

The role of diplomatic missions in fostering international trade A literature review to be considered in the Visegrad Countries when dealing with Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract:

The paper briefly shows the renewed interest in and fundamental reasons for establishing new diplomatic missions in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Old and new trading partners alike are trying to create more embassies and consulates because they strive to help the private sector by preparing the ground for bilateral trade. The Central and Eastern European (CEE), and the Visegrad (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovak Republic) countries have been following the international tendencies and they have placed and increased emphasis on their diplomatic missions in the hope of diversifying their exports. After synthesizing the related literature, the second part of the paper argues that embassies and consulates directly contribute to stronger bilateral trade links. It seems that by opening more embassies in the SSA region the V4 countries could find alternative markets for their products and services so the embassies count to be growth opportunities. By fostering stronger economic and political ties both regions could benefit from the new scramble for diplomatic missions in various forms.

Keywords:

diplomatic missions;
trade promotion;
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Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has seen many busy summers since the start of the growing international interests somewhere around the turn of the new millennium. There have been many chief of state visits from a number of countries like Argentina, Brazil, China, France, Germany, Russia, South Korea, Turkey, and the United Kingdom (Devermont, 2018). This time is different because under the Cold War period the African leaders had limited choices, but now the countries can freely choose with whom they want to foster closer political and economic ties and with whom they want to do business. In the 8 March edition of The Economist magazine a completely new scramble for Africa is discussed in which the winners could be the Africans themselves. The African leaders welcome foreign investors with open arms and with the help of economic diplomacy the old and the new trading partners are trying to establish strong bilateral trade links. There has never been such an intense embassy building period in SSA so far and between 2010 and 2016 320 new embassies and consulates were being built. Many countries regard diplomatic missions as key in establishing export and import connections. The Central and Eastern European (CEE) and the Visegrad countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovak Republic) have been following the international tendencies and launched their own opening-ups toward the SSA region. This paper tries to show why there is such a renewed interest in establishing and re-establishing diplomatic missions in the region. It briefly describes that a number of active countries have managed to significantly increase their bilateral trade largely by placing more emphasis on having more embassies and consulates. Later the renewed interest of the V4 countries is introduced by highlighting the advantages of a more dynamic cooperation. Many V4 countries have been establishing stronger diplomatic ties as they believe that more intense trade connections are to be created by more dynamic diplomatic missions. In the hope of finding the connection between these two factors, the paper synthesizes the related literature and tries to shed light on the following question: Do embassies increase bilateral trade? Based on the literature review, it is quite clear that diplomatic missions (embassies especially) have a significant effect on fostering bilateral trade. By opening new posts in SSA, the first steps could be taken towards the diversifications of the exports of the CEE countries. The example of other countries and regions could be of high importance for the diplomats of the V4 and CEE diplomats so in the last section a couple of conclusions are drawn and suggestions are given.

A New Diplomatic Mission Scramble for Sub-Saharan Africa

After the turn of the new millennium the foreign counterparts of SSA have been forging ever closer partnerships with the regions as they see new trade and investment possibilities. China has been setting the fashion and a number of other countries following suit and they regard Africa as increasingly important to a wide range of economic, security, and political goals (Devermont, 2018). Many regard this spike in foreign engagement as a fundamental change in SSA's foreign relations. What is unique and truly remarkable this time is the number of 'new' countries turning their attention to Africa. At the University of Denver in the Frederick S.



Pardee Center for International Futures, Josef Korbel School of International Studies they have had a Diplometrics Project. This project calls our attention to the fact that between 2010 and 2016 more than 320 embassies and consulates were opened in Africa. Turkey alone opened 26 new embassies. According to the March 2020 issue of the African Business Magazine, between 2003 and 2021 the number of Turkish embassies in Africa jumped from 12 to 42. This almost 4-fold increase tells a lot about Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ambitions on the continent. In the light of this, trade between Turkey and Africa has ballooned from \$5.5bn in 2003 to more than \$26bn in 2020. The Turkish president seems to be a tireless visitor to African countries as he has visited more African countries than any other non-African leader. His plans are overly ambitious as Turkey wants to double the trade volume to \$50bn in the coming years. Turkey is not the only country being interested in SSA. According to Devermont (2018) Qatar opened 11, Japan 9, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom 6, Germany and Venezuela 5, and China, India, Spain, Sweden 4 new embassies in the region. The Diplometrics Project claims more than 150 new embassies have been opened in Sub Saharan Africa since 2010. A number of countries have launched brand new policies toward Africa. Poland unveiled its "Go Africa" programme in 2013, Hungary followed suit with its "Opening to the South" policy two years later at the second Budapest–Africa Forum, but a stronger focus on Africa has been on the agenda since 2009 (Tarrósy and Morenth, 2013). Several other countries and regions have placed much more emphasis on their Africa policies. Kuwait hosted the third Africa-Arab Summit in 2013, Russia hosted its first Russia-Africa summit in Sochi in 2019. Indonesia held its first Indonesia-Africa Forum in 2018. Japan hosted the seventh Tokyo International Conference on African Development in 2019.

