geopolitical actor. The region's strategic location along key maritime routes, coupled with its growing demographic and economic potential, has

elevated its importance in the foreign policy agendas of both Western and non-Western powers (UNU-WIDER, 2020). The resurgence of interest in East Africa's political economy has been met with increasing diplomatic assertiveness from regional governments. While many East African states historically adhered to a posture of non-alignment during the Cold War, today's multipolar context presents them with new opportunities and constraints. Crucially, East African states now operate from a position of greater institutional maturity and policy autonomy than in the immediate post-independence period. No longer merely subjects of foreign agendas, these countries are shaping their external relations with a heightened sense of agency and strategic calculation (Chipaike & Knowledge, 2018).

This paper explores the evolving geopolitical role of East African states within the changing global environment. At the centre of this investigation lies a set of interrelated research questions, which aim to capture both the structural pressures and domestic determinants shaping foreign policy orientation. First, to what extent will East African states be compelled to position themselves within



The 37th African Union (AU) Summit was held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on February 17-18, 2024 (Photo Credit: African Arguments/ Paul Kagame)

the emerging global divide between Western states and the expanding BRICS+ coalition? Second, what political, economic, and ideological factors are likely to influence East African states strategic alignment? Special attention is given to the appeal of BRICS+ as an alternative platform for global governance, infrastructure finance, and South–South cooperation, in contrast to the conditionalities often associated with Western engagement. Third, how do post-independence developments—such as the erosion of colonial dependencies, the rise of new political elites, and varying degrees of socio-economic transformation— influence contemporary foreign policy decisions? Finally, the paper asks whether “the West” should still be treated as a coherent actor. Given increasing divergences between the United States—particularly under Trump-like leadership—and the European Union, this analysis explores whether East African governments might differentiate between Western powers in their external engagements.

In addressing these questions, the paper adopts a theory-led, conceptual approach. Rather than offering an exhaustive empirical investigation, it seeks to develop a framework for understanding the strategic behaviour of medium and small powers in a multipolar world. The analysis is interpretative and comparative in nature, drawing on insights from geopolitical theory,

neoclassical realism, postcolonial theory, and historical analogies, including the Cold War and the Non-Aligned Movement. Due to limitations in access to primary data, such as fieldwork, policy archives, or elite interviews, this study refrains from making definitive claims about individual country positions. Instead, it offers a conceptual contribution that can inform future empirical research and policy analysis.

The structure of the paper is organized into thematic sections. The first section outlines the theoretical framework and defines key concepts such as multipolarity, geopolitical alignment, and the Global South. The next section provides historical and political context by tracing East Africa’s post-independence trajectory, with particular attention to the enduring impact of colonial legacies and the development of regional institutions.

Following this, the paper analyzes contemporary global dynamics and examines the strategic options currently available to East African states. Building on these insights, the subsequent section introduces a set of conceptual hypotheses and develops strategic scenarios that reflect different domestic and international configurations. The final section synthesizes the paper’s key findings, reflects on its conceptual contributions, and proposes avenues for future research.

Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Grounding

Understanding the foreign policy behavior of East African states in an evolving multipolar global order requires a robust and conceptually coherent theoretical framework. This study asks: *What is the case of East African foreign policy a case of?* The answer offered here is that it is a case of strategic positioning by mid-sized post-colonial states within a reconfiguring international system. As this article provides the analytical foundations to grasp how global structural shifts interact with regional agency and historical legacies. It introduces and contextualizes the key concepts of multipolarity, alignment, and strategic autonomy while drawing on selected theoretical perspectives—namely neoclassical realism, post-colonial theory, and rationalist institutionalism—to explain the complex drivers of East African foreign policy choices.

Rather than applying Cold War-era models of bloc politics and ideological bipolarity, a re-theorization of alignment behavior under conditions of normative and institutional is necessary. The post-1990 liberal international order, dominated by the United States and its allies, is increasingly being challenged by a rising coalition of non-Western actors—chief among them the BRICS and BRICS+ states (Kukreja, 2020). In contrast to bipolar rigidity, the current moment is marked by fluid, interest-based coalitions and competing governance models. This transition—from unipolarity to a multipolar constellation—is not merely a redistribution of material capabilities. As scholars such as Amitav Acharya and John J. Mearsheimer argue, it involves a deeper contestation over the institutional norms, developmental models, and epistemic foundations of global order (Acharya, 2017; Mearsheimer et al., 2019).

In this context, the concept of multipolarity is used to describe a global system in which no single actor enjoys uncontested hegemony, and where multiple centers of power coexist and compete—economically, politically, and ideologically. For East African states, such a system opens new strategic possibilities that were largely foreclosed during the Cold War, when alignment often equated to dependency. Today, strategic maneuverability has increased, but so has the complexity of managing external pressures and domestic interests.

This study understands *alignment* as a flexible spectrum of cooperative strategies, rather than as formal alliances. Alignments can occur on issue-specific bases—such

as trade, security, or climate governance—and may vary across time and policy domains. Conversely, the concept of *strategic autonomy* refers to a state's capacity to define and pursue its national interests without structural dependence on any single external actor. This notion is particularly salient for post-colonial states in the Global South, where sovereignty, non-alignment, and developmental self-determination remain powerful normative aspirations.

To analytically capture this complexity, the following pluralistic theoretical model toolkit was employed:

- **Neoclassical realism** provides a systemic foundation by linking external constraints—such as power distribution and great power rivalry—with internal mediating variables like regime type, elite perceptions, and institutional capacity. It helps explain why similarly positioned states may adopt divergent strategies depending on domestic conditions and leadership assessments (Lobell et al., 2009).
- **Post-colonial theory** complements this view by foregrounding the historical and symbolic dimensions of East African foreign policy behavior. It highlights how colonial legacies, epistemic asymmetries, and the persistent marginalization of African agency continue to shape perceptions of Western and non-Western actors alike. This lens is particularly useful for understanding the appeal of South-South cooperation and the ambivalence many East African states exhibit toward Western conditionalities (Childs & Williams, 2014).
- **Rationalist approaches**, especially those informed by rational choice institutionalism, focus on the utility-maximizing behavior of states. These models illuminate how governments calculate costs and benefits across different partnership constellations, and why they may adopt issue-based, dual, or situational alignments depending on perceived strategic returns (Hechter & Kanazawa, 1997).

Integrating these perspectives sets the stage for a nuanced analysis of East Africa as a region of rising geopolitical agency. Far from being a passive recipient of external influence, East Africa is reconceptualized here as a dynamic actor navigating a competitive and pluralistic international environment. The theoretical

framework adopted here-in thus enables a more precise understanding of the region's foreign policy behavior—not as a replication of Cold War alignments, but as a new form of pragmatic, context-sensitive diplomacy shaped by both global structures and localized agency.

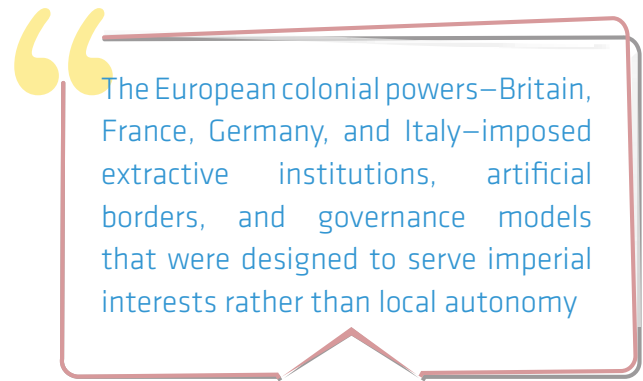
Historical and Political Background of East African States

To grasp the strategic behavior of East African states in an emerging multipolar world order, it is essential to contextualize their foreign policy within the region's historical and structural evolution. The foreign policy agency of East African states today is thus a product of layered transformations—colonial legacies, post-independence state formation, regional institutionalization, and economic diversification—which together have shaped the contours of contemporary strategic choices. The trajectory traced here demonstrates how East African states have transitioned from externally constrained actors to increasingly autonomous players with selective alignment strategies.

The foundations of East Africa's international orientation were laid under colonial rule. The European colonial powers—Britain, France, Germany, and Italy—imposed extractive institutions, artificial borders, and governance models that were designed to serve imperial interests rather than local autonomy (Shohat, 1992; Alemazung, 2010). These externally imposed structures profoundly shaped the post-colonial state, leaving lasting legacies in legal systems, administrative institutions, and patterns of economic dependency.

After independence, most East African states retained strong institutional and ideological ties to their former colonial rulers. These ties were often reinforced by asymmetrical economic relationships and military cooperation agreements, which limited the space for sovereign foreign policy. Post-independence leaders, many of whom were either backed by or ideologically aligned with former colonial powers, were often compelled to rely on external support to ensure regime survival. In this early phase, foreign policy autonomy was structurally constrained, and alignment was frequently a by-product of economic dependence or ideological proximity (Munene, 2015).

Nevertheless, during the Cold War, some East African states attempted to circumvent binary bloc alignments



through participation in the Non-Aligned Movement. While the success of such strategies varied, this period introduced a precedent of *balancing* external powers—a practice that would re-emerge under contemporary multipolar conditions (Khapoya & Agyeman-Duah, 1985).

The post-colonial period was marked by uneven political development, ranging from enduring autocracies to gradual democratization processes. However, despite persistent governance challenges, the region has witnessed significant political transformations since the 1990s. Societal pressures for democratization, legal reform, and political inclusion contributed to the weakening of single-party rule and the emergence of hybrid or semi-democratic regimes. Cases such as Kenya's constitutional reform process illustrate how domestic legitimacy concerns have reshaped governance structures and elite configurations (Maingi & FIDA Kenya, 2011). These internal reforms were accompanied by growing efforts to build regional political and economic institutions.

The revitalization of the East African Community (EAC) and the broader institutional development within the African Union (AU) have not only fostered intra-African cooperation but also bolstered the international bargaining capacity of East African states. The increasing importance of regionalism has contributed to the emergence of a more coordinated and confident foreign policy posture in the region (Kelechi A.

Kalu, 2023). A major structural shift in East Africa's foreign policy agency stems from its economic transformation. While many states were once heavily reliant on Western aid, recent decades have witnessed a trend toward diversification of growth models and international partnerships. Investments in infrastructure, technological hubs, and resource extraction have contributed to greater

economic self-reliance (Habimana, 2023). This shift has created space for alternative development paths, reducing the structural monopoly of Western donors and enabling strategic recalibration. The rise of non-Western actors—particularly China, India, and the Gulf States—has introduced new opportunities for infrastructure finance, trade, and diplomatic engagement. East African countries have leveraged these relationships to expand their foreign policy options and enhance their bargaining position vis-à-vis both Western and non-Western powers. This diversification is not only economic but also strategic: East African states increasingly pursue partnerships based on interest-driven calculations rather than ideological affinity.

The cumulative effect of these political and economic developments has been a discernible shift in East Africa's strategic culture. Contemporary foreign policy is no longer shaped primarily by historical dependencies but increasingly reflects calculated efforts to promote national interests, secure regime legitimacy, and advance regional influence (Musau, 2023).

