



GLOBAL TRENDS

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FIVE-YEAR REGIONAL OUTLOOK

Sub-Saharan Africa

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By 2025, Sub-Saharan Africa probably will have begun to reinvigorate the momentum of its upward trajectory, which was abruptly derailed by the disruptive social and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the next five years, Sub-Saharan Africa's population and urbanization growth rate will continue to be the highest worldwide, creating business and democratic openings for an increasingly connected and youthful population. However, several trends already affecting some parts of the region probably will continue or sharpen, including unstable commodities prices and stalled regional economic integration; poor service delivery and endemic corruption; the rising stresses of extreme weather events; and increasing insecurity because of terrorism, insurgency, and sectarian violence. At the same time, Africa's demographic growth, supply of natural resources, and potential collective political and economic leverage will drive its increasing engagement and significance in the international system.

The judgments in this paper were made by the National Intelligence Council in consultation with outside experts and Intelligence Community analysts and do not reflect official US Government policy or the coordinated position of the US Intelligence Community.

KEY TRENDS

Slow Economic Recovery Following Rapid Downturn

Before the COVID-19 pandemic began, the economic outlook was promising for many Sub-Saharan countries. Africa was home to some of the world's fastest-growing economies, with new technology and outside investment invigorating the business environment. However, worldwide efforts to contain the COVID-19 virus have devastated economies across Sub-Saharan Africa, leading to the region's first recession in 25 years. Without outside assistance, Sub-Saharan Africa is at risk for a permanent loss of productive capacity because of the region's constrained fiscal environment, dependence on commodity exports, and risk of debt distress.

- **Economic Recovery Likely To Lag.** The IMF estimates that COVID-19 will cost up to 20 million jobs in Africa in the formal and informal sectors, and Africa's remittances were expected to fall by 9 percent in 2020, to \$44 billion, because of the pandemic, with a further decline of 5.8 percent projected in 2021. Many African countries have taken innovative steps to try to facilitate the flow of remittances—recognizing that one in five people in Africa sends or receives international remittances—but these efforts probably will not be sufficient to account for the sharp drop. In November 2020, Zambia became the first African country to officially default on its Eurobond debt, potentially setting a precedent for other heavily indebted economies—including Angola, Djibouti, and Kenya—if they do not receive additional assistance or concessions.
- **Making Progress Towards Integration.** Despite these setbacks, Africa's collective stature in the global economy is likely to increase in the coming years as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) comes into effect early this year. The AfCFTA presents an opportunity for the region's governments to better navigate the near-term effects that COVID-19–

related travel restrictions and uncertainty in tariffs and exchange rates have had on the business environment. In 2020, the Africa Centers for Disease Control demonstrated the effectiveness of collective approaches to Africa-wide issues by facilitating testing and capacity building throughout the continent.

AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)—signed by all but one member of the continent-wide African Union and entered into force in May 2019—is expected to promote free trade, industrialization, and diversification as well as liberalize the movement of the continent's 1.3 billion people into a multitrillion-dollar economic bloc. The IMF predicts that the AfCFTA will improve African countries' standing in the Global Competitiveness Index and enhance their resilience to negative global shocks.

- **Technology Access Growing Despite Structural Impediments.** Access to technology is likely to continue to increase during the next five years, and innovative solutions implemented during the pandemic, such as the expansion of mobile banking, probably will continue to lower barriers to entry. Although funding shortages, uneven access to electricity, and low Internet penetration will continue to constrain access to advanced technology, some countries with technology centers and nascent software development communities—such as Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa—may increasingly leverage resources to identify creative solutions. At the same time, many governments may increase controls on Internet access

and digital information, or they may use surveillance technology to try to suppress political dissent.

Rising Calls for Government Accountability

Despite overall strong economic performance during the past 20 years, many Sub-Saharan African governments have failed to translate economic growth into meaningful outcomes for their citizens, resulting in greater perceptions of relative inequality among increasingly interconnected populations. African publics have taken to the streets in record numbers in the past decade to demand greater government accountability and responsiveness, leading some regimes to employ blunt tools for repression and control alongside increasingly sophisticated Internet suppression. The continent's sharp economic downturn because of the pandemic is likely to amplify growing tension between leaders and publics, a trend that may intensify through 2025.

- **Corruption Fueling Mistrust.** Corruption continues to undermine Africa's economic, political, and social development and fuels mistrust in government. In a survey taken between 2016 and 2018, 55 percent of Africans polled thought corruption had increased in the past year, and 59 percent thought their governments were doing a poor job addressing the problem. Some academic research suggests that citizens who are most accustomed to paying bribes are more likely to take part in anti-corruption protests.
- **Political Activism Rising.** As African publics become increasingly urbanized and better connected, they are likely to engage in more protest activity during the next five years, driven in large part by a greater demand for government services and accountability for increasing income inequality and lack of opportunity. African countries have a long history of street protests driven by deep-seated frustration with the political and economic status quo. During the past decade, mass uprisings in Africa have accounted for one in three

nonviolent campaigns aimed at toppling dictatorships around the world, almost twice as many as in Asia.

- **Government Increasing Authoritarian Responses.**

The increasing public pressure on governments is driving a new round of circumvented term limits, manipulated elections, and suppression of independent media and civil society. These trends probably will be amplified in the next two years as the pandemic provides some leaders with additional pretexts to enact harsher security measures and regulations. For example, governments have used COVID-19-related measures as an excuse to suppress the opposition in Guinea and Zimbabwe and silence journalists in Nigeria, Rwanda, and Somalia.

Poor Humanitarian Outlook, Widening Social Gaps

Improvements across an array of development indicators in Sub-Saharan Africa are leveling off or in some cases reversing. Many governments now consistently struggle to provide access to safe water, food, electricity, and other basic needs. Although the number of lives lost to COVID-19 so far appears to be lower in Africa than in other parts of the world, the economic effect of the pandemic, coupled with growing food insecurity in parts of the continent, is likely to deepen the region's already large humanitarian burden and lead to greater migration within and out of Africa.

- **Growing Food Insecurity.** Undernourishment has been on the rise for at least five years, with about one in four people in Sub-Saharan Africa undernourished as of December 2020, according to the WHO. More than 110 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance because of conflict, climate, or economic shocks, according to the UN's Global Humanitarian appeal for 2021. Levels of food insecurity are almost certain to increase in the next year or two because of the compounding effects of the COVID-19-related economic downturn, logistic issues resulting from travel restrictions, rising food

prices, climate shocks, and uncertainty surrounding donor commitments to humanitarian assistance. Such assistance could also decrease because wealthier governments, which have provided the bulk of humanitarian aid in the past, may find it difficult to contribute at the same or increasing levels because of domestic pressures.

- **Health Improvements at Risk.** The COVID-19 pandemic has diverted resources, attention, and capacity from other diseases in Africa, such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis, as well as from vaccination campaigns—potentially resulting in increased deaths. A WHO study suggested that severe disruptions from COVID-19 to antimalarial campaigns could lead to a doubling of annual malaria deaths, up to 800,000. UNAIDS projected in November 2020 that the pandemic's impact on global HIV response could cause more than 300,000 new HIV/AIDS infections and up to 148,000 more HIV/AIDS-related deaths in 2020-21.
- **Setbacks in Education, Particularly for Girls.** African countries are unlikely to attain the UN's Sustainable Development Goal of universal primary and secondary education by 2030 because of stagnated funding, lack of trained teachers, and pandemic-related complications. Girls probably will be slower than boys to return to the classroom as schools reopen across the region, judging from data on school attendance following the West Africa Ebola crisis. Studies suggest that a reduction in girls' school attendance might lead to higher birthrates and a decrease in women's participation in the labor market.
- **Continuing Environmental Changes.** More frequent severe weather coupled with other environmental stressors, such as poor land management and urban planning, could lead to increased instability, conflict, and migration. Although data is limited, African economies dependent on agricultural outputs may be among the most vulnerable to further climate change,

in part because poverty and poor governance tend to hinder a country's adaptive capacity. The inability of governments to respond to such stresses in some cases can undermine their legitimacy, causing parts of the population to migrate or join organizations, such as militias and insurgent or terrorist groups.

Security Issues Likely To Expand

The economic, social, and political implications of the pandemic are likely to exacerbate already complex and varied security dynamics across the continent. Increased regional migration and resulting xenophobia, as well as government crackdowns on opposition parties, may also contribute to insecurity. Several transnational and regional issues are likely to persist during the next five years.

- **Terrorism on the Rise.** Terrorist groups are poised to expand throughout Africa, especially in West Africa, because the groups have become more integrated into communities and have consistently thwarted regional containment efforts. Lacking the resources to address these transnational threats with traditional security services, governments have increased their use of local militias and private military contractors, which suffer from severe capacity, commitment, and coordination challenges. This counterterrorism approach has led to an increase in violence against civilian populations, which, when coupled with rising xenophobia towards disenfranchised populations and economic decline, is likely to expand terrorist recruitment and activity.
- **Ongoing Conflicts Unlikely To End.** The dynamics of longstanding ethnic, communal, and resource-based conflicts—such as those in the Central African Republic, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, northern Nigeria, the Sahel, Somalia, and South Sudan—are unlikely to change substantially during the next five years without a significant improvement in

government capacity, service provision, or external assistance.

- **Lack of Domestic Stability in Key Regions.** In the next five years, the trajectory of internal conflict within Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Sudan will be critical to Sub-Saharan Africa's regional stability and overall economic outlook. Nigeria's oil-based economy will face an uphill battle to economic recovery given depressed global demand and prices, which could exacerbate public calls for more effective governance, as well as lead to additional violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt and northwest. Waves of ethnic-based violence and large-scale conflict between federal and regional governments are challenging Ethiopia's domestic stability, and the economic crisis faced by Sudan's transitional government could upend its transition to civilian rule.

KEY UNCERTAINTIES

Long-Term Economic Growth Trajectory

Although economic recovery in Sub-Saharan Africa is likely to be slow during the next five years, the longer-term impact of current disruptions is less certain. Variables that may drive the continent's economic trajectory beyond a five-year time horizon include the scale and duration of the global economic recession, the future of foreign direct investment, international willingness to forgive or forestall servicing African debt past the immediate crisis, and the change in commodity prices. In addition, it is uncertain whether Africa will have a role in more developed economies' push to "reorder" the supply chain post-COVID-19.

External Collaboration Pathway for Growth

Sub-Saharan Africa's growth and stability trajectories will be influenced by how external actors—including China, Europe, the Gulf states, and Russia—prioritize and coordinate their economic, political, development, and security activities for Africa during the next five years. Foreign spending in Africa probably will decrease in the next one to two years because of COVID-19 recovery efforts, which could significantly reduce investments in infrastructure development, humanitarian assistance, overseas basing, technology transfers, business ventures, and peacekeeping.

Collective Action Could Increase Global Agency

African agency and influence in international affairs have been on the rise during the past decade, both at a continent level and bilaterally, a trend that is likely to continue in the next five years, particularly with the increased efforts for continental integration. On the continental level, African governments may be able to work as a bloc to engage larger countries and international entities more effectively. For example, since the pandemic began, the African Union designated a group of prominent Africans who successfully led some debt relief negotiations with the international community. Bilaterally, African governments probably will continue to try to deepen and diversify relationships and avoid choosing sides in geopolitical struggles, while trying to secure the best advantage for themselves.