According to the International Trade Centre, these diplomatic efforts seem to be fruitful because more than 65 countries increased their overall trade with Sub Saharan Africa between 2010 and 2017. India made remarkable progress as the country became the region's second largest trading partner. A number of Eastern European countries (for example Bulgaria and Serbia), and Russia doubled their trade with the African countries. Apart from China, several East Asian countries (for example Indonesia and Thailand) have remarkably increased their trade with the region. For a couple of other countries this period was less successful as a number of traditional trading partners like France, United Kingdom, and the USA did not manage to increase their trade numbers at all (*Figure 1*).

Best performers	2010	2017	Change (percent)	Worst performers	2010	2017	Change (percent)
Russia	1.6	4.2	260	United Arab Emirates	13.9	11.5	83
Thailand	4.7	10.9	230	Italy	14.7	11.7	81
Turkey	3.1	6.1	190	France	26.3	20.7	79
Indonesia	3.8	7.0	180	South Korea	12.7	9.9	78
China	91.2	165.4	180	Portugal	7.5	5.5	73

Mexico	0.9	1.4	140	United Kingdom	20.7	13.9	68
India	32.8	45.9	140	Japan	20.8	13.8	66
Qatar	0.4	0.58	140	Brazil	13.5	6.5	48
Saudi Arabia	8.1	9.7	120	United States	80.3	36.7	46
Germany	22.2	24.6	110	Canada	10.5	4.7	45

Figure 1. Some of the most and least successful countries in fostering bilateral trade with SSA (billions of USD, and percentage changes between 2010 and 2017). Source: CSIS (2018)

Africa’s new and old foreign trade partners want to access the region’s consumer base and mineral wealth. Also, they try to have a larger share of the dynamic marketplace. Among others, the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe claimed in 2016 that “we have a feeling in our gut that in Africa, where possibilities abound, Japan can grow vigorously.” It is very likely that the region will be even more populous by 1.3 billion people by 2050 making the cost of labour even cheaper although the labour force is and will remain (in the foreseeable future) relatively unskilled in comparison with different parts of Asia. Also, there is an increasing market potential for goods and services in those countries where there is a growing middle, and upper-middle class.

The Re-engagement of V4 and SSA

In CEE the economic and political transformation meant an enormous drop in political and economic relationships with SSA in the 1990s but private-sector actors have been trying to deepen the engagement on both sides. By recognising this and following the actions of the largest investors and trading partners to Africa, CEE governments started fostering stronger diplomatic ties after the turn of the new millennium. Since the early 2000s a kind of revival has been seen in the bilateral political relations between CEE states and SSA countries. During the European Union accession process it became clear for the candidate countries that they would put in place development assistance policies focusing on the SSA region as when becoming full members of the bloc. At the very beginning many CEE countries perceived it as a burden (Cibian, 2020). A smaller regional formation, the Visegrad countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovak Republic) henceforth V4 countries, have a special focus on connecting with African regional organizations, among others the East African Community (EAC). Apart from certain clear intentions, relations in general are inconsistent, and dependent on the political will and the priorities of the leadership of the countries (Cibian, 2020). The case of Poland for example is very telling as there was a significant opening-up towards SSA countries between 2007 and 2014 under the premiership of Donald Tusk, but relations were scaled back after he left office. Also, the various V4 countries are not uniformly interested in their SSA engagement. Several CEE countries have embassies that are responsible for more than one SSA countries with limited resources and staff and in many cases little support from their

national governments. This raises the question of efficiency as diplomatic missions have limited capacity to monitor and engage fully with every country covered (*Appendix 1*). The diplomatic missions of SSA countries are even more limited, laying the ground for the initial stages of economic cooperation between the different countries only (*Figure 2.*) It is interesting to notice that mainly the largest economies of the SSA region maintain embassies in the V4 countries and Slovakia with a population of less than 5 million is unable to attract any embassy from the south of the Sahara.

V4 countries	Embassies	Consulates and Honorary consulates
Czech Republic	Angola, DRC, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Sudan	Angola, Benin, Botswana, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Namibia, Niger, Seychelles, Sudan
Hungary	Angola, Nigeria, South Africa, Sudan	Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Eritrea, Ghana, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mauritius, Namibia, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Zambia
Poland	Angola, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa	Gambia, Ghana, Malawi, Mauritius, Seychelles, Zambia
Slovak Republic	None	DRC, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Mali, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Uganda

Figure 2. SSA diplomatic missions in the V4 countries. Source: Cibian (2020)

Some CEE countries do not have any embassies in SSA. The new EU development policies intend to make trade and investment a top priority and it is likely that CEE ministers of finance and development banks will begin to increase their engagement on SSA. Cibian (2020) however calls our attention to the fact that an effective engagement is likely to be hindered by inexperience, lack of awareness of the context in which they will be operating. At home, the V4 countries have many investment support facilities which may help overcome the bottlenecks in SSA. The different services provide information and among others try to support the risk averse businesses (*Figure 3*).

