



20 YEARS OF
INTERNATIONAL
COOPERATION BETWEEN
FLANDERS AND
SOUTH AFRICA



Flanders
State of the Art



In 1994, the Government of Flanders opted for South Africa to become a priority partner within Flemish foreign policy. Flemish cooperation initially focused on assistance towards the building of a new, democratic South Africa, but was subsequently extended to include development cooperation, culture, science and innovation, economy and trade, youth policy and education. Various actors became involved with this cooperation, from Flemish ministers and government departments, to scientific and tertiary institutions, non-governmental organisations, businesses and private entities.

Formalising Flemish-South African cooperation

The opening of a Flemish Trade Office in South Africa in 1994 launched Flemish-South African cooperation. On 28 October 1996 the "Treaty between the Government of Flanders and the Government of the Republic of South Africa on cooperation in the fields of education, art, culture, science, technology and sport" was signed, and later extended in 2002 to include all Flemish competences. On 14 February 1999, the first General Representative of the Government of Flanders took up his function in Pretoria, serving as first point of contact between governments, government departments and other actors in Flanders and South Africa. The remit of the General Representation includes South Africa, Mozambique, Malawi, Namibia, Botswana, Swaziland and Lesotho.

There have been 23 official visits by Flemish Ministers to South Africa since 1994; Flemish delegations have furthermore been officially received five times by South African Presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki. These missions have been political or economic in nature, or have taken place in the framework of development cooperation. Contact has been reciprocal with equally numerous visits by South African delegations to Flanders, where they have been received by the Minister-President and Flemish Ministers.

Multi-faceted cooperation

From the outset, the range of activities and cooperation initiatives between Flemish and South African partners was broad in scope. These included training opportunities for the port sector and tourism, parliamentary exchanges, support to SMEs through mentorship programmes, exchange and cooperation in the cultural and academic sector, conferences and courses regarding human rights, and support to youth centres.

Since 1994 Flemish exports to South Africa have increased annually by 27,3%, reaching 1,350.27 million Euros in 2013, whilst imports from South Africa also increased (reaching 1,422.27 million Euros in 2013). Tourism is a booming industry and the number of Flemish visitors to South Africa continues to grow. The number of South African students choosing to study at Flemish universities or colleges has risen from 9 in the 2004-2005 academic year to 92 during 2013-2014. Conversely, there is growing interest from Flemish students, researchers and lecturers in taking up residencies in South Africa; this is reflected by the number of cooperation agreements drawn up between Flemish and South African universities over the past few years.

Development cooperation

In 2001, Flanders and South Africa signed a "Memorandum on development cooperation". Geographically, cooperation was limited to three provinces: KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and the Free State. Flemish development cooperation with South Africa was initially aimed at poverty reduction, the promotion of democratisation at provincial and municipal levels, and the continuation of long-term and extended relations between Flanders and South Africa. As of 2005, the approach became more targeted, with the focus on larger programmes submitted by the provinces involved. Health care, employment and job creation, agriculture and food security were central in this context.

Since 2012, Flanders contributes principally to programmes that deal with high unemployment rates, in particular among young people, through the promotion of (social and environment-friendly) entrepreneurship and the development of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in sectors with job potential. The programmes and initiatives supported by Flanders reflect the priorities of the National Development Plan of South Africa, and are implemented by the South African public authorities, civil society and the private sector.

Truth and reconciliation

Flanders provided financial support to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) created in Bloemfontein in 1995. It was vital that victims of the Apartheid regime could testify in their own language during the TRC hearings. Eleven young South African translators and interpreters were given the opportunity to attend further training in Flanders. In turn, they were responsible for the training of the other interpreters. It is in part due to Flemish support that equipment for interpreters could be financed and testimonies could be recorded during the hearings of the TRC. The interpretation equipment continues to be used by the Bloemfontein Court of Justice and the University of the Free State, thanks to upgrades financed by the Department of Higher Education of South Africa.

Knowledge-sharing

In July 2014, the General Representation of the Government of Flanders organised a knowledge-sharing workshop on SME development in South Africa in partnership with the International Labour Organization and the Technical Management Support project, administered by National Treasury. The aim of the workshop was to stimulate debate and knowledge-sharing among government departments, private sector organisations, academia and civil society. Topics covered comprised different SME development models, lessons learned and the way forward regarding SME development and job creation.

The workshop took place shortly after the South African Government set up a new Department of Small Business Development. The creation of this department is testimony to the government's ongoing commitment to job creation through SME's and the search for innovative and effective ways to nurture and develop the sector. The conclusions and recommendations of the workshop were made available to the Minister of Small Business Development in order to support the Department with its mandate.



Supporting social and environmental enterprises

Since 2012, Flanders has offered support to the SEED Initiative which promotes promising and innovative social and environmental start-up enterprises. The Initiative administers an annual global awards scheme, with an independent international jury of experts. This jury selects the most promising and innovative social and environmental start-ups, working in multi-stakeholder partnerships. Each award comprises an individually tailored support package to help winners develop business and management plans and skills, implement triple bottom line indicators, and build networks that also include financial bodies. Winners receive a financial contribution and are profiled at high-level events.

SEED tracks the progress of winners in order to identify their economic, social and environmental contributions, as well as any enablers and obstacles they encounter. This experience is then used to develop specific tools for entrepreneurs. Insights are presented to policy makers to inform the elaboration of supportive frameworks for social and environmental entrepreneurs.



Human rights

The Centre for Human Rights of the University of Pretoria runs 10 Advanced Human Rights Courses (AHRC) annually. These intensive, one-week courses deal with various aspects of human rights, the rule of law and good governance. Taught by some of the most outstanding lecturers in their respective fields, both from Southern African and internationally, they are aimed at senior government officials, academics, and legal and human rights practitioners from Africa. The Centre and the AHRC have established a reputation as a major source of advanced capacity building in the field of human rights on the African continent.

The Government of Flanders offers financial support which enables participants to attend the AHRC. Moreover, as part of the project, the Centre has established a close partnership with three Flemish universities on three of the courses: "Sexual Minority Rights" (KU Leuven); "African Human Rights Systems in Comparative Perspectives" (Ghent University); "The Right to Development in Africa" (University of Antwerp).



The future

As a major player in sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa continues to be a priority country for Flemish foreign policy. Flanders hopes to strengthen strategic partnership, ties and interaction with South Africa and its people in a variety of areas. Flanders remains conscious that any approach must be both flexible and accessible in order to ensure that future cooperation will continue to optimise benefits for both partners. Flanders seeks to deepen cooperation with South Africa through ongoing and meaningful discussions with the South African public authorities and civil society, and hopes that the positive experiences from the past will have paved the way for the future.

Would you like to know more? Please contact us.

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Sources

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