Three key patterns illustrate this shift:

1. **Multilateral Assertiveness:** East African states are increasingly visible and vocal within multilateral institutions. Kenya's mediation efforts in regional conflicts and Tanzania's reputation for diplomatic moderation exemplify this trend. These roles enhance both regional stability and international credibility, while reinforcing the image of East Africa as a norm-producing rather than merely norm-receiving region (Muigua, 2023).
2. **Foreign Policy as Domestic Legitimation:** External engagements are strategically employed by domestic elites to signal competence, sovereignty, and developmental success. High-profile summits, foreign investments, and security pacts are often framed within national discourses of modernization and international relevance—particularly in countries like Uganda or Rwanda (Nzomo, 2016).
3. **Selective and Situational Alignment:** East African states increasingly adopt flexible, context-specific partnerships that cut across ideological lines.



Peacekeeper troops from China deployed by the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), patrol on foot outside the premises of the UN Protection of Civilians (PoC) site in Juba, South Sudan (Photo Credits: ALBERT GONZALEZ FARRAN / AFP)

Security cooperation may remain anchored in traditional Western alliances, while development partnerships are often pursued with BRICS+ countries or emerging actors from the Global South. This balancing strategy enhances autonomy and maximizes benefits in a competitive international landscape (Magu, 2024).

While general trends have been identified, it is important to recognize that East Africa is not a monolith. States in the region vary in terms of economic structure, regime type, conflict history, and integration depth within regional institutions. Accordingly, their foreign policy strategies also differ. Nevertheless, the overarching pattern remains: the gradual transition from dependency-driven to strategic, multi-directional diplomacy. The evolution traced here contextualizes East African states as increasingly capable and autonomous actors in a shifting international environment. Their foreign policy behavior cannot be reduced to Cold War-style proxies or aid-dependent recipients. Instead, East African countries should be understood as strategic actors operating within—and responding to—the constraints and opportunities of an emerging multipolar order.

Geopolitical Dynamics and Strategic Options for East Africa

The reconfiguration of global power relations in the 21st century is marked not by a return to Cold War-style bipolarity, but by the emergence of a contested multipolar order (Flockhart, 2016). This new constellation is defined by competing economic models, divergent institutional norms, and overlapping spheres of strategic influence. For East African states, this systemic transformation redefines the parameters of foreign policy choice. No longer situated within a world of unambiguous hegemonic leadership, they now navigate a global landscape shaped by strategic pluralism and competitive interdependence.

Unlike the Cold War dichotomy between capitalism and communism, today's multipolar dynamics are not solely driven by ideological divergence. The competition between the West and alternative power centers—most prominently the BRICS+ grouping—is rooted in broader structural fault lines: economic sovereignty, industrial capacity, digital infrastructure, and institutional design. The push for de-dollarization, the emergence of parallel institutions such as the New Development

Bank (NDB), and growing calls for reforming global governance frameworks indicate a systemic contest over the architecture of international order (Qobo & Soko, 2015). This new global competition is thus not binary but pluralistic. It pits multiple models of governance and development against each other—not just the liberal international order against one alternative, but a spectrum of competing visions from the Global South. In this context, East African states are not merely reacting to external power shifts but are increasingly engaging as autonomous actors with agency in determining their own alignments and partnerships.

As a representative platform for emerging powers of the Global South, BRICS+ positions itself as an institutional counterweight to Western dominance. The alliance promotes narratives of *South-South solidarity*, non-interference, and infrastructural investment without conditionalities (Diko & Sempijja, 2020). Recent expansions to include countries such as Ethiopia, Egypt, Iran, and the UAE reflect a broader ambition to reshape global governance. For East African states, the strategic appeal of BRICS+ lies in its promise of alternative development financing, prestige, and political recognition. However, fundamental questions persist: Is BRICS+ a cohesive bloc or a loose constellation of convenience? Can it deliver tangible benefits beyond symbolic solidarity? And how compatible are its institutional norms with the governance needs and preferences of East African countries?

Simultaneously, the notion of a unified Western bloc is increasingly untenable. While the United States tends to pursue transactional, security-centered engagements—often skeptical of multilateralism—European Union strategies emphasize normative goals such as democratic governance, human rights, and sustainable development (Regilme, 2019). These divergent approaches are filtered in East Africa through the lens of historical legacies: colonialism, conditionality-based aid regimes, and perceived Western double standards (Thakur, 2016). As a result, East African leaders do not view “the West” as a monolithic actor but rather as a fragmented ensemble of partners with varying levels of credibility and utility. This disaggregation opens up space for differentiated alignments and creates opportunities for selective engagement based on issue-specific priorities.

In light of these global shifts, East African states face a wide spectrum of strategic positioning options:

- **Full Alignment:** Engagement along clear ideological or structural lines with either the Western or BRICS+ bloc, driven by security guarantees, aid, or investment access.
- **Selective Multi-Alignment:** Pragmatic, issue-based partnerships with multiple external actors across different sectors (e.g., security with the U.S., infrastructure with China, trade with the EU).
- **Revived Non-Alignment:** A reinterpretation of the Non-Aligned Movement logic, emphasizing autonomy and neutrality within global rivalries.
- **Sub-Regional Hedging:** Prioritizing regional integration via platforms like the African Union or the East African Community to create internal resilience and reduce external dependency.

The choice of strategy is contingent upon a range of interrelated variables. First, material needs play a crucial role—states often align based on pragmatic considerations such as the pursuit of foreign investment, access to infrastructure financing, or the need for debt relief. Second, the ideational self-perception of the state significantly shapes strategic orientation. This includes prevailing national narratives such as anti-imperialist identity, a commitment to sovereignty-driven nationalism, or a broader vision of regional solidarity, all of which influence how external partnerships are framed and pursued. Finally, the domestic political structure—including regime type, institutional robustness, and elite configurations—mediates both external preferences and internal legitimacy strategies. These domestic factors condition how international alignments are interpreted, negotiated, and instrumentalized within the national political arena.

East African leaders are acutely aware of the structural incentives and constraints associated with different alignments. The West offers access to capital markets, security cooperation, and technical governance assistance—but often conditions this support on reforms, transparency, and human rights compliance. BRICS+, by contrast, emphasizes resource-based investment, non-interference, and south-south solidarity—an approach that appeals particularly to leaders facing domestic legitimacy challenges or wary of Western oversight. Beyond material incentives, symbolic and ideational dimensions play a central role. Prestige, voice, and recognition in multilateral forums—especially as “representatives of the Global South”—are important elements of East Africa’s

foreign policy calculus. Strategic alignment thus involves more than transactional cost-benefit analyses; it is also shaped by narratives of sovereignty, historical justice, and global equity (Dietz et al., 2011).

Despite growing room for maneuver, East African foreign policy is not without constraints. Three structural limitations stand out:

1. **Debt Dependency:** Increased reliance on foreign loans—especially for large-scale infrastructure—can translate into political vulnerability and reduced bargaining power (Babu et al., 2014).
2. **Institutional Capacity:** The simultaneous management of multiple complex partnerships may overwhelm state institutions, leading to inefficiencies or incoherence in foreign policy execution (Yiblet, 2024).
3. **External Leverage:** Once dependencies are in place, external actors can exercise pressure through sanctions, aid conditionalities, or geopolitical bargaining—curbing domestic autonomy (Gizaw et al., 2023).

East African states must therefore navigate between opportunity and overreach. Strategic pluralism offers room for diversified partnerships and greater autonomy, but it also introduces risks of fragmentation, dependency, and institutional overstretch. East Africa’s strategic positioning in the emerging multipolar order reflects a careful balancing act between structural realities and aspirational narratives. The region is not merely adapting to external changes but actively participating in the redefinition of global alignments. The choices that East African states make—between alignment, hedging, or non-alignment—are shaped by both material constraints and ideational aspirations. Understanding these dynamics requires recognizing East African states as strategic actors, not passive recipients—agents navigating a complex and shifting international terrain in pursuit of autonomy, influence, and development.

Hypotheses and Strategic Scenarios

In light of the emerging multipolar world order, East African states are confronted with an increasingly complex and fragmented global environment that necessitates a recalibration of traditional foreign policy strategies.

The hypotheses introduced in this section are conceptually informed and derive logically from the

geopolitical, historical, and institutional patterns examined earlier. The central aim is to distill key variables that are likely to shape the foreign policy behavior of East African governments in an increasingly competitive international arena. It is posited, for instance, that East African states with higher levels of economic diversification and institutional capacity are more likely to pursue selective, interest-based alignments rather than rigid bloc-based affiliations. This reflects assumptions from neoclassical realism and rational choice theory, which emphasize the importance of domestic capabilities in expanding strategic autonomy. Conversely, states with enduring post-colonial linkages—particularly those embedded in legal, military, or financial structures—are more likely to approach BRICS+ engagement with caution, a dynamic consistent with post-colonial theoretical frameworks that highlight the persistence of structural dependencies and asymmetries.

Moreover, it can be argued that regimes facing acute legitimacy crises or internal instability are prone to instrumentalize foreign alignments for domestic political gain, using external engagement as a means of regime survival or elite consolidation. Finally, the increasing fragmentation of Western foreign policy—especially the divergence between U.S. unilateralism and EU normative multilateralism—creates additional room for strategic maneuvering by East African states, allowing them to calibrate partnerships more flexibly and pragmatically.

To further elaborate the spectrum of potential foreign policy pathways, this section outlines four ideal-type scenarios that conceptualize distinct strategic responses to global multipolarity. These scenarios do not predict actual developments but offer analytically coherent models for interpreting the behavior of East African states under varying structural and domestic conditions. The first scenario envisions a deliberate revival and adaptation of non-alignment, whereby East African states actively avoid binary choices between competing global powers. Instead, they adopt a strategy of diversified engagement

aimed at safeguarding sovereignty, enhancing regional integration, and preserving maximum flexibility. This non-aligned approach echoes the historical principles of the Non-Aligned Movement, but is recalibrated to reflect the complexities of contemporary multipolarity.

A contrasting pathway is represented by a scenario of strategic bandwagoning with BRICS+, in which East African states, disillusioned by Western conditionalities and normative pressures, gravitate more decisively toward alternative global actors. In this setting, China, Russia, and other BRICS+ members are valued not only for their investment potential and infrastructure financing, but also for their rhetorical commitment to South-South solidarity and non-interference in domestic governance. Here, foreign policy becomes a vehicle for asserting autonomy vis-à-vis traditional Western patrons, reflecting realistic assumptions about shifting alliance structures in response to changing power distributions.

A third scenario envisions a functional dual alignment, in which East African states adopt an explicitly segmented foreign policy strategy. Security, governance, and humanitarian cooperation are maintained with Western actors, particularly the United States and the European Union, while economic development, trade, and infrastructure projects are pursued with BRICS+ countries. This pragmatic bifurcation enables East African governments to hedge against overdependence on any one bloc while maximizing returns from multiple partnerships. It also reflects the growing capacity of states in the region to compartmentalize international engagements according to sector-specific needs.

Finally, the regional bloc consolidation scenario emphasizes the strengthening of African multilateralism as the central axis of foreign policy. Through deeper integration within institutions such as the East African Community (EAC), the African Union (AU), and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), East African states seek to harmonize external relations and increase

The competition between the West and alternative power centers—most prominently the BRICS+ grouping—is rooted in broader structural fault lines: economic sovereignty, industrial capacity, digital infrastructure, and institutional design.



The 16th BRICS Summit, hosted in Kazan, Russia, from October 22-24, 2024 (Photo Credit: CFR.ORG)

collective bargaining power in a fragmented global order. Rather than aligning externally, this strategy prioritizes regional solidarity, institutional capacity-building, and the pursuit of endogenous development agendas.