	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Slovak Republic
Investment promotion agencies	CzechInvest – focus on inward FDI	HIPA – Focus on inward FDI	PAIH – outward and inward FDI mandate and geographical focus on Africa	SARIO – focus on inward FDI
Foreign trade offices	No	Yes	Yes	No
National development institutions	Czech-Moravian Development Bank (CMZR) Czech Export Guarantee and Insurance Corporation (EGAP)	Hungarian Eximbank	Polish Development Bank (BGK)	Slovak Eximbanka

Figure 3. Government investment support to V4 businesses. Source: Kurtagic (2019)

Apart from these bottlenecks, Kurtagic (2019) calls our attention to the fact that there are growing economic links between the economies of CEE and SSA in terms of both trade and investment. He calls our attention to the fact that total exports from CEE countries to SSA more than doubled from \$2 billion in 2005 to more than \$4.5 billion in the early 2010s, before declining to just under \$3.5 billion in 2016. Cibian (2017) confirms the visible increase and points to the fact that the share of all imports to SSA from CEE rose from about 1.3 percent to more than 4 percent between 2005 and 2016. The latest World Bank (2021) data confirm the favourable economic relations also but the performance of Hungary cannot be compared to Poland (Figure 4). The Hungarian “Opening to the South” policy launched in 2015 visibly stopped the decrease of the volume of the bilateral trade. Hungary was the only country that could not increase its performance since 2015. Even Slovakia, with the previously mentioned limited capabilities, was able to do so.

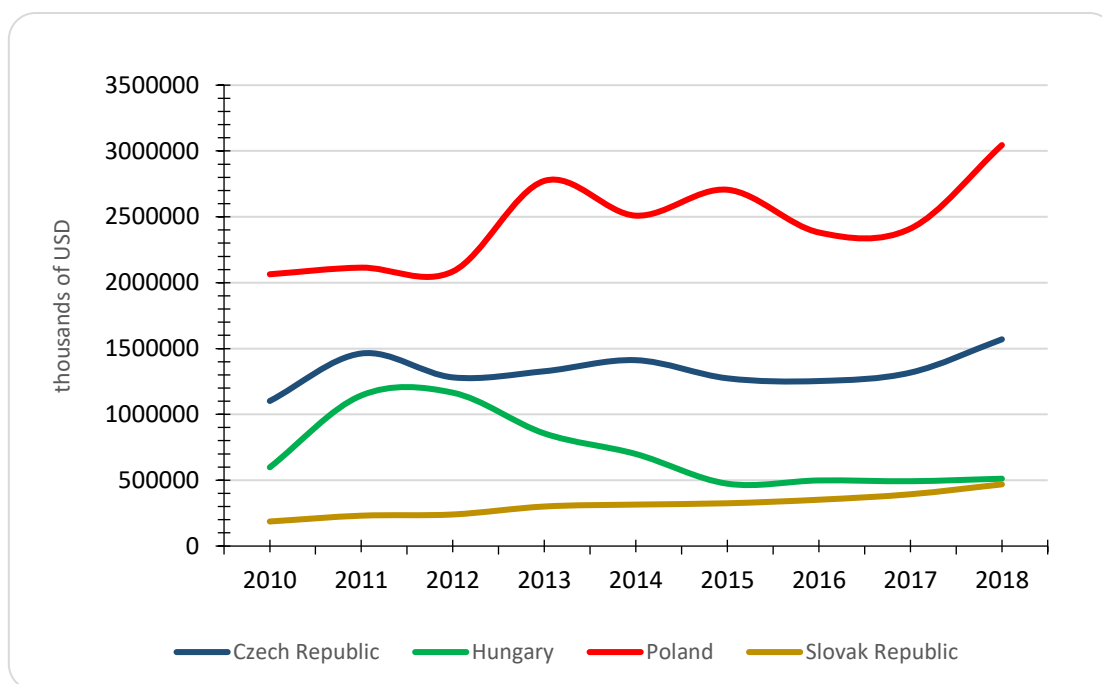


Figure 4. Bilateral trade between the V4 countries and Sub Saharan Africa (2010 and 2018)

Source: World Bank (2021)

Many believe that the more intense bilateral trade relations between the CEE and SSA region are the direct effect of the increased diplomatic engagement and extended networks. Despite the fact that investment figures are hard to find, others like Kurtagic (2019) for example calls our attention to the fact that investments play an increasing role and are on the rise in some CEE countries. He mentions Poland and the total stock of Polish foreign direct investment (FDI) in SSA which reached almost \$240 million by 2017. This figure makes Poland the largest investor in SSA. In case of Hungary, among the top five African export destinations there is only one SSA country, South Africa. Coupled with Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria, South Africa represents almost 80 percent of the African exports. Those are the top five export destinations of Hungary in SSA where there are diplomatic missions (embassies) so in this respect we cannot question the impact of diplomatic presence on Hungarian–African bilateral trade. From an SSA perspective South Africