



Review Article

Türkiye in Africa: Assessing the Sustainability of Political, Economic, Humanitarian, and Environmental Initiatives on the Continent

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Abstract: In the twenty-first century, Türkiye has vigorously emerged as one of the most active and dynamic players on the African continent. Through the launch or strengthening of political, diplomatic, and military ties, the promotion of new trade routes, the provision of humanitarian and medical aid, and investments ranging from infrastructure to education, Ankara has substantially boosted its presence across Africa. However, little attention has generally been paid to the sustainability of Türkiye's influence along with its prolonged effects on African development. This article addresses this gap by examining Turkish-African relations through a multilayered sustainability framework encompassing the political, economic, social, and environmental dimensions of Türkiye's affirmation in Africa. By examining Türkiye's exchanges with the African continent in their different forms, and especially the political, economic, humanitarian, and environmental ones, the article argues that this engagement presents both opportunities and risks. While offering African states greater agency within an increasingly multipolar and fragmented international system, it could also give rise to new forms of dependency if economic and political asymmetries are not properly addressed. The article concludes by stressing that the future of Türkiye's influence in Africa will be determined less by its international ambitions than by its capacity to deliver sustainable, mutually beneficial development outcomes across all African countries where its presence is substantial.

Keywords: Türkiye, Africa, sustainability, South-South cooperation, soft power.

1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, Africa has become a key arena where international cooperation and competition intertwine. Over the last two decades, several global and regional powers have boosted their engagement with the African continent. Alongside *traditional* actors such as the United States and European states, new partners such as China, India, Russia, the Gulf Monarchies, and Türkiye have drastically transformed the continent's geopolitical arena by entering it. Among them, Türkiye is regarded as one of the most remarkable cases of diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian expansion in Africa. The magnitude of Ankara's enhanced engagement with this region since the early 2000s is well represented by the opening of several new embassies all across the continent,

the expansion of the activities carried out by governmental agencies, private companies, and civil society organizations, as well as the establishment of new routes operated by Turkish Airlines, Türkiye's most prominent flying company, which allow for the continuous exchange between Anatolia and most of African territory (Özkan, 2016).

Türkiye's growing presence in Africa is a direct consequence of the wider transformation in the country's foreign policy grand strategy since the emergence of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, in Turkish), or AKP, in the early 2000s. Under the AKP, in fact, Türkiye has consistently worked to diversify its international partnerships, positioning the country as a respected actor within the Global South, with some African regions, such as North Africa and the Horn of Africa, as cornerstones of this long-term vision.

The existing literature has largely examined Türkiye's engagement with Africa from three major standpoints. One of these, briefly mentioned above, is that of global geopolitical strategic power competition, according to which Ankara is seeking greater influence in Africa to advance its power and international prestige (Yeşiltaş & Balcı, 2013). Another standpoint is that of economic development, according to which the creation of new trade routes, investment opportunities, and market diversification are among the leading principles behind Türkiye's active presence in Africa (Öniş & Kutlay, 2020). Finally, a third standpoint examines Türkiye's activities through the lens of South-South cooperation, emphasising narratives of solidarity and reciprocal respect (Mawdsley, 2019).

Although each of these approaches has generated useful insights upon analysing Türkiye's rising influence in Africa, they often overlook a key question: how *sustainable* is that influence? While most studies focus on political, economic, military, and strategic-related outcomes, less attention is generally paid to the sustainability implications of Türkiye's engagement in the region. Yet sustainability has indeed become a core concept in international relations and development studies, as it provides a useful system for assessing whether external partnerships actively support long-term and just development. This article precisely argues that sustainability offers a salient standpoint for assessing Turkish-African relations in the twenty-first century. Instead of limiting the concept of sustainability to environmental and climate concerns, the article adopts a multidimensional, multidisciplinary approach which encompasses economic feasibility, political stability, social inclusion, and environmental accountability. From this perspective, the assessment of the sustainability of Turkish influence in Africa is rooted not only in its competence to expand geographically but also in its contribution to long-term positive outcomes that directly strengthen African agency.

2. Türkiye, Africa, and sustainable development

Even before the Turkish reorientation of foreign policy towards the African continent reached the levels witnessed since the early 2000s, relevant relations with several African states existed. In the years following the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, and especially throughout the Cold War decades, however, Africa occupied a rather marginal position on the Turkish foreign policy agenda (Özkan, 2010). The adoption of the 1998 Africa Action Plan (also known as the Action Plan for Opening to Africa) constitutes a turning point in this regard. This document is generally considered the first real milestone of Türkiye's Africa policy. However, it was with the emergence of the AKP government in 2002 that the implementation of this strategy truly gained momentum. Throughout this period, policymakers increasingly viewed Africa as both an economic opportunity and a tactical arena in which Türkiye could expand its international influence (Akgün & Özkan, 2011). The concept of strategic depth, introduced to the policy tables of Turkish policymakers by Turkish politician Ahmet Davutoğlu, affirmed

the importance of multidimensional diplomacy and assertive engagement beyond the more traditional Euro-Atlantic orientation that Türkiye maintained throughout the Cold War. According to this vision, Africa represented a region where Ankara could nurture new partnerships while strengthening its stance as a leading global actor (Davutoğlu, 2008).

The rapidly growing economic drive linking Türkiye to several African states has been analysed through various lenses, including trade volumes and investments, particularly in the construction and infrastructure sectors (Öniş & Kutlay, 2020). Another central theme is soft power and humanitarian diplomacy in their different forms. Several scholars have thoroughly analysed Ankara's use of, for instance, health diplomacy, the implementation of educational programs, and cooperation and development projects carried out under the Turkish flag across Africa (Bilgin & Bilgiç, 2011). A third current of analysis examines security cooperation, highlighting Türkiye's growing role in military training, defence industry exports, and security agreements with several African states, especially in the Horn of Africa, where Ankara's military presence is particularly solid (Donelli, 2021). Finally, a fourth cluster of literature analyses Türkiye's engagement in Africa through South-South cooperation and rhetoric, underscoring Turkish and African leaders' narrative rooted in equality, solidarity, and non-colonial means, thereby distinguishing the country from Western partners by presenting itself and its policies as partnership-oriented rather than patronising (Mawdsley, 2019). Despite these valuable contributions, the literature centred on Türkiye's energetic and perpetually shifting engagement with the African continent remains incomplete, particularly because insufficient attention has been paid in recent years to the systematic assessment of whether this engagement will translate into sustainable development outcomes.

Sustainable development is commonly associated with the definition provided by the 1987 United Nations Brundtland Report, also known as *Our Common Future*. Among the most remarkable innovations introduced by the Report is the concept of multilateralism and interdependence of nations on the path to sustainable development, defined as “development that meets present needs without undermining the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 54). Although initially associated primarily with climate- and environment-related concerns, the conceptualization and application of sustainability have evolved into a multidimensional form that encompasses most spheres of human activity, including the political, economic, social, and ecological dimensions (Sachs, 2015). The adoption and gradual implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) since 2015 have further strengthened this multidimensional understanding of sustainable development by emphasising the interconnections among economic growth, governance, environmental protection, and social justice through 17 specific global goals (United Nations, n.d.). Despite the growing body of literature, sustainability continues to be largely absent from analyses of Turkish-African relations. Evaluation of Turkish engagement through a sustainability framework, therefore, offers an opportunity to bridge two important clusters of literature. Given the multidimensional nature of sustainable development, this article adopts a multidisciplinary approach to analyse Türkiye's engagement and its sustainability dimension in Africa, integrating political, economic, social, and environmental aspects.

