

The

# Eastern Africa

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### THEME:

#### **Africa Forward Summit 2026: Integrated Ecosystems as the Foundation for Eastern Africa's Sovereignty, Growth, and Global Competitiveness**

The Africa Forward Summit 2026 highlighted Eastern Africa's transition toward a more integrated and sovereignty-driven development model anchored in digital transformation, industrialisation, infrastructure modernization, health resilience, maritime governance, and sports commercialization. Across the five sectors, a common theme emerged: sustainable transformation depends on building interconnected ecosystems rather than fragmented initiatives. Investments in AI, ports, pharmaceuticals, the Blue Economy, and sports infrastructure can strengthen regional integration, job creation, innovation, and global competitiveness if supported by coordinated governance, financing, and local capacity development. Ultimately, the Summit reinforced the importance of people-centered, investment-led, and regionally coordinated strategies in advancing Africa's long-term economic resilience and strategic influence.

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## Africa's AI Sovereignty Agenda: Building Integrated Ecosystems for Inclusive Digital Industrialisation

The Africa Forward Summit 2026 marked a decisive turning point in Africa's digital transformation trajectory by reframing artificial intelligence not merely as a technological tool but as a strategic domain of sovereignty, economic competitiveness, and long-term development. The high-level engagement led by Presidents Emmanuel Macron and William Ruto underscored the urgency of moving away from fragmented digital projects toward coordinated, ecosystem-based approaches that integrate infrastructure, policy, skills, and innovation into a unified framework.

AI sovereignty, in this context, extends far beyond the development of software applications or isolated innovation hubs. It requires a deliberate and sustained investment in foundational systems that enable digital industrialisation. These include robust digital infrastructure, reliable energy systems, secure data storage capacity, and high-speed broadband connectivity. Without these core enablers, AI ecosystems remain underdeveloped and heavily dependent on external technologies, platforms, and computational resources.

A central pillar of this agenda is the establishment of regional AI research and

innovation networks. Such networks would connect universities, technical institutes, research centres, startups, and private sector actors into collaborative ecosystems that generate knowledge, develop algorithms, and design context-specific AI solutions. Priority application areas include agriculture optimization, predictive healthcare systems, logistics and supply chain management, climate modelling, and public service delivery. By grounding innovation in local realities, these networks can ensure that AI development responds directly to African socio-economic challenges.

Equally critical is the question of data sovereignty. Data is the foundational resource of the AI economy, yet much of Africa's data is currently generated locally but stored, processed, and monetized externally. To address this imbalance, African states must develop strong regulatory frameworks governing data ownership, cross-border data flows, privacy protection, and ethical AI deployment. Establishing continental and regional data governance standards would ensure that data generated within Africa contributes directly to domestic value creation and innovation ecosystems.



Photo Credit: Nation Africa

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Energy infrastructure forms another essential pillar of AI competitiveness. Artificial intelligence systems are highly energy-intensive, particularly in areas such as large-scale model training and cloud computing. As such, the expansion of stable and scalable energy systems is directly linked to digital sovereignty. Investments in renewable energy sources, especially solar, wind, hydro, and geothermal, are critical for ensuring that AI infrastructure is both sustainable and resilient.

Human capital development is equally important. African universities and technical institutions must undergo curriculum transformation to include machine learning, data science, robotics, cybersecurity, and AI

ethics. This shift is essential to ensure that African youth are not only users of imported technologies but active designers, engineers, and innovators within the global digital economy.

Africa's AI sovereignty agenda requires a strategic shift from dependency to co-creation. By building integrated ecosystems that align infrastructure, governance, education, energy, and innovation, the continent can strengthen its capacity to shape global AI standards and governance frameworks. In doing so, Africa positions itself not as a passive consumer of technological change, but as an active architect of the future digital order.

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## Building Africa's Sports Ecosystem as a Driver of Economic Transformation and Strategic Influence

Africa's sports sector is undergoing a structural shift from being primarily a recreational and entertainment activity to becoming a fully-fledged economic ecosystem with significant industrial, cultural, and geopolitical value. The Africa Forward Summit highlighted this transformation, emphasizing sports as a multisectoral engine that connects infrastructure development, media and broadcasting, tourism, digital innovation, creative industries, and human capital development into an integrated growth platform.

Eastern Africa is particularly well-positioned to capitalize on this shift. The co-hosting of AFCON 2027 by Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania represents more than a sporting event; it is a regional integration milestone with long-term economic implications. Large-scale infrastructure projects such as Talanta Sports City illustrate how sports facilities can anchor urban regeneration, stimulate surrounding commercial activity, and catalyze improvements in transport, hospitality, and city planning systems. These developments create ripple effects that extend far beyond the

stadium environment into broader urban and regional economies.

A modern sports ecosystem, however, goes far beyond physical infrastructure. It encompasses a wide and interconnected value chain that includes sports medicine and performance science, data analytics, broadcasting rights management, merchandising industries, youth academies, digital streaming platforms, event management services, and sports tourism. When these components are effectively integrated, they create diversified employment opportunities and new investment frontiers, particularly for young people who constitute the majority of the region's population.