Taken together, the hypotheses and scenarios presented in this section, provide a conceptual map of the possible strategic directions available to East African states in a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape. While none of these models claims empirical certainty, they offer useful heuristics for interpreting the interplay between external pressures, domestic constraints, and the agency of East African actors. By foregrounding the region's growing assertiveness and strategic pluralism, this section contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how East African foreign policy is being shaped—not simply by global power shifts, but by endogenous logics of political survival, economic aspiration, and regional ambition.

Conclusion and Outlook

This study has demonstrated that East African foreign policy choices in a multipolar world are neither monolithic nor externally determined, but rather reflect a range of differentiated strategic calculations shaped by a combination of institutional structures, historical legacies, and geopolitical constraints. One of the central findings

is the increasing strategic selectivity of East African states in their external engagements. Far from being passive recipients of global influence, they have emerged as active agents capable of navigating the complexities of a shifting global order. This agency is evident in their growing tendency to pursue diversified partnerships and pragmatic alignments, often opting for issue-based cooperation rather than ideological bloc affiliation.

While historical legacies—particularly postcolonial ties to Western powers—continue to influence diplomatic preferences and institutional frameworks, they no longer function as determinative forces in shaping foreign policy choices. The inertia of colonial dependencies is increasingly counterbalanced by a deliberate effort to expand the range of international engagements. This trend reflects a recalibration of sovereignty, in which strategic autonomy is no longer defined by ideological distance from former colonial centers, but by the ability to maneuver flexibly within a competitive global environment. A critical insight that has emerged from this analysis is the role of domestic factors in shaping foreign policy behavior. Political stability, levels of economic diversification, and institutional robustness all serve as key enablers of strategic choice. States with greater internal coherence are more likely to engage in functional diplomacy that maximizes national interest rather than

conforming to externally defined ideological camps (Zehfuss, 2009). In this context, external alignments become tools of domestic consolidation as much as instruments of international positioning. At the same time, the fragmentation of Western engagement on the African continent has opened new strategic spaces for East African agencies. Divergences between U.S. and EU approaches—ranging from policy coherence to conditionality regimes—have produced varied perceptions and created opportunities for East African states to engage in calibrated balancing acts.

This fragmentation does not automatically push states into alternative alignments but increases their ability to shape the terms of engagement with both traditional and emerging partners. BRICS+ in particular has emerged as an attractive alternative to Western interlocutors, offering access to infrastructure investments, trade opportunities, and diplomatic solidarity under the banner of South–South cooperation (Lissovolik et al., 2017). However, these partnerships are not necessarily rooted in ideological affinity; rather, they reflect pragmatic motivations, including dissatisfaction with Western conditionalities and a desire for policy space. East African engagement with BRICS+ should therefore be understood as a strategic response to systemic asymmetries rather than a wholesale realignment of normative commitments.

The foregoing strategic scenarios—ranging from non-alignment to functional dual alignment—illustrate the spectrum of foreign policy options available to East African states in a multipolar world. These ideal-types underscore the fluid and context-sensitive nature of regional diplomacy. No single trajectory is inevitable, and different states will likely adopt varying strategies based on their domestic political configurations, economic imperatives, and regional affiliations.

This paper has adopted a theory-led and conceptually driven approach to examining East African foreign policy agencies. Its primary conceptual contribution lies in reframing alignment not as a binary or static choice, but as a dynamic, issue-specific strategy embedded in both structural and agential considerations. By integrating insights from neoclassical realism, postcolonial theory, and rationalist models of decision-making, the analysis offers a multidimensional framework for interpreting foreign policy behavior in the Global South. In doing so, it contributes to broader theoretical debates by foregrounding the calculated, contextually informed,

and often experimental nature of alignment decisions in postcolonial states. The findings carry several policy-relevant implications. For East African policymakers, understanding alignment as a flexible process enables the design of adaptive diplomatic strategies that preserve sovereignty while maximizing international leverage. The scenarios developed herein can assist in anticipatory planning and strategic forecasting.

For external actors—both within the West and in the BRICS+ constellation—the analysis underscores the need to recognize the heterogeneity of interests and experiences within East Africa, as well as the limitations of conditionality-driven engagement. Regional institutions such as the African Union and the East African Community may also draw on these insights to promote greater policy coherence and collective bargaining capacity.

While this paper provides a conceptual foundation for understanding the evolving dynamics of East African foreign policy, its exploratory nature opens several avenues for further research. Empirical validation of the proposed hypotheses and scenarios will be essential for refining the analytical framework. Comparative case studies focusing on key actors such as Kenya, Ethiopia, or Tanzania could elucidate how specific regime types, economic strategies, and historical trajectories shape alignment behavior. Cross-regional comparisons with Latin America or Southeast Asia may help to generalize the findings and expand the theoretical scope of strategic autonomy in the Global South. Furthermore, mixed-method approaches incorporating elite interviews, discourse analysis, and foreign policy documentation

... East African states are not merely reacting to global power shifts but are actively shaping their foreign policy trajectories within a competitive and fluid international environment. Their strategies reflect both enduring constraints and novel opportunities, demanding an analytical lens that is attuned to complexity, nuance, and transformation.

could offer valuable insights into the internal logics of decision-making. Finally, emerging phenomena such as digital diplomacy, climate cooperation, and new modalities of South–South engagement merit deeper theoretical and empirical investigation, particularly as they redefine the parameters of agency and alignment in the international system.

In sum, this paper has argued that East African states are not merely reacting to global power shifts but are actively shaping their foreign policy trajectories within a competitive and fluid international environment. Their strategies reflect both enduring constraints and novel opportunities, demanding an analytical lens that is attuned to complexity, nuance, and transformation.

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Reviving Cold War Ties: How Russia Can Catalyze Development in Kenya through Strategic Partnerships

By: Maria Faridah

Abstract

As global power dynamics shift toward a multipolar order, Russia is reasserting its geopolitical influence in Africa reviving historical Cold War ties with a contemporary economic and strategic agenda. This paper examines how Russia, once a key ideological and developmental ally to African liberation movements including those in Kenya can reposition itself as a relevant and pragmatic development partner in the 21st century. With bilateral trade between Russia and Africa rising to over \$20 billion in 2024, and the Russia–Africa Summit (2023) reaffirming Moscow’s intent to deepen economic and security cooperation on the continent, Kenya stands as a critical gateway to East Africa’s economic and strategic landscape. Anchored in Kenya’s Vision 2030 and Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA), this analysis explores sector-specific pathways where Russia can provide meaningful support: energy (particularly nuclear through Rosatom), agriculture (via fertilizer and grain access), technical education (through scholarships and vocational exchanges), and security (military and cyber cooperation). It draws parallels between Soviet-era technical and ideological engagements and Russia’s emerging model of transactional, state-led partnerships. This article argues that Russia’s development diplomacy, if delinked from zero-sum geopolitical rivalries, could complement Kenya’s quest for industrialization, energy diversification, and food security. However, challenges including limited Russian private sector presence and reputational risks linked to the Ukraine war must be strategically navigated. Finally, a reimagined Russia–Kenya partnership must align with Kenya’s long-term goals while offering Russia a stable foothold in one of Africa’s most dynamic economies.

Introduction

During the Cold War era, Africa emerged as a key geopolitical theatre where the Soviet Union competed with the West for ideological and strategic influence. The USSR’s engagement with Africa was shaped by anti-colonial solidarity, Marxist ideological export, and a broader strategy to counterbalance Western hegemony. The Soviet Union supported liberation movements, provided military training, and offered thousands of scholarships to African students, contributing to the rise of new political elites across the continent (Shubin, 2008). While Kenya maintained a relatively non-aligned position during the Cold War, leaning more toward Western economic models, the USSR still played a secondary role in educational and technical assistance, particularly through cultural diplomacy and indirect influence via Pan-African institutions (Keller, 2010).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia experienced a two-decade-long retreat from African affairs, largely focusing on domestic restructuring

and Western integration. However, after 2014 marked by the annexation of Crimea and escalating tensions with NATO—Russia has increasingly pivoted eastward and southward, reviving its presence across Africa through a new framework of strategic and economic diplomacy (Ramani, 2020). The convening of the Russia–Africa Summits in 2019 and 2023 underscores this renewed engagement, with over 40 African heads of state attending, signaling a deliberate effort by Moscow to regain influence and secure partnerships outside the Western sphere (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

Kenya, as East Africa’s economic hub and one of the continent’s most politically stable democracies, presents a vital partner in this new wave of Russian outreach. Its diversified economy, ambitious development agenda under Vision 2030, and recent policy pivot under the Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA) make it a strategic platform for external powers seeking

influence in the region (Government of Kenya, 2022). Additionally, Kenya's geostrategic location, access to the Indian Ocean, and participation in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) position it as a gateway for broader engagement with East and Central Africa.

This paper explores the central question: How can Russia strategically contribute to Kenya's development agenda by leveraging historical ties and new sectoral partnerships? The significance of this article lies in offering a nuanced, evidence-based understanding of Kenya–Russia relations, cutting through ideological binaries to examine realpolitik and development potential. As Africa increasingly becomes a contested space for global influence, unpacking the dynamics of non-traditional partnerships such as with Russia is crucial for policy analysts, diplomats, and development planners. This study draws on a mixed-method approach, using qualitative analysis of policy documents (e.g., Russia–Africa Summit declarations, Kenya's Vision 2030 policy papers), recent trade and investment data (e.g., COMTRADE, UNCTAD), and secondary literature from international relations and development studies.

News reports, think tank briefings, and diplomatic communiqués complement the analysis, ensuring the paper is grounded in both historical context and current realities.

Historical Context: Soviet–Kenya Relations during the Cold War

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union engaged robustly with post-colonial Africa as part of its global ideological contest with the West. Between 1956 and 1990, the USSR provided over 300,000 scholarships to students from developing countries, with more than 25,000 Africans graduating from Soviet universities by the end of the 1980s (Freemantle, 2021; Shubin, 2021). The Soviet model of influence centered on exporting socialist ideology, technical training, and military support. Education, in particular, became a soft power tool, enabling the USSR to shape Africa's emerging elites by offering degrees in engineering, medicine, and state administration sectors critical to national development.

Kenya, however, did not fully embrace the ideological alignments seen in other African states like Angola or



Students from different African countries in Russia for studies in 1984 (Photo Credit: reddit)



With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia significantly curtailed its international engagements. Diplomatic missions in Africa were either closed or downsized, and economic cooperation nearly collapsed

Ethiopia. While Kenya maintained a non-aligned foreign policy, it leaned economically and diplomatically toward the West under Presidents Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel Arap Moi. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union still found avenues for indirect influence. For instance, from 1965 to 1985, an estimated 1,200 Kenyan students studied in the USSR under scholarship programs (Mutua, 2020). These students, many of whom were trained in technical fields, contributed to Kenya's development in engineering, medicine, and public administration upon their return.

Military cooperation was limited but not absent. Kenyan officers were occasionally sent to Soviet institutions for short-term training, particularly in intelligence and logistics (Nyambura, 2023). However, this collaboration remained cautious and episodic due to Kenya's close ties with Western defense allies, particularly the United Kingdom and the United States, which jointly supported Kenya's military modernization programs during the same period.

Beyond bilateral agreements, the Soviet Union also leveraged Pan-African and multilateral organizations to broaden its ideological reach. Through institutions such as the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization (AAPSO) and the World Federation of Democratic Youth, Kenyan delegates—especially students and trade union leaders participated in Soviet-backed seminars and cultural exchanges (Oloo, 2021). These platforms did not result in overt political alignments but provided an important exposure to socialist ideas, scientific cooperation, and alternative models of governance.

Notably, Soviet soft power in Kenya also took the form of cultural diplomacy. By 1982, the Russian Cultural Center in Nairobi had trained over 2,000 Kenyans in Russian language and organized regular exhibitions showcasing

Soviet achievements in space science, education, and technology (Kalika, 2019). These efforts helped maintain a symbolic presence in Kenya despite the absence of deep economic or political alliances.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia significantly curtailed its international engagements. Diplomatic missions in Africa were either closed or downsized, and economic cooperation nearly collapsed. By 1995, Russia's total trade volume with Africa fell below USD 1 billion, a stark contrast to the robust Soviet engagements of the previous decades (Ramani, 2020). Kenya was among the many countries where bilateral relations stagnated, as Moscow shifted its foreign policy inward to focus on domestic recovery and Western integration.

The post-Cold War vacuum created by Russia's retreat was rapidly filled by other powers. China-Kenya trade, for example, rose from USD 100 million in 2000 to over USD 5 billion by 2020, illustrating the scale of alternative partnerships Kenya embraced during Russia's absence (World Bank, 2023). However, the institutional memory of Soviet-era cooperation through alumni networks, cultural centers, and dormant bilateral agreements provided Russia with a latent infrastructure for future re-engagement.

This historical backdrop offers valuable insight into how Russia may now reposition itself as a pragmatic, non-Western development partner to Kenya. While Cold War-era relations were limited in depth, they set the stage for renewed sectoral engagement in areas like education, agriculture, and defense, which have long-standing precedents.

Russia's Re-Emergence in Africa: Strategic Shift Since 2000

Russia's contemporary engagement with Africa represents a significant recalibration of its post-Soviet foreign policy. After decades of limited interaction following the collapse of the USSR, Russia under President Vladimir Putin has repositioned itself as a proactive actor on the continent. The shift is grounded in a broader strategy of promoting a multipolar world order, asserting strategic autonomy, and forging "equal and mutually beneficial" partnerships—principles codified in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (2023) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023). This document explicitly identifies Africa as a "center of global development,"

highlighting Russia's intention to deepen ties through diplomacy, trade, energy, education, and defense.

This reorientation gained momentum after 2014, when Western sanctions following the annexation of Crimea forced Russia to reduce its dependency on Euro-Atlantic institutions and seek alternative global alliances. Africa—rich in natural resources, diplomatically influential in multilateral fora, and strategically under-engaged by Russia became a priority target in Moscow's pivot east and south (Marten, 2019). Unlike Cold War-era ideological alignment, the new Russian approach is transactional, sector-specific, and anchored in bilateralism, with the Kremlin deploying a combination of state diplomacy, commercial outreach, and military cooperation.

The Russia–Africa Summit held in Sochi in 2019 marked a turning point. Attended by 43 African heads of state and over 3,000 delegates, the summit produced more than 90 bilateral agreements spanning nuclear energy, agriculture, defense, and infrastructure (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). The 2023 Russia–Africa Summit in St. Petersburg reaffirmed these priorities while emphasizing de-dollarization of trade, food security partnerships, and security collaboration. The summit also pledged increased humanitarian aid and scholarships, with Russia offering 1,500 government-funded academic slots to African students in 2024 (Rossotrudnichestvo, 2024).

Statistically, Russia's engagement with Africa is still growing but remains concentrated in key sectors. By the end of 2024, Russia–Africa trade volume reached USD 20.4 billion, up from USD 14.2 billion in 2020, driven primarily by exports of wheat, fertilizers, crude oil products, and military hardware (UNCTAD, 2025). Russia has also emerged as Africa's largest supplier of arms, accounting for approximately 40% of the continent's total arms imports—a lead reinforced through military partnerships with over 20 African nations (SIPRI, 2024).

When compared to other global actors, Russia lags behind in trade value but competes strategically in influence. China remains Africa's largest trading partner, with trade reaching USD 282 billion in 2024, followed by the European Union (USD 200 billion) and the United States (USD 44 billion) (AfDB, 2025; World Bank, 2025). However, while China's model focuses on infrastructure financing and the EU emphasizes regulatory governance and development aid, Russia has carved a distinct niche

in security, mining, energy, and sovereign diplomacy offering African governments an alternative model of cooperation without conditionalities on governance or human rights.

Key motivations underpinning Russia's strategic return to Africa include: One, counteracting Western isolation: Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, African support or abstention in UN General Assembly votes has become diplomatically vital. Russia views Africa as a critical bloc to build legitimacy and resist Western narratives (Korybko, 2023). Two, securing access to strategic resources: Russian state-linked firms have signed mining and energy deals in countries such as Sudan (gold), Algeria (natural gas), and Zimbabwe (platinum). These partnerships are frequently tied to military or diplomatic support (Erickson, 2023). Three, expanding arms and defense sales: Russia provides air defense systems, helicopters, and small arms, and in return receives diplomatic loyalty, security contracts, or access to logistics hubs. Its influence is further amplified through military training programs and private security entities such as the Wagner Group (SIPRI, 2024). Lastly, soft power and educational diplomacy: As of 2024, more than 17,000 African students were enrolled in Russian institutions, supported by tuition waivers, cultural exchange, and Russian-language programs (Rossotrudnichestvo, 2024).

The 2023 Foreign Policy Concept places emphasis on "sovereign equality" and "non-interference" in domestic affairs principles that resonate with African leaders wary of conditionality-driven aid from Western partners. This rhetoric, coupled with pragmatic offerings in security, energy, and grain supply, allows Russia to portray itself as a development partner that respects national autonomy. Nonetheless, challenges remain. Russia's foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa remains below USD 5 billion, a small figure compared to China's USD 90 billion and the EU's USD 60+ billion (AfDB, 2025). Additionally, its economic engagement is heavily dependent on state-owned enterprises and lacks the robust private sector presence seen in other major powers. Sanctions, logistical constraints, and reputational issues tied to its Ukraine war and mercenary operations further limit the scalability of Russian partnerships.

In sum, Russia's re-emergence in Africa is guided by a recalibrated foreign policy that blends historical relationships with new strategic imperatives. While its economic weight is modest, Russia's diplomatic



33,835.9 metric tonnes of fertilizer donated by Russia to Kenya, July 2, 2024 (Photo Credit: TV 47 Digital)

assertiveness and willingness to engage on African terms position it as a relevant—if selective—actor in the continent’s evolving geopolitical architecture.

Kenya’s Development Priorities: Vision 2030 and the BETA Agenda

Kenya’s development trajectory has been shaped by a long-term policy framework known as Vision 2030, launched in 2008, which seeks to transform the country into a newly industrializing, middle-income nation providing a high quality of life to its citizens by 2030. The blueprint rests on three key pillars: economic, social, and political. The economic pillar emphasizes industrialization, infrastructure development, expanded energy access, and market-driven growth (Government of Kenya, 2020). As of 2024, the industrial sector contributes approximately 17.1% to Kenya’s GDP, with manufacturing alone accounting for 7.6%, underscoring the country’s commitment to diversifying away from agriculture-based growth (World Bank, 2025).

Access to affordable and reliable energy is another cornerstone of Vision 2030. Kenya aims to increase installed electricity capacity to over 5,000 MW by 2030, with a significant focus on clean energy sources such as geothermal, hydro, and wind. As of 2024, over 80% of Kenya’s electricity generation is derived from renewable sources, making it one of the greenest energy grids

in sub-Saharan Africa (IEA, 2024). Education has also received substantial investment, particularly in technical and vocational training to align workforce skills with industrialization goals. The government allocated KSh 628 billion to education in the 2023/2024 budget, representing 26.9% of total recurrent expenditure (KNBS, 2024).

Building on Vision 2030, the Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA) was introduced by President William Ruto’s administration in 2022. BETA places greater emphasis on grassroots economic empowerment, aiming to correct structural inequalities by focusing on agriculture, micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), healthcare, digital access, and job creation (Republic of Kenya, 2023). The approach recognizes that economic growth must be inclusive, especially for Kenya’s youthful population—over 70% of whom are under 35—many of whom face unemployment or underemployment.

Agriculture, which employs over 60% of the Kenyan workforce, is prioritized under BETA with renewed focus on irrigation, fertilizer subsidies, and market access for smallholder farmers (FAO, 2024). The government has invested in constructing 1,000 aggregation and storage centers to reduce post-harvest losses, which currently exceed 30% annually for perishable goods (MOALD,

2024). In parallel, the Hustler Fund, a state-backed financial inclusion initiative, has disbursed over KSh 80 billion to MSMEs as of April 2025, aimed at unlocking productivity at the bottom of the pyramid (Republic of Kenya, 2025).

These agendas open up numerous strategic sectors ripe for international partnerships, particularly with non-traditional actors such as Russia. In energy, for instance, Kenya has expressed interest in nuclear power development as part of its long-term diversification strategy—an area where Russia's state nuclear corporation, Rosatom, holds competitive advantage (Nuclear Africa, 2023). In agriculture, partnerships in mechanized farming, fertilizer supply, and food security logistics would complement BETA objectives. Additionally, Kenya's prioritization of technical and vocational training aligns well with Russia's longstanding tradition of offering education scholarships and building specialized institutions in engineering and medicine.

Additionally, as Kenya continues to expand its digital and infrastructure backbone, opportunities exist for bilateral engagement in ICT, cyber-security, and industrial R&D. These sectors also align with Kenya's strategic location within the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), making it a potential hub for regional value chains. By aligning external partnerships with its domestic priorities, Kenya can ensure that foreign cooperation is not extractive, but transformative.

Sectoral Opportunities for Kenya–Russia Cooperation

Energy and Nuclear Technology

Russia's state-owned nuclear energy company, Rosatom, has deepened its footprint across Africa, with active or planned projects in countries such as Egypt, Algeria, Mali, and Burkina Faso (FT, 2024). At the African Energy Indaba in early 2024, Rosatom emphasized the strategic and developmental role of nuclear power in Africa, positioning it as a long-term solution to energy security challenges (FT, 2024). Kenya's nuclear ambitions by 2035 are enshrined in its long-term energy roadmap. In 2017, the Kenya Nuclear Electrification Board (KNEB) now the Nuclear Power and Energy Agency (NuPEA) projected a 1,000 MW nuclear plant operational by 2027, estimated to cost US \$5–6 billion, likely situated near Lake Victoria or the Indian Ocean coast. While timelines have shifted, the target remains for a first reactor by the mid-2030s.

Kenya signed a nuclear cooperation MoU with the United States at the 2024 IAEA General Conference, indicating its active pursuit of international partners in nuclear regulation and technology (Reddit, 2024).

Russia with its deep expertise in design, financing, and operation of nuclear reactors can support Kenya's objectives through technical assistance, regulatory training, and project financing. Rosatom's Africa-wide agreements highlight its capacity to provide turnkey nuclear builds under state-backed credit lines. In the short- to medium term, Russia can also collaborate in renewable and fossil energy sectors. Kenya's growing oil and gas exploration activities especially offshore blocks in the Lamu Basin—could benefit from Russian firms experienced in Arctic and frontier extraction projects. Similarly, Russia's fertilizer-supported grain diplomacy ties into agricultural energy needs such as storage and processing infrastructure powered by hybrid energy systems.

Agriculture and Food Security

Russia has become a dominant agricultural exporter to Africa. In 2024, Russian agricultural exports to African markets exceeded US \$7 billion, up 19% from 2023, supplying cereals, dairy, oils, meat, and fish to 45 countries, with Kenya among the top five importers (Agroexport, 2025). Cereals primarily wheat, barley, and maize accounted for 87% of the export value, and Africa received about 38% of Russia's record 21 million tonnes of wheat exports in the 2023–2024 season (Sputnik/Interfax, 2025; Africa Report, 2025). Russia exported 1.5 million tonnes of wheat to Kenya in that period, representing approximately 60% of Kenya's total wheat imports (Izvestia interpretation, 2025). This scale is relevant given Kenya's food security concerns, where wheat imports constitute roughly 60% of national consumption. Russia's competitive pricing, coupled with willingness to engage in barter or concessional models, makes it a logical partner for Kenya aiming to reduce reliance on European or North American markets.

Fertilizer is another critical area of cooperation. Kenya relies heavily on imports to support its 60%+ agrarian workforce (FAO, 2024). With rising global fertilizer prices, Russia's robust production capacity can provide more affordable alternatives and reduce dependence on Western suppliers, aligning with BETA's agricultural empowerment goals. On mechanized farming and agro-industrial investments, Russia's agro-machinery sector and grain logistics expertise align well with Kenya's efforts to

Fertilizer is another critical area of cooperation. Kenya relies heavily on imports to support its 60%+ agrarian workforce (FAO, 2024). With rising global fertilizer prices, Russia's robust production capacity can provide more affordable alternatives and reduce dependence on Western suppliers, aligning with BETA's agricultural empowerment goals

build 1,000 farmer aggregation centers to reduce annual post-harvest losses of 30% for perishables (MOALD, 2024). Joint ventures in cold-chain logistics, grain silos, and agro-processing facilities could accelerate BETA's goals in rural transformation and SME development.

Education and Skills Transfer

Educational engagement has long been a hallmark of Russia–Africa diplomacy, dating back to the Soviet era and institutions such as Patrice Lumumba University (RUDN). In recent years, Russia offered approximately 1,500 scholarships to African students in 2024, including science, engineering, and vocational studies, with many beneficiaries enrolled at RUDN and other technical institutions (Rossotrudnichestvo, 2024). Kenya's emphasis on technical and vocational education under Vision 2030 and BETA particularly in engineering, agritech, renewable energy, and manufacturing provides a strong platform for Russia to revive and scale scholarship and exchange programs. Russian support for Kenya's technical training colleges (TVETs) could boost skills transfer in fields critical to industrialization objectives.

Additionally, establishing a Russian cultural and language center in Nairobi—comparable to those maintained in Algeria or Egypt—would catalyze soft power and deepen educational linkages. Training Kenyan language instructors and integrating the Russian language into Kenya's university offerings would support reciprocal cultural understanding and technical collaboration.

Security and Defense Cooperation

Kenya's security landscape faces persistent threats from terrorism (e.g., Al-Shabaab), emerging cyber risks, and regional instability. Russia's military-industrial complex is a leading global supplier: as of 2024, Russia accounted for 40% of Africa's arms imports, providing air defense systems, helicopters, small arms, and military training abroad, often tied to broader security cooperation or resource access (SIPRI, 2024). Kenya could benefit from Russian support in counterterrorism training, aviation

support (e.g., Mi-17 helicopters), border security hardware, and cybersecurity infrastructure—areas where Kenyan needs intersect with Russian capability. Russia's private military companies (e.g., Wagner), albeit controversial, also complement the Kremlin's state-led defense diplomacy across Africa (Erickson, 2023).

However, Kenya must navigate these engagements carefully, balancing its partnerships with Western allies, regional norms, and domestic governance expectations. Arms transfers from Russia must be structured transparently and in accordance with Kenyan legal frameworks to avoid diplomatic friction. Nonetheless, Kenya's strategic non-alignment and operational independence could allow it to access Russian defense offerings without compromising its international partnerships.

Risks, Limitations and Geopolitical Challenges

Despite Russia's renewed engagement with Africa, significant limitations exist that may affect the depth and sustainability of Kenya–Russia cooperation. One of the foremost challenges is Russia's relatively low foreign direct investment (FDI) footprint on the continent. As of 2024, Russia accounted for less than 1% of total FDI stock in Africa, compared to China (15%), the European Union (39%), and the United States (7%) (UNCTAD, 2025). Most Russian engagements remain state-driven and centered around resource extraction, arms trade, and large infrastructure projects, often lacking deep private sector participation or institutional support systems.

This limitation is exacerbated by the economic sanctions imposed on Russia following the Ukraine conflict in 2022, which have significantly constrained the country's access to global financial systems and investment capital. The ruble's volatility, combined with export restrictions, has made Russian firms less competitive in global markets. These sanctions also carry reputational risks for countries like Kenya that may be perceived as aligning too closely with Moscow (Kreps & Nzioki, 2023). While Kenya has

maintained a non-aligned foreign policy, deeper Russian engagement could complicate its diplomatic standing with Western donors—who contributed USD 3.4 billion in development aid to Kenya in 2023 alone (OECD, 2024). Another geopolitical reality is Kenya's existing ties with other major powers. China remains Kenya's largest bilateral creditor, having financed over USD 9 billion in infrastructure projects, including the Standard Gauge Railway (CGD, 2024). The United States and European Union also maintain extensive trade, security, and development partnerships. Additionally, Gulf states such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia have intensified investments in logistics, energy, and agriculture. In this context, Kenya must balance its foreign relations carefully to avoid diplomatic overdependence or misalignment with key partners (Omondi, 2025).

Additionally, Russia's Africa policy has been criticized for adopting a transactional approach that focuses on short-term geopolitical wins rather than long-term development impact. The emphasis on arms sales, elite-focused agreements, and extractive resource contracts risks sidelining public-centered, inclusive development

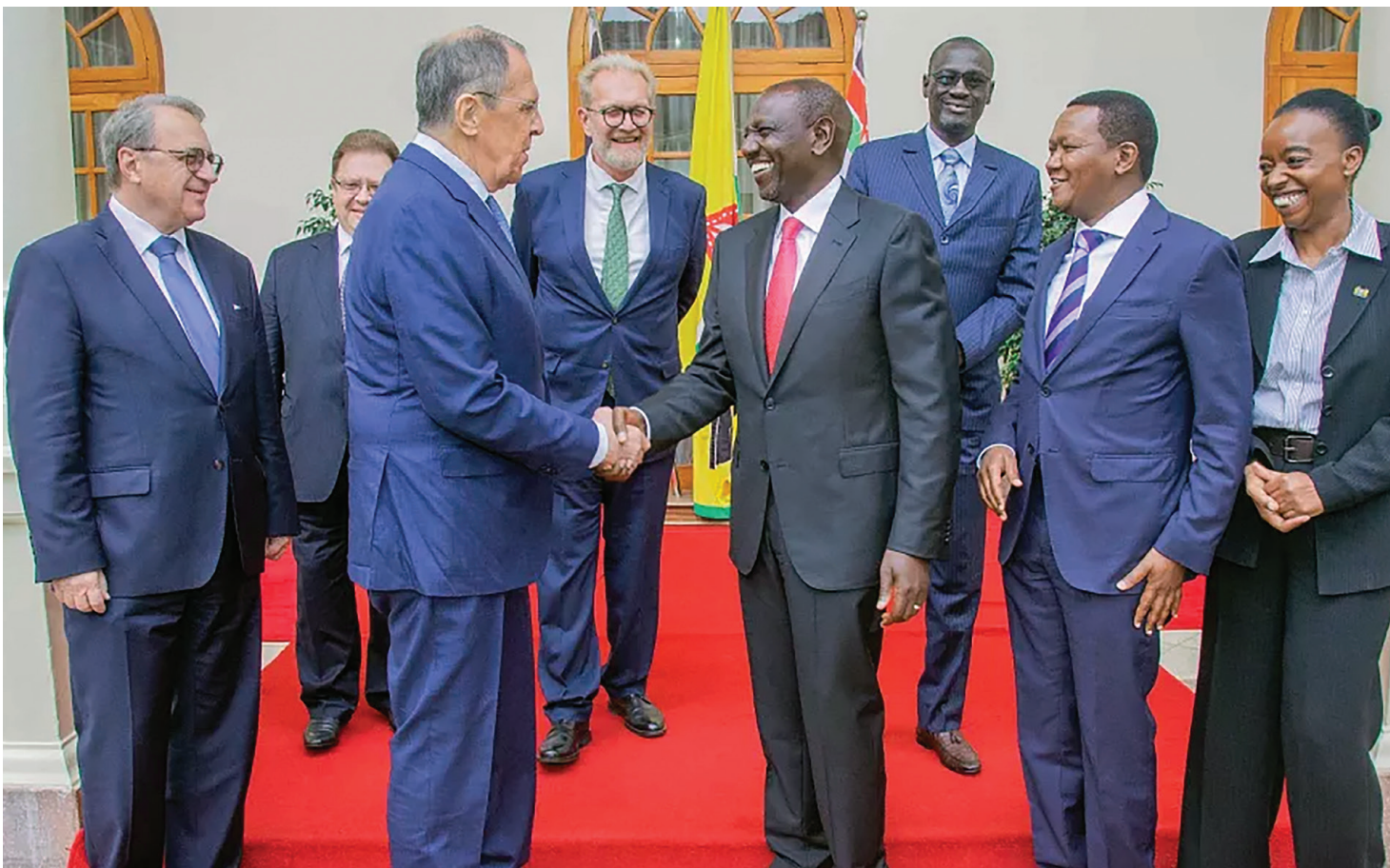
priorities (ISS Africa, 2023). If unchecked, such partnerships could undermine Kenya's own policy frameworks, such as Vision 2030 and the BETA Agenda, which emphasize sustainability, industrialization, and social equity.

To ensure resilience and benefit, Kenya must approach Russian engagement with clear institutional checks, strategic alignment, and measurable development outcomes. Otherwise, there is a risk that cooperation may yield symbolic rather than structural gains, particularly in a rapidly changing global order.


Policy Recommendations

To optimize its engagement with Russia, Kenya should adopt a principled and structured approach rooted in mutual benefit, transparency, and long-term national interests.

First, the Kenyan government should pursue sector-specific memoranda of understanding (MoUs) and public-private partnerships (PPPs) that align with Vision 2030 and the BETA Agenda. Areas such as nuclear energy, agricultural technology, and vocational education



H.E. the President of Kenya, William Ruto, Ph.D, meets with the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov in Nairobi for bilateral talks on May 29, 2023 (Photo Credit: africanews)



Kenya could benefit from Russian support in counterterrorism training, aviation support (e.g., Mi-17 helicopters), border security hardware, and cybersecurity infrastructure—areas where Kenyan needs intersect with Russian capability

offer concrete, measurable benefits. Each agreement should include timelines, investment thresholds, and capacity-building components to ensure domestic value addition. Second, Kenya and Russia should establish joint intergovernmental commissions or technical working groups, similar to frameworks used in Kenya–EU or Kenya–China bilateral dialogues. These mechanisms can streamline policy coordination, monitor project implementation, and allow for regular high-level consultations.

Third, Kenya should leverage multilateral platforms such as the African Union (AU) and East African Community (EAC) to coordinate regional approaches to Russia. A collective stance can improve bargaining power, reduce duplication, and align Russia's involvement with regional priorities like energy integration, food security, and counterterrorism. Finally, transparency and public accountability must be embedded into all agreements. Parliamentary oversight, public reporting of financial terms, and environmental impact assessments should be

standard procedure. Kenya's past experience with opaque debt deals, particularly in infrastructure, highlights the need for early disclosure and civic participation.

Conclusion

This article has examined the potential for a revived Kenya–Russia development partnership by drawing on Cold War legacies and aligning them with contemporary opportunities. Historical connections particularly in education and ideology—have evolved into new modes of cooperation focused on energy, agriculture, skills transfer, and security. Russia's strategic return to Africa, symbolized by major summits and trade growth exceeding USD 20 billion across Africa by 2024, reflects its ambitions to diversify alliances and counterbalance Western isolation. However, key risks remain. Russia's limited FDI, reputational challenges due to the Ukraine conflict, and Kenya's complex diplomatic ties to Western and Asian powers necessitate a pragmatic and calibrated engagement model. Kenya must avoid transactional deals and ensure that Russian involvement aligns with its own national development priorities under Vision 2030 and the Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA).

Looking ahead, Kenya–Russia cooperation should not be framed through Cold War nostalgia or great power competition, but rather through a non-aligned, developmental lens. Strategic diversification in global partnerships offers Kenya agency to pursue technological innovation, food sovereignty, and energy independence. If grounded in shared interests and governed by strong institutions, a reimagined Kenya–Russia relationship could become a case study in 21st-century development diplomacy.

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Health Security at Risk: Assessing Infrastructure and Operational Gaps in Refugee Immunizations Services in Dadaab

By Michelle A. Sagala 'ndc'K, Michael Sitawa, Ph.D., Joyce Jebet, Ph.D

Abstract

Vaccination is vital to public health security, especially in refugee settings where health systems are often weak. This study examined health system barriers influencing vaccination uptake among caregivers of children aged 0–14 years in the Dadaab refugee complex, Kenya. A mixed-methods design was used, combining data from 380 survey respondents and qualitative inputs from key informant interviews and a focus group discussion. Findings revealed wide disparities in vaccine coverage across camps, Dagahaley (99.1%), Hagadera (65.0%), and Ifo (22.0%), attributed to inconsistent healthcare delivery, workforce shortages, and access barriers. Multivariate analysis showed that camp location and incomplete immunization histories significantly predicted low uptake. Qualitative data highlighted additional barriers, including language gaps, poor coordination, and mistrust. Despite vaccine availability, systemic inequities persist. Strengthening routine services, improving access, and fostering community engagement are essential for improving vaccine uptake and enhancing health security in refugee settings.

Introduction

Immunization is a critical public health intervention that is estimated to prevent four million deaths globally each year (WHO, n.d.). It serves as a vital aspect of primary healthcare, facilitating other essential health services and linking families and children with healthcare systems (Behera et al., 2022). Beyond the immediate health benefits, vaccination offers substantial economic and social returns, with an estimated \$44 gained for every dollar spent, contributing to lower medical costs, increased productivity, and improvements in education (Ozawa, 2016). Despite extensive progress in preventing vaccine-preventable diseases (VPDs) worldwide, significant obstacles remain, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where overall vaccination rates often fall below ideal targets. Communities affected by migration and displacement, such as refugees and migrants, are exceptionally vulnerable, typically exhibiting lower immunization rates and higher susceptibility to VPDs compared to host populations. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health security as the necessary actions to address and mitigate both reactive and proactive threats posed by serious public health events that could impact health across different regions and borders (WHO, n.d.). In humanitarian settings like refugee camps, managing vaccination programmes is paramount to achieving robust health security.

Kenya has historically been a significant recipient of forcibly displaced people from neighboring countries, including Somalia and South Sudan (UNHCR, 2019). As of January 2024, the country registered 714,137 refugees, with over 84% residing in camps. These refugee-hosting counties, including Garissa where Dadaab is located, are often underdeveloped, grappling with high levels of food insecurity, chronic malnutrition, poverty, limited livelihood opportunities, and inadequate access to basic services and infrastructure (UNHCR, 2019; World Bank, 2016).

The Dadaab refugee complex in Kenya, home to over 320,000 Somali refugees, is a critical and enduring health security flashpoint (KNBS, 2024). The complex comprises three main camps: Dagahaley, Ifo (specifically Ifo 2), and Hagadera. For nearly three decades, its care and maintenance strategy has relied heavily on UNHCR and partners, with sub-optimal County Government support (UNHCR, 2019). This protracted, underdeveloped setting, compounded by continuous refugee influx from low-vaccination Somalia and sub-optimal new arrival screening, significantly elevates the risk of rapid disease epidemics within overcrowded camps and the wider Garissa County (MSF, 2022; WHO, 2023). This context has already led to outbreaks of polio, cholera,



The expansive and ever-growing Dadaab Refugee Camps in Garissa County-Kenya (Photo Credit: Abiri Kenya)

and measles, posing a tangible threat of disease spillover and underscoring the urgent need for a shift towards sustainable, development-oriented programming (MSF, 2022; UN-Habitat, 2022; UNHCR, 2019).

Despite Kenya's constitutional mandate for universal health access and the goals of its Universal Health Coverage (UHC) programme, the reality in Dadaab falls significantly short (HERAF, 2025; WHO, 2025). Although Kenya's national immunization programme (KEPI) is integrated, vaccination efforts face severe systemic challenges, including the absence of a dedicated government system for refugee healthcare, critical resource limitations, persistent logistical barriers, and the transient nature of the refugee population (Jemutai et al., 2021; MSF, 2022; NTLD, 2022; UNHCR, 2019; WHO, 2022). The lingering impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these issues pandemic (Lupieri, 2021; McAteer et al., 2023).

These factors collectively result in significant gaps in immunization coverage, leading to recurrent outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases like measles, cholera, and polio, directly threatening both refugee and host communities (WHO, n.d.). This high disease burden within the camps carries severe repercussions: diverting crucial resources from Kenya's general population, posing a direct risk of disease spillover, and potentially fostering

social tensions and diplomatic strains (Larson et al., 2015; MOH Kenya, 2022; Tankwanchi et al., 2020; WHO, n.d.). Exacerbated by a heavy reliance on unpredictable donor funding and insufficient domestic health budget allocation, the situation leaves health security critically exposed and impedes broader national and global vaccination goals (Dzaba et al., 2024).

The theoretical optics for the study are primarily derived from the Global Health Justice Theory. This framework provides a critical lens by directly addressing ethical, social, and political global health inequalities. It fundamentally emphasizes the importance of equal access to healthcare resources and the minimization of health disparity differences, asserting the universal right to optimal health regardless of socio-economic or geographic determinants (Ruger, 2010).

Through these theoretical optics, the study frames the complex issues of vaccine delivery and health security in Dadaab not merely as operational or logistical challenges, but as profound matters of justice and human rights. Equity in Access is a key dimension of the theory since it underscores the principle of ensuring equity in the distribution of health resources. This directly informs the study's investigation into the poorly defined extent of under-vaccination among refugees and the significant disparities observed in vaccination coverage across

different Dadaab camps. It compels an examination of these structural inequities (Farmer et al., 2013; Gostin et al., 2018).

Human Rights and Universal Health Coverage (UHC) is another key dimension for the Global Health Justice positions the right to health as a fundamental human right, aligning with Article 43(1)(a) of the 2010 Kenyan Constitution, which mandates guaranteeing the highest attainable standard of health for all individuals, including refugees (Kickbusch & Holly, 2023). The theory advocates for the inclusion of refugees in national health goals, such as the UHC Program under the Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA).

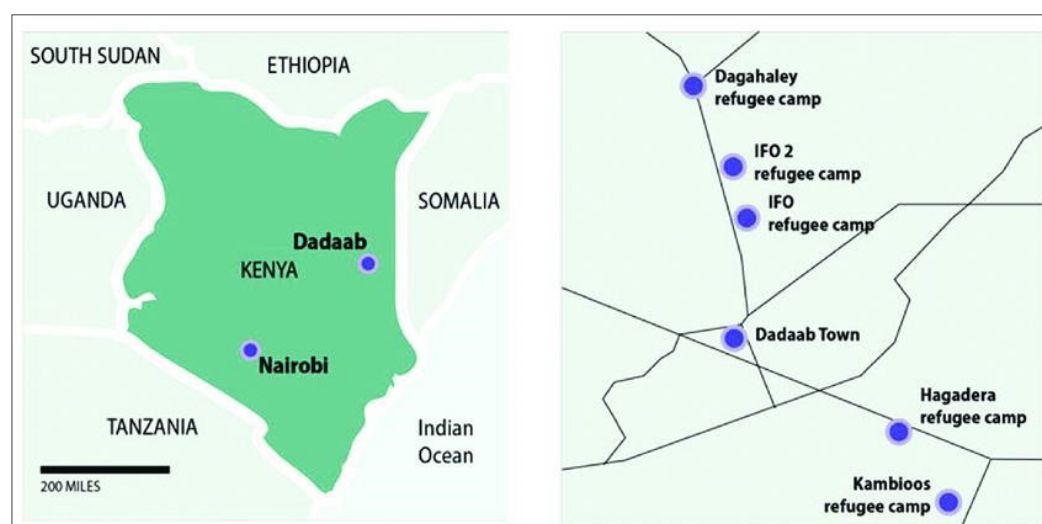
The framework seeks to hold governments, international organizations, and private enterprises accountable for their roles in perpetuating or reducing health inequities. It calls for “global solidarity” to address transnational health concerns like pandemics, (United Nations, 1948, United Nations, 1966). This optic is crucial for understanding the risk of disease spillover from camps into host communities and broader health security threats, framing them as shared responsibilities.

Global Health Justice specifically also focuses on eliminating barriers such as cost, distance, and inadequate infrastructure that hinder equitable healthcare provision (Crenshaw, 1991; GAVI, 2020; Marmot, 2005; Watts et al., 2018). This theoretical lens directs the study to investigate “health system barriers,” including frequent vaccine stock-outs, logistical challenges, understaffing, and inadequate cold chain storage, interpreting these

as systemic failures against the principle of equity and justice.

Materials and Methods

This study was conducted within the Dadaab refugee complex, focusing specifically on the Hagadera, Dagahaley, and Ifo camps, examining vaccination services and their impact on regional and national health security. The target population included refugee caregivers of children aged 0-14 years, healthcare providers, and policymakers. The research employed a mixed-methods approach specifically explanatory sequential research design. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires from a sample of 380 caregivers, supplemented by qualitative data obtained through four key informant interviews (KIIs) and one focus group discussion (FGD). The timeframe for the study was 2020-2024 in order to gain insights into the impact of the COVID19 pandemic on healthcare services and vaccination programmes. While the study provides an indepth exploration of Dadaab, its findings might not be generalizable to other refugee settings due to demographic, location, and infrastructure differences. Efforts were made to overcome limitations such as incomplete record-keeping and language barriers through trained research assistants and consistent methodologies. Data analysis combined descriptive and inferential statistics using SPSS v20 for quantitative data, and thematic analysis using NVivo v15 for qualitative data, allowing for triangulation of findings. Ethical considerations were paramount, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity to protect the vulnerable refugees.



Source:
(Research challenges in evaluating gender-based violence response services in a refugee camp,” by (McAlpine et al., 2020))

Figure 1: Study Setting

Results

The study engaged a total of 380 participants through surveys, achieving a high response rate of 98.7%. The majority of respondents were female (87%) and aged between 30-49 years (47.1%) or 18-29 years (44.7%), with a significant proportion having no formal education (68.9%). Family size also varied considerably among respondents. On average, each participant reported having five children (SD = 2.83), with the number of children ranging

from one to fifteen. The sample was distributed across the three Dadaab camps: Hagadera (41.3%), Dagahaley (29.5%), and Ifo (29.2%). Qualitative data were gathered through four KIs and one FGD.

Table 1 presents the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants interviewed in the survey.

Table 1: A summary of socio demographics characteristics of participants, (n=380)

	Respondent	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	49	12.89
	Female	331	87.11
Age bracket	18-29 years	170	44.74
	30-49 years	179	47.11
	50-64 years	25	6.58
	65 years and above	6	1.58
Education Level	Primary	101	26.58
	Secondary	16	4.12
	College	1	0.26
	No Education	262	68.95
Marital Status	Divorced	54	13.68
	Married	307	79.21
	Single	3	0.53
	Widowed/Widowed	25	6.58
Occupation	Jobless / No Occupation	150	38.68
	Housewife / Stay-at-home	104	26.32
	Casual Laborers	67	17.11
	Community Role	30	7.89
	Business / Self-Employment	24	6.32
	Skilled/Specific Jobs	9	2.37
Camp	Dagahaley Camp	112	29.47
	Hagdera Camp	157	41.32
	Ifo camp	111	29.21
Household Number of Children	1-3	128	33.68
	4-6	142	37.37
	7+	110	28.95

Source: Field data (2025)

Secondly, the study revealed that funding gaps significantly undermine health security in the Dadaab Refugee Complex by directly impacting vaccine availability, straining healthcare systems, and increasing the risk of disease outbreaks. The reliance on unpredictable external aid, particularly from donors like USAID, creates considerable uncertainty for sustained health service provision. The survey results show that vaccine unavailability was the primary reason for nonvaccination, reported by 45.5% (n=65) of unvaccinated respondents. This was particularly seen in Hagadera (61.82%) and Ifo (35.63%) camps. This quantitative finding directly reflects the supply chain issues and stock-outs highlighted qualitatively, which are linked to funding instability. The KII participants also confirmed that frequent stock outs affected their indicators, indicating a direct impact on measured vaccination coverage.

"We rely heavily on donor funding, but post-COVID-19, funding has become more unpredictable, affecting our vaccine stock levels... We get a substantial amount of funding from the US government... so yes, we are affected... we are working on ways of navigating that... but we are bound to make

some cost changes to continue services,"
- [KII participant 03, 2025].

Community members observed that vaccination campaigns are infrequent, often occurring with long intervals, sometimes up to a year, between different initiatives. These campaigns are commonly perceived as reactive measures triggered by disease outbreaks (such as COVID-19, measles, cholera, or chikungunya), rather than part of a proactive and sustained immunization strategy. The persistence of vaccine-preventable diseases like cholera (3,773 cases between 2022-2023) and a significant measles surge in 2024 (Dagahaley: 791 cases, Ifo: 267 cases) underscore these vulnerabilities despite immunization campaigns. This reactive approach contributes to inconsistent vaccine coverage and hinders the achievement of continuous immunization needed for robust health security.

Thirdly, between 2022 and 2024, overall vaccination rates generally improved, with most vaccines showing a 15%–50% increase in coverage. However, key stakeholders noted fluctuations, with overall coverage dropping from above 92% (2021-2023) to 88% in 2024, primarily attributed to challenges in target population calculations.

Table 2: Percentage Increase in Vaccination Rates between 2022 to 2024

Vaccine	Ifo Ward (%)	Hagadera Ward (%)	Dagahaley Ward (%)	Dadaab Refugee Camp Sub-County (%)
BCG	11.10%	59.70%	2.20%	23.10%
DPT/Hep+HiB1	13.60%	42.10%	-9.60%	20.80%
DPT/Hep+HiB3	-13.2%	-132.0%	-45.7%	-49.7%
Dropout Rate	(Improved)	(Improved)	(Improved)	(Improved)
OPV Birth Dose	0.40%	59.50%	2.20%	19.70%
OPV 1	6.40%	37.20%	-9.50%	15.90%
OPV 3	8.60%	54.70%	1.60%	25.50%
Measles & Rubella 1	6.10%	178.40%	13.90%	48.70%
Pneumococcal 1	13.60%	42.60%	-12.30%	18.90%
Pneumococcal 3	14.70%	55.30%	1.60%	29%

Vaccine	Ifo Ward (%)	Hagadera Ward (%)	Dagahaley Ward (%)	Dadaab Refugee Camp Sub-County (%)
Rota 1	1257.20%	139.70%	312.70%	338.70%
Rota 2	1322.50%	148.10%	483.10%	397.50%

Source: Field data (2025)

Although vaccination uptake is generally high, the continuous inflow of refugees from Somalia and population mobility in and out of the camps make it difficult to establish a stable target population for immunization efforts. Health managers struggle to determine accurate vaccination coverage rates, as they must rely on varying population estimates from the county government, UNHCR, and their own internal data sources. One Key Informant highlighted the impact of inconsistent population data:

“So we have two different types of population targets given. We have one given by the county and we have one given by UNHCR. ... Now we don’t know which population to use on calculating denominator... But this year we decided to use the county population now, but we just don’t know because in the first month, I think our MR two coverage is at 56% which is extremely low,”
- [KII participant 01, 2025].

Moreover, the transient nature of the refugee population presents a significant challenge to maintaining adequate vaccination coverage and achieving herd immunity. Between 2020 and 2024, the population across the three Dadaab camps increased by 18%, from 323,080 to 380,933. with Ifo ward recording the highest growth rate at 31%, indicating a substantial influx of new arrivals. This constant movement, combined with low immunization coverage in countries of origin such as

Somalia, elevates the risk of disease outbreaks within the already overcrowded camps. The continued presence of vaccine-preventable diseases—such as cholera (3,773 cases reported between 2022–2023) and a sharp rise in measles cases in 2024 (Dagahaley: 791 cases, Ifo: 267 cases)—highlights these vulnerabilities despite periodic immunization efforts.

Unregistered and underserved new arrivals further complicate vaccination efforts, as population estimates remain unreliable. Many individuals enter or leave the camps without being officially recorded, making it difficult to identify and vaccinate unregistered children. The frequent movement of families between Somalia and the camps increases the risk of importing vaccinepreventable diseases. Notably, reported polio cases in the camps have been linked to individuals arriving from areas with weak health systems, particularly in Somalia.

“There’s a lot of influx from Somalia... a lot of unregistered population... they just come in and leave... it’s difficult to get those children and link them to vaccination centers.”
- [KII Participant 01, 2025]

Moreover, instances of incompleteness in retrospective vaccination data posed limitations in verifying historical coverage trends. This made it challenging to accurately assess past performance in identifying long-term patterns or improvements. Similarly, the study revealed that there were potential gaps in the data entry into systems like the Kenya Health Information System (KHIS), which further limits the ability to get an accurate picture of the vaccination status and can restrict researchers from making necessary adjustments to the data. These therefore causes a significant challenge in linking unregistered populations to services and identifying reliable targets.

In addition, although non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are the primary healthcare providers, nearly 44.21% of respondents reported facing challenges in

“The frequent movement of families between Somalia and the camps increases the risk of importing vaccinepreventable diseases. Notably, reported polio cases in the camps have been linked to individuals arriving from areas with weak health systems, particularly in Somalia

accessing vaccination services. The most frequently cited issue by far was long queues (93.45% of those facing challenges). Qualitative data provided deeper insight into the systemic issues contributing to these long wait times. Key informants pointed to understaffing, a lack of fully trained personnel, and inadequate cold chain storage as critical problems.

One participant stated, *"There are only three health facilities in the entire camp, and they are overwhelmed. The few available staff are not fully trained as nurses, which further slows down service delivery"* - [KII participant 01, 2025].

Logistical challenges, particularly the daily transportation of vaccines to and from health facilities, were reported to compromise the cold chain and affect vaccine integrity, often resulting in stockouts. Health providers noted that vaccines must be delivered each morning and returned in the afternoon, disrupting consistent temperature control and undermining vaccine efficacy. This presents a significant logistical barrier, consistent with existing literature on infrastructure limitations in refugee settings.

"We have to ship these vaccines every day to the facilities and back in the afternoon. Yeah. So of course, that compromises our cold chain and the integrity of these vaccines" - [KII participant 01, 2025].

Multivariate analysis confirmed that geographic location significantly impacted vaccine uptake, with caregivers in Hagadera (AOR= 0.012, $P < 0.000$) and Ifo (AOR= 0.01, $P < 0.000$) camps being substantially less likely to be vaccinated compared to those in Dagahaley. This suggests inconsistencies in healthcare delivery across the camp system. Furthermore, caregivers whose children had not received all KEPI vaccines were significantly less likely to be vaccinated themselves (AOR = 0.046, $p = 0.009$), highlighting critical gaps in family-level immunization.

Finally, refugees in Dadaab consistently report high levels of trust in vaccines as a tool for disease prevention. Ifo Camp recorded a perfect mean trust score of 1.000, while Hagadera Camp had the lowest at 0.975. Despite this strong confidence, vaccination uptake remains suboptimal due to persistent systemic and operational weaknesses within the health system. Our statistical analysis revealed no significant association between vaccine trust and actual uptake (AOR = 0.06; 95% CI: 0.00–3820.28; $p = 0.62$), indicating that structural barriers undermine the influence of trust on vaccination behaviour. Furthermore, the observed variation in trust levels across the three camps was not statistically significant ($F(2,377) = 1.74$, $p = 0.1775$), suggesting the differences could be due to random variation rather than meaningful disparities, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Difference between camps based on trust in vaccines availability and cultural influences on vaccination

Determinant		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig
	Between Groups	0450	2	.0225	1.74	0.1775
Trust in Vaccine	Within Groups	4.889	377	.0130		
	Total	4.934	379	.0130		
Vaccine Readily available	Between Groups	0	2 377	0		
	Within Groups	0		0		
	Total	0	379			
Cultural influence on vaccination	Between Groups	108.33	2 377	54.16	37.90	0.0000
	Within Groups	538.71		1.429		
	Total	647.04	379	1.707		

Source: Field data (2025)

Qualitative insights show while refugees in Dadaab demonstrate high intrinsic trust in vaccines, qualitative insights reveal that this trust is gradually undermined by persistent operational and infrastructural deficiencies that compromise health security

Similarly, only 8.35% of vaccinated respondents cited trust in the health care system as their primary motivation factor, highlighting a crucial disconnect between general vaccine confidence and institutional trust. Instead,

interpersonal trust in healthcare workers (57.33% of caregivers sought their advice) and community health promoters is key to fostering vaccine uptake and countering misinformation.

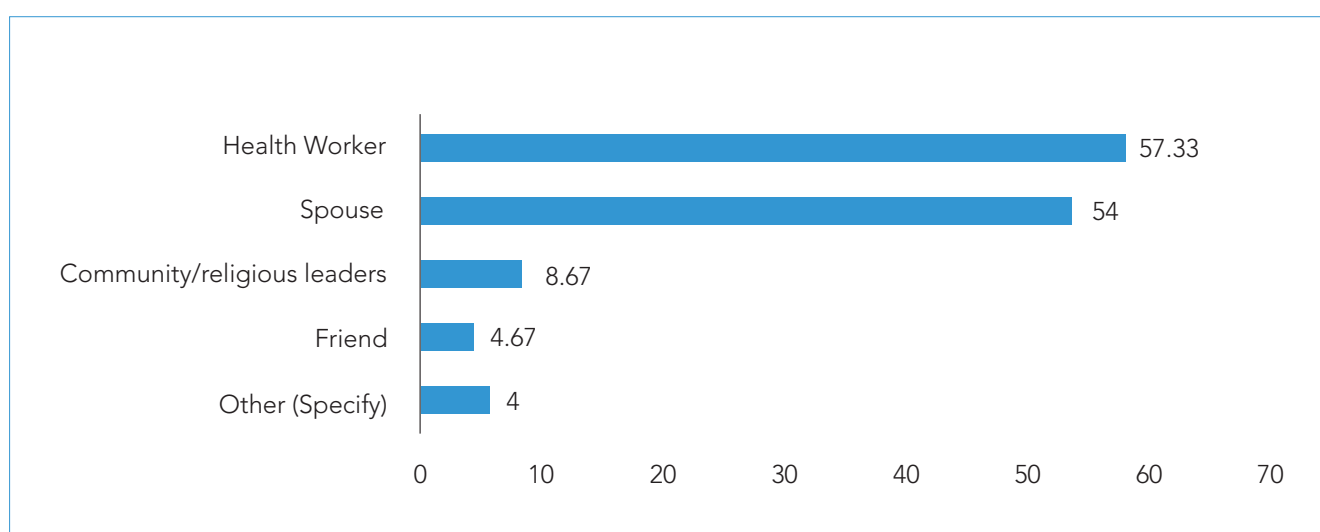


Figure 2: Sources of Consultation Before Vaccination Decisions in percentages (n=148)

Qualitative insights show while refugees in Dadaab demonstrate high intrinsic trust in vaccines, qualitative insights reveal that this trust is gradually undermined by persistent operational and infrastructural deficiencies that compromise health security. Caregivers noted that vaccination campaigns are irregular and largely reactive, typically launched in response to outbreaks like measles, cholera, or COVID-19, rather than being part of a proactive, continuous immunization strategy. This reactive model leads to inconsistent vaccine coverage and hampers the development of sustained immunity in the population.

As one participant explained:

"...there were a lot of sensitizations... health talks when they come for medications... using public address systems. Like during COVID-19, people were saying if you take the vaccine, you will not be able to produce."
- KII participant 04 (January 2025)

Additional concerns around service delivery, such as frequent vaccine stockouts, unreliable cold chain systems, and the use of undertrained, incentive-based staff, further weaken confidence in the system. Despite overall trust in vaccines, misinformation about specific vaccines like HPV and COVID-19 remains widespread. Caregivers also reported inadequate communication about potential side effects, leading to hesitancy or outright refusal of doses.

Discussion

The research uncovered significant disparities in vaccination uptake across the Dadaab camps, with Dagahaley demonstrating near-universal caregiver coverage (99.1%) and child vaccination (100%), while Ifo had the lowest rates (22.0% for caregivers, 80% for children) and Hagadera showed moderate uptake (65.0%). Multivariate analysis confirmed that individuals in Ifo (AOR = 0.01, $p < 0.000$) and Hagadera (AOR = 0.012, $p < 0.000$) were substantially less likely to be vaccinated

compared to those in Dagahaley. According to Ruger (2010), These disparities reflect profound structural inequities, directly violating the Global Health Justice Theory's call for equitable distribution of health resources and the removal of systemic barriers.

Farmer et al. (2013) argue that structural violence manifests when health systems are constrained by economic and geopolitical forces beyond the control of those most affected. A primary driver of these inequities is vaccine unavailability, reported by 45.5% of unvaccinated respondents, peaking at 61.82% in Hagadera. This is directly linked to donor-dependent supply chains vulnerable to post-COVID-19 fiscal contractions as also shown in literature discussed by Dzaba et al., (2024). Concerns raised by Health Rights Advocacy Forum (HERAF) highlighting overdependency on unpredictable donor funding was noted by key informants who raise concern that these dependence on external aid, particularly from major donors like USAID, creates immense uncertainty for sustained health service provision, often forcing "cost changes to continue services". This aligns with the concept of structural

violence, where health systems are constrained by economic and geopolitical forces beyond the control of those most affected as Gavi (2021) outlines.

Global Health Justice framework demands anticipatory and inclusive health strategies that prioritize structurally disadvantaged populations. However, contrary to this, the observation that vaccination campaigns are infrequent and often reactive, triggered only by outbreaks (e.g., COVID-19, measles, cholera, chikungunya), rather than proactive, sustained immunization strategies, exacerbates the population's vulnerability. The persistence of vaccine-preventable diseases like cholera (3,773 cases between 2022-2023) and a significant measles surge in 2024 (Dagahaley: 791 cases, Ifo: 267 cases). As Kickbusch et al. (2021) noted, to realize Global Health Justice, there is need for political will, adequate resources and a balanced geographical influence which Dadaab shows a failure in and national interest overshadow global solidarity.

The reliance on external funding also violates the principle of equal moral worth, where refugee populations should not receive second-tier health services due to their



Parents in Dadaab Refugee Camp take their child for measles and cholera vaccinations to prevent an outbreak within the camp (Photo Credit: Médecins Sans Frontières)

geopolitical status. This directly contradicts Kenya's Shirika Plan (Ministry of Interior and National Administration, 2025), which aims to transition humanitarian assistance into government-led, development-oriented responses by integrating refugees into national systems, including health. While Kenya's UHC under Vision 2030 prioritizes equity and access, the structural dependence on external funding for essential services like vaccination creates an automatic two-tiered system, leaving refugees outside the full benefits of UHC and compromising national health security goals. Gostin et al. (2020) further stresses that sustainable financing mechanisms are essential to safeguard global health equity and uphold the rights of vulnerable populations.

Despite an overall improvement in vaccination rates between 2022 and 2024, with most vaccines showing a 15%–50% increase in coverage, operational and structural challenges persist in achieving and sustaining high coverage. The decline in overall coverage from 92% (2021–2023) to 88% in 2024 is primarily attributed to inconsistencies in target population calculations contrary to the principle of proportionality central to global health justice (Ruger, 2010). Which is more of a systemic inefficiency. Literature affirms that in mobile, high-density refugee contexts, accurate population tracking is foundational to effective health programming (WHO, 2018; Gostin et al., 2020). In this case, UNHCR, and their own internal records, reflecting a lack of standardized, integrated data systems.

This directly undermines accurate planning and coverage assessments. Routine immunization rounds overlook unregistered and underserved new arrivals, raising the possibility of bringing in vaccine-preventable illnesses like the confirmed polio cases connected to arrivals from regions with weaker health systems bringing forth the need for integrated surveillance systems that are suited to humanitarian situations.

Furthermore, gaps in Kenya Health Information System (KHIS) data entry and retrospective record-keeping reflect systemic weaknesses that hamper long-term program evaluation and weaken real-time outbreak responses. Without resolving the “denominator problem,” and formally integrating refugees into national systems, routine immunization programs in humanitarian contexts like Dadaab will remain reactionary rather than preventive, leaving health security critically compromised as Gavi (2021) outlines.

Approximately 44.21% of respondents reported difficulties in accessing vaccination services, with long queues (93.45%) being the predominant challenge. Qualitative data indicates these long wait times are due to deeper systemic issues, including understaffing, insufficiently trained personnel, and overburdened health facilities. A critical infrastructure limitation is the logistical burden of daily vaccine transportation, which often compromises the cold chain and vaccine integrity, leading to stock-outs (Crenshaw, 1991; GAVI, 2020).

Furthermore, geographic disparities in service delivery evident between the camps suggests uneven resource allocation or operational challenges across the camps. The strong association found between child and caregiver vaccination status (caregivers whose children were not fully vaccinated were less likely to be vaccinated themselves) highlights household-level service gaps or knowledge barriers. These issues collectively represent “systemic failures against the principle of equity and justice” (Ruger, 2010).

Refugees in Dadaab consistently express high mean trust in vaccines as a tool for disease prevention, with Ifo Camp reporting a perfect score of 1.000. However, this intrinsic confidence does not consistently translate into optimal vaccination uptake. Though there is still a high level of public trust in vaccines, community members pointed out that systemic problems like irregular, outbreak-driven vaccination campaigns, frequent stock-outs, and undertrained personnel erode that trust. Hesitancy and unequal coverage are exacerbated by these operational flaws, ongoing disinformation, and carers' lack of awareness regarding vaccine side effects. According to Larson et al. (2015), interpersonal relationships, particularly those with frontline healthcare workers, often have a greater influence on vaccine trust than does faith in the larger health system. The fact that 57.33% of respondents consulted medical professionals prior to receiving a vaccination reflects this, highlighting the vital role that community-level involvement plays in maintaining vaccine confidence.

In conclusion, even though the Dadaab refugee camps have seen a general improvement in vaccine uptake, access to vaccine still is unequal because of the structural and systemic issues that are coupled in the camp. Although refugees report a high level of trust in vaccines, which is primarily based on personal relationships with frontline health workers, systemic barriers such as

reactive campaigns, logistical gaps, misinformation, and limited health system reliability undermine this trust, underscoring the need for structural reform and sustained, community-driven engagement.

As the Global Health Justice framework states, refugees have equal rights to quality healthcare, there is need for Kenya to entrench refugees in the UHC agenda through mechanisms such as Shirika plan, since this is not only for equity but also health security. This study therefore recommends that: there is need to integrate refugees into Kenya's UHC and Shirika Plan which will eliminate the two tiered healthcare system. In turn this would promote equitable access to routine immunization and align refugee health with Kenya's development agenda.

It is also key to establish a sustainable co financing model for refugees in order to reduce the volatile dependency on donor funding and hence therefore stabilize vaccine supply supporting both governments led health and system for refugees and host populations; Stakeholders need to harmonize population data and strengthen health information Systems such as KHIS, so that an accurate denominator can be used for effective immunization planning, resource allocation, and timely

Though there is still a high level of public trust in vaccines, community members pointed out that systemic problems like irregular, outbreak-driven vaccination campaigns, frequent stock-outs, and undertrained personnel erode that trust

response to disease outbreaks; in order to make vaccines readily available and not compromise the integrity of the vaccines, there is a pressing need to improve the way vaccines are stored and transported in the camps. Setting up permanent and solar powered facilities to store vaccines help vaccines remain potent and builds trust in the system therefore reducing missed opportunities and; more qualified health workers need to be recruited to serve in this high demand area, Dadaab, therefore reducing waiting times and also making experiences more respectful efficient and consistent.

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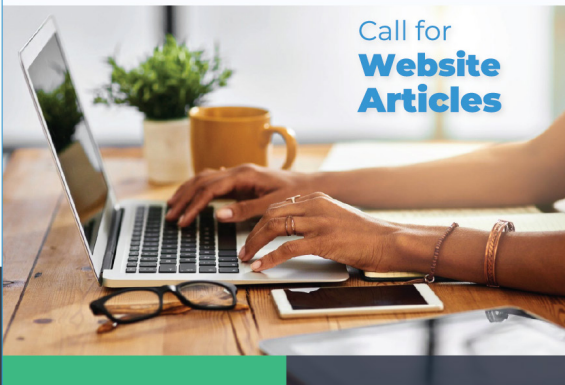
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