3. Political Sustainability and Security Partnerships in Türkiye-Africa Relations

The political dimension of sustainability concerns how external engagement contributes to governance capacity, institutional solidity, and long-term political stability in a given country or region. In the case of Turkish-African political relations, a useful way to assess sustainability is to examine Ankara's diplomatic interaction at the state

and regional levels, particularly in support of governance and security agreements. One of the most apparent aspects of Türkiye's African policy has been its unprecedented diplomatic expansion on the continent. Until the early 2000s, in fact, Ankara could rely on a very limited diplomatic presence in Africa. In the last quarter of the century, the number of embassies and consulates across Africa flying the Turkish flag has steadily increased, demonstrating the country's goal of institutionalizing and consolidating political relations through regular diplomatic contacts with its African counterparts.

As further evidence of Türkiye's African commitment in the New Millennium, the Türkiye-Africa Partnership Summits, launched in 2008, were the first in a series of high-level meetings between Turkish and African leaders, experts, and decision-makers to explore strategic cooperation across sectors, including security, trade and investment, infrastructure, education, and the strengthening of local health systems (African Union, 2024). The first of these Summits took place in Istanbul in 2008 and was attended by 49 African nations, plus 11 international and regional organizations. After that, another Summit was held in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, in 2014, followed by another in Istanbul in 2021. The next Türkiye-Africa Partnership Summit is expected to take place in Libya in 2026, underscoring Libya's importance to Türkiye's long-term vision and presence on the continent's northern shore. The establishment of a continuous dialogue and institutionalized diplomatic exchange between Türkiye and African states encourages and underpins coordination and long-term planning between all actors involved in these dialogues.

Another important entity worth mentioning is the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), a Turkish institution whose main purpose is to implement development projects in areas as diverse as education, health care, public administration, agriculture, and many more across several African states. Most initiatives carried out by TİKA are framed and widely acknowledged as efforts to directly strengthen local capacities and reproducibility rather than to create dependence on external forces and organizations. From a purely sustainability perspective, however, a key question arises: to what extent do these projects deliver to sustainability-oriented governance and institutional development?

By definition, sustainable governance occurs when public institutions are fully able to provide services, manage resources, and react effectively to social challenges without substantial external support. In this regard, contrasting opinions arise when looking at the Türkiye-Africa case. On the one hand, worries over the potential personalization of cross-state political relationships are widespread among observers. Some scholars, in fact, point out that Türkiye's foreign policy frequently relies on strong ties among political elites, a factor that can generate vulnerabilities during leadership successions or crises (Öniş & Kutlay, 2020). From this perspective, partnerships built on elite networks and personal acquaintances may yield short-term political benefits but usually lack the institutional depth necessary for long-term political cooperation.

Another paramount topic in analyzing Türkiye's engagement in Africa is military and security cooperation. Since the early 2000s, and with greater emphasis in recent years, Ankara has massively expanded its defense cooperation agreements with several African states, thereby asserting strategic influence across entire regions of Africa. Through the recent signing of more than twenty military training cooperation deals across Africa and the establishment of two crucial military arrangements in Libya and Somalia, military ties with Sahelian countries such as Niger, Mali, and Nigeria are being tested further to increase Ankara's military presence on the continent and are expected to be joined by more agreements in the years to come (Jones, 2026). While these developments clearly play a role in Türkiye's quest for greater strategic influence in Africa, often acting as an alternative to

Russian or Chinese leverage, supporters of this approach emphasize the necessary nature of these military partnerships to strengthen African states' capacity to meet challenges as diverse as terrorism, piracy, insurgency, and international organized crime networks. From this perspective, external assistance to reinforce domestic capacity to address such challenges self-sufficiently is not exclusively beneficial but also necessary. On the other hand, security arrangements can sometimes have unintended consequences. While military assistance is an important step toward bolstering state institutions, it may intensify authoritarian tendencies or contribute to the accumulation of power in the hands of a few people. In other words, the sustainability of security cooperation is tightly tied to its incorporation within broader frameworks of democratic administration and institutional transparency; the absence or weakness of such integration often results in adverse consequences.

It is evident that political sustainability, in the forms of diplomatic dynamism and security cooperation, needs a balance between collaboration and autonomy. While Türkiye's vigorous engagement in Africa can sustain institutional resilience by supporting local governance capacities and encouraging political development, if the relationship becomes excessively dependent on external support or personalized political connections, its durability may be compromised at its very roots.

4. Economic engagement as the foundation of Türkiye's presence in Africa

Since the early 2000s, economic exchange between Türkiye and an increasing number of African countries has skyrocketed, making economic cooperation one of the most tangible and politically significant dimensions of Türkiye-Africa relations. With a trade volume of around \$1.35 billion in 2003, the volume increased over seven-fold to \$12.4 billion in 2023, twenty years later, with key partners scattered across the continent, from Egypt, Algeria, and Libya to Nigeria and South Africa (Parens & Plichta, 2025). From a sustainability standpoint, however, the key question is not simply whether trade volume has increased, but whether this increase translates into long-term, structural development. Compared to other external actors interested in increasing their economic weight in Africa, such as China, Russia, the United States, or the European Union, Türkiye's approach is much more grounded in neutrality, entrepreneurship, and a win-win approach to maximize mutual benefit.

One of the most substantial contributions of Turkish economic engagement in Africa has been the large volume of investments in connectivity. An outstanding example is the rapid expansion of Turkish Airlines' routes across Africa, along with several logistics agreements and infrastructure investments, which have substantially boosted connectivity between African cities and global markets, facilitating business exchanges and encouraging tourism and investment (Koné, 2026). Dynamism in the infrastructure and construction sectors, in fact, is another pole star of Türkiye's economic engagement in Africa. Turkish funds and construction firms have been involved in financing and building major infrastructure projects, including airports, railways, roads, housing, and hospitals. As of 2026, Turkish construction companies have completed more than 2,000 infrastructure projects across Africa, with a total value exceeding \$100 billion (Africa Defense Forum, 2026). Nevertheless, it is clear that infrastructure projects only yield sustainable outcomes when aligned to build local capacity. Conversely, when these massive projects rely too much on external expertise and resources, their long-term positive impact is likely to be limited.

An important issue to address when examining Türkiye's trade relations with Africa is economic diversification. Many African economies, in fact, are heavily dependent on raw-material exports, a situation that inevitably leaves entire communities or countries vulnerable to external shocks that affect supply chains. Sustainable devel-

opment requires a switch towards higher-value activities and industrial production, which would drastically reduce dependence on raw materials. Turkish investment in the manufacturing sectors, particularly in countries such as Ethiopia, has the potential to contribute directly to this process. Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, Türkiye established itself as one of the most significant foreign investors in Ethiopia. Turkish companies set up production facilities, particularly in the textile and light industry sectors, contributing towards job creation and export-oriented production. In terms of economic sustainability, Ethiopia exemplifies both the prospects and the limitations associated with Turkish investment. Such commitment in the manufacturing sector has stimulated industrial diversification and provided employment opportunities for thousands of workers; these activities fit with increased development goals centred on structural transformation (Avdaliani, 2026). However, the scale of such investment remains relatively modest compared with the country's broader development needs.

Finally, the sustainability of Türkiye's commitment must also be assessed in the light of the country's domestic financial circumstances. Economic crises, inflationary effects, and currency volatility have periodically affected the Turkish economy over the past decade. These internal obstacles inevitably raise concerns and inquiries about the long-term consistency of Türkiye's commitments abroad, particularly since sustainable partnerships require not only beneficiaries' capacity but also external actors' capacity to maintain them over time. Taken together, these considerations suggest that Türkiye's economic engagement possesses considerable potential for development. Investments in connectivity, infrastructure, and the manufacturing sector yield notable prospects for growth and diversification. However, the sustainability of these benefits depends on the extent to which they contribute to the development of local capacities, technological upgrading, and structural transformation, rather than to the creation of new forms of dependence on Turkish capital and expertise.