Commercialization is central to unlocking the full potential of this ecosystem. African sports institutions and leagues must transition toward financially sustainable models that leverage diversified revenue streams such as sponsorship deals, broadcasting rights, ticketing systems, licensing agreements, and private sector partnerships.

This transition requires strong institutional governance, transparent financial management, and the professionalization of sports administration to build investor confidence and ensure long-term sustainability.

At the regional level, harmonized sports policies can significantly enhance the mobility of athletes, cross-border competition structures, and shared utilization of sports infrastructure. Such coordination strengthens regional integration while also fostering a shared cultural identity. Over time, this contributes to soft power projection, allowing Eastern Africa to increase its influence within continental and global sports governance systems.

Importantly, sports development must be embedded within broader socio-economic strategies. Structured youth sports programs can play a critical role in education support, health promotion, and social cohesion. By providing structured pathways for talent development and employment, sports can reduce youth vulnerability to unemployment,

crime, and social exclusion while strengthening community resilience.

Against this backdrop, a well-developed and integrated sports ecosystem enables Africa to convert its demographic advantage into tangible economic power and strategic influence. In the global sports economy, where media rights, digital platforms, and entertainment industries are increasingly dominant, Africa's ability to organize, commercialize, and innovate within sports will determine its future competitiveness and global visibility.



Photo Credit: LinkedIn



Photo Credit: Football Foundation For Africa

## Leveraging the France-Backed Port and Logistics Investments for Eastern Africa's Strategic Transformation

The France-backed KES 104 billion logistics and port infrastructure investments present a timely and strategic opportunity to reposition Eastern Africa as a competitive and integrated hub within global and regional trade networks. These investments are unfolding within a shifting global economic environment characterized by supply chain reconfiguration, geopolitical realignment, and the operationalization of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), all of which are opening new pathways for trade diversification and regional value chain integration.

Ports remain the backbone of Eastern Africa's external trade architecture, handling the majority of imports and exports that sustain national economies. However, systemic inefficiencies continue to undermine their full potential. Persistent challenges such as port congestion, slow cargo clearance processes, inadequate handling capacity, weak digital integration, and poor hinterland connectivity significantly raise transaction costs. These inefficiencies reduce the competitiveness of regional exports and discourage investment in manufacturing and logistics-dependent industries.

Addressing these constraints requires comprehensive port modernization. Investments should prioritize automation of cargo handling systems, expansion of berths, deepening of port channels to accommodate larger vessels, and deployment of advanced digital tracking and logistics management platforms. Such upgrades would not only improve throughput but also enhance transparency and reduce operational delays that currently characterize many port systems in the region.

Equally important is the integration of ports

with efficient inland transport corridors. Without strong rail and road connectivity, ports risk functioning as isolated nodes rather than integrated economic gateways. Strengthening multimodal transport systems linking coastal hubs to inland production and consumption zones is therefore essential. Priority corridors connecting Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Mozambique should be developed as interconnected economic arteries that facilitate the smooth movement of goods and services across borders.

Customs and trade facilitation reforms are another critical pillar. The adoption of interoperable customs systems, digital single-window clearance platforms, and harmonized border procedures can significantly reduce clearance times, minimize bureaucratic bottlenecks, and limit opportunities for rent-seeking. These reforms also enhance state revenue collection while improving predictability for private sector actors engaged in cross-border trade.

The geopolitical dimension of these infrastructure investments adds further strategic significance. Eastern Africa is increasingly emerging as a critical gateway linking the African continent to the Indo-Pacific and broader global markets. As such, partnerships with external actors such as France must be structured in a way that ensures mutual benefit, particularly through technology transfer, local content requirements, skills development, and industrial spillover effects that strengthen domestic capacity rather than perpetuate dependency.

Regional coordination mechanisms through institutions such as the East African Community and IGAD are essential to ensure coherence in infrastructure planning. Without such coordination, there is a risk of duplication, competition between ports, and fragmented investments that undermine regional efficiency. A more strategic approach would involve the development of complementary port specialization and integrated logistics corridors that optimize comparative advantages across countries.

If effectively managed, these investments can go beyond infrastructure development to catalyze industrialization, enhance maritime security, and deepen Eastern

Africa's integration into global value chains, ultimately strengthening its position in the evolving global economic order.



## Financing Eastern Africa's Blue Economy for Sustainable Growth and Ocean Governance

The Nairobi Declaration, adopted at the Africa Forward Summit 2026, elevates the Blue Economy as a foundational pillar for Eastern Africa's long-term transformation. It positions the region as a central driver of economic growth, employment creation, and environmental sustainability. For coastal and maritime states such as Kenya, Tanzania, Somalia, and Mozambique, the ocean space is no longer a marginal or sector-specific concern but a strategic development frontier. It integrates fisheries, maritime transport, coastal and marine tourism, offshore energy systems, and emerging marine biotechnology into a single, interconnected economic system with significant regional spillover effects.

Despite this potential, the Blue Economy in Eastern Africa continues to face deep

structural financing constraints. Investment flows remain fragmented across sectors and countries, heavily reliant on donor funding, and often poorly aligned with national and regional development priorities. This fragmentation limits the scale and coherence required for transformative impact. The Nairobi Declaration's emphasis on affordable, predictable, and equitable financing, therefore, reflects a necessary shift toward restructuring how ocean-based development is financed and governed.

In practical terms, this requires the adoption of innovative financing mechanisms that can mobilize long-term capital at scale. Blended finance models that combine concessional funding with private investment can help de-risk large-scale maritime projects.

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Sovereign blue bonds can provide governments with dedicated instruments for financing ocean infrastructure and conservation initiatives. Similarly, climate-linked financial instruments can align marine investment with adaptation and mitigation goals, particularly in coastal protection and ecosystem restoration. Public-private partnerships will also be essential in reducing the cost of capital while expanding investment in ports, logistics systems, and marine industries.

A major priority is the modernization and expansion of maritime infrastructure. Efficient ports, well-equipped fisheries landing sites, cold-chain storage systems, and integrated coastal transport corridors are critical enablers of value addition. Without these systems, Eastern Africa remains locked into low-value extraction of marine resources, limiting income generation for coastal populations and reducing competitiveness in global seafood and maritime markets. At the same time, offshore renewable energy offers a significant but underdeveloped opportunity to diversify the regional energy mix and support decarbonization goals.

Strengthening ocean governance is equally essential. Overfishing, illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, marine pollution, and weak enforcement mechanisms continue to undermine sustainability and reduce long-term economic returns. A coordinated governance framework for the Western Indian Ocean, supported by joint maritime surveillance systems, shared data platforms, and harmonized regulatory standards, would significantly enhance compliance and resource stewardship across national boundaries.

Ultimately, a well-financed and effectively governed Blue Economy has the potential to become a transformative engine for Eastern Africa. Its success, however, will depend on whether investment strategies prioritize inclusivity, ecological sustainability, and long-term resilience over short-term extractive gains. If properly structured, it can strengthen regional integration, enhance climate resilience, and reposition the region as a key player in the global ocean economy.



Photo Credit: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs

## Strengthening Health Sovereignty through Regional Pharmaceutical and Biotechnology Industrialization in Eastern Africa

The Africa Forward Summit 2026 underscored a decisive shift in Eastern Africa's development paradigm: moving from health dependency toward health sovereignty. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of relying heavily on external suppliers for vaccines, pharmaceuticals, diagnostics, and broader medical technologies. Supply chain disruptions, export restrictions, and unequal access to life-saving medicines revealed structural vulnerabilities in the region's health systems. In response, the Summit advanced regional industrialization as a strategic pathway to resilience, autonomy, and long-term health security.

At the center of this agenda is the creation of a coordinated pharmaceutical and biotechnology ecosystem across Eastern Africa. Instead of fragmented national initiatives that compete for limited investment and capacity, the region requires an integrated value chain approach. This involves aligning production systems, harmonizing regulatory frameworks, and coordinating research, innovation, and distribution networks. Key priorities include the establishment of regional vaccine manufacturing hubs, active pharmaceutical ingredient (API) production facilities, and biotechnology centres of excellence that are closely linked to universities, research institutes, and private sector innovation clusters.

Such an integrated system would significantly reduce reliance on imported medicines and medical technologies, which currently exposes countries to price volatility and external supply shocks. It would

also improve responsiveness to future health emergencies by enabling faster production and regional distribution of critical medical supplies. Beyond crisis response, a localized production system would help address persistent shortages of essential medicines, especially in rural and underserved areas where access gaps remain severe.

Regulatory harmonization is a critical enabler of this transformation. Divergent national approval systems, quality control standards, and clinical trial procedures currently slow down innovation and increase operational costs. A unified regional regulatory framework would streamline drug approval processes, reduce duplication, and enhance safety and quality assurance. Regional health institutions and regulatory alliances can play a central coordinating role in ensuring alignment, mutual recognition of standards, and enforcement of compliance mechanisms.

Beyond its health security dimension, pharmaceutical and biotechnology industrialization carries significant economic transformation potential. It can create high-skilled employment opportunities in research, manufacturing, logistics, and quality assurance. It can also attract foreign direct investment into high-value sectors while stimulating domestic innovation ecosystems in chemistry, biomedical engineering, and life sciences. In this sense, health systems evolve from being primarily consumption-driven cost centers into productive engines of industrial development and technological advancement.

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However, realizing this vision requires sustained and coordinated financing. Domestic resource mobilization must be complemented by strategic international partnerships that support technology transfer, infrastructure development, and skills enhancement. Equally important is long-term policy stability to ensure investor confidence and continuity in industrial planning.

In the long run, health sovereignty extends

beyond access to medicines. It is fundamentally about building the endogenous capacity to research, develop, manufacture, and distribute medical technologies within the region. A successful transition would position Eastern Africa not only as a consumer of global health innovations but as an active producer and contributor to global biomedical knowledge and supply systems.



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