5. Social sustainability, soft power, and cultural diplomacy

The concept of social sustainability emphasizes the importance of social cohesion, inclusion, and long-term social relationships. Unlike economic transactions or political agreements, socially sustainable partnerships are based on trust, cultural understanding, and lasting interpersonal bonds. In this regard, Türkiye's engagement in Africa is characterized by the extensive use of soft power tools. Joseph Nye's conceptualization of soft power focuses on an external power's ability to influence preferences in a given country or community through attraction, very much based on reputation rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). Türkiye's policy towards Africa has increasingly been based on activities such as educational collaborations and the bestowal of scholarships for international students; the provision of humanitarian aid in the form of health diplomacy; and cultural diplomacy, which is commonly tied to religious engagement, for instance, through the building of mosques all over the Muslim world, all mechanisms that have the potential to generate influence and legitimacy abroad.

Education occupies a central place within this strategy. Turkish scholarship programs have enabled thousands of African students to pursue higher education in Türkiye, simultaneously supporting the development of human capital whilst also encouraging long-term interpersonal networks between Turkish and African societies. Cooperation in education can be considered a remarkably sustainable form of influence, as its effects are more likely to endure over time across generations. Students who study abroad often develop professional relationships, language skills, and cultural familiarity that keep shaping later interactions. Such networks contribute to the formation of transnational communities that facilitate economic, political, and cultural cooperation. The role of educational institutions affiliated with Turkish organizations has also been outstanding in this sense. Schools and

universities supported by Turkish actors operate in several African countries and contribute to achieving wider educational development objectives. Even though discussions persist over the political consequences of such institutions, their contribution to access to education and skills development is unquestionable.

Unlike purely strategic forms of engagement, humanitarian diplomacy derives its legitimacy from its connection to universal values such as sympathy and human dignity. This dimension of Turkish foreign policy has often been presented as evidence of an alternative approach to international cooperation, based also on moral responsibility and human security, rather than on strategic and opportunistic goals alone. Cultural diplomacy is another factor that further bolsters social sustainability. Turkish television series, cultural programmes and media products have gained popularity in various African countries. Cross-cultural communication facilitates mutual understanding and creates venues for dialogue between societies. In an ever-more-connected world, such interactions push towards the development of shared cultural references and perceptions. Furthermore, religion also plays a complex role in Turkish-African relations. Türkiye's identity as a predominantly Muslim country creates chances for engagement in areas where Islam is a significant social and cultural force. For this reason, religious institutions and faith-based organizations have been heavily involved in schooling, humanitarian and community development activities.

Nevertheless, social sustainability demands reciprocity. To be sustainable, cultural relations cannot be based solely on one-way influence. Partnerships that leave room for discussion and bidirectional learning are more likely to establish enduring legitimacy than those perceived as tools for mere cultural projection or political influence. Furthermore, soft power remains inherently fragile. Public perceptions may change rapidly in response to political developments, economic crises, or political disagreements. Sustaining social sustainability, therefore, requires consistency, credibility, and respect for local cultures and priorities. Overall, Türkiye's emphasis on education, humanitarianism, and cultural engagement represents one of the most distinctive features of its African policy. These instruments contribute to socially sustainable forms of influence, encouraging long-term relationships that go past immediate political or economic interests.

6. The environmental dimension of Türkiye's African policy

Environmental protection has received relatively little attention in debates on relations between Türkiye and Africa. Nevertheless, it has taken on growing importance as climate change, environmental degradation, and sustainable development have become central issues on global governance agendas. Africa is among the region's most vulnerable to climate change, despite making a relatively modest contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions. Rising temperatures, changes in rainfall patterns, desertification, water scarcity, and extreme weather events constitute major challenges to economic development and social stability (IPCC, 2023). Consequently, external partnerships must increasingly be assessed for their environmental effects.

Türkiye's growing involvement in infrastructure construction, as mentioned earlier, must also be carefully assessed from an environmental perspective. Investment in infrastructure can help achieve sustained long-term development by improving resource efficiency, strengthening climate resilience, and facilitating sustainable urbanization. At the same time, large-scale construction projects can impose ecological strain when environmental elements are not taken into consideration.

The sustainability of Turkish infrastructure projects, therefore, depends on the combination of ecological assessments, regulatory supervision, and long-term planning. Roads, airports, and industrial facilities can add

value to development, but they must be designed to minimize environmental disruption and support climate adaptation.

Agriculture represents another important area of cooperation. Several African countries have attempted to improve agricultural productivity through technological modernization, irrigation systems, and upgraded resource management. Türkiye possesses considerable experience in agricultural development and water management, creating opportunities for knowledge transfer and technical cooperation. Yet farm expansion also involves environmental risks. Unsustainable land-use practices can result in soil degradation, biodiversity loss, and water scarcity. Environmentally sustainable agricultural cooperation, therefore, demands the coordination of productivity objectives with nature conservation.

The transition toward renewable energy presents perhaps the most promising area for future Turkish-African cooperation. Many African countries have substantial solar and wind energy potential, while Türkiye has developed increasingly strong capabilities in sustainable energy technologies. Collaborative initiatives in this sector could simultaneously support economic development, energy security, and climate mitigation, while strengthening the Turkish-African axis in ways that benefit not only the countries directly involved. Environmental protection also has important geostrategic consequences. As international climate policies become increasingly influential, external actors will be evaluated not only on their economic contributions but also on their environmental performance. Partnerships perceived as environmentally responsible are likely to enjoy greater legitimacy within both domestic and international arenas. At present, however, environmental aspects persist relatively underdeveloped within Turkish-African relations. While economic and political cooperation has expanded rapidly, green development has not yet become a central pillar of engagement. Future cooperation strategies will need to place greater emphasis on climate resilience, renewable energy, and environmental governance to correspond with wider sustainable development objectives.

7. Conclusion

Türkiye's growing presence in Africa is one of the most significant developments in international relations of the twenty-first century. Through a combination of diplomatic expansion, economic cooperation, humanitarian assistance, and security agreements, Ankara has established itself as one of the most influential actors across the continent. This article has examined relations between Türkiye and Africa through a multidimensional sustainability framework encompassing economic, political, social, and environmental aspects. This approach goes beyond narrow geopolitical interpretations and focuses on the long-term development consequences of external engagement. The review reveals that Türkiye has succeeded in establishing a distinctive model of cooperation. Unlike many traditional powers, the country emphasizes a narrative centered on cooperation, mutual benefit, and respect for sovereignty. Its engagement combines commercial interests with humanitarian aid, learning exchanges, and cultural diplomacy, creating a many-sided presence that goes beyond purely strategic concerns.

From an economic perspective, Turkish investment in infrastructure, transport, and the manufacturing sector has created significant opportunities for development. Politically, diplomatic expansion and development cooperation have strengthened bilateral relations and contributed to institutional capacity-building. On a social level, educational programmes and humanitarian initiatives have generated considerable goodwill and fostered ties among people. From an environmental perspective, however, the relationship remains underdeveloped, and greater attention will be needed in the future to climate resilience, together with green development.

At the same time, major complications persist. Sustainable partnerships require local ownership, institutional autonomy, and long-term organizational strengthening. Economic cooperation must avoid creating new forms of dependency. Political commitment must fortify institutions rather than merely fostering relations between elites. Social influence must be based on reciprocity rather than cultural projection. And environmental cooperation must go beyond rhetoric and handle the urgent realities of climate change.

To conclude, the sustainability of Türkiye's influence in Africa does not depend on the scale of its presence, but on the quality of its partnerships. Influence becomes sustainable when it contributes to local development, institutional resilience, and social well-being. Conversely, if cooperation perpetuates asymmetrical dependencies and overlooks environmental issues, its long-term legitimacy could be undermined. As Africa's international partnerships continue to diversify in an increasingly multipolar world, Türkiye occupies a potentially significant position as a middle power, presenting alternatives to classic models of engagement. Realizing this potential will rely on the ability of both Turkish and African actors to build relationships based on genuine partnership, shared responsibility, and sustainable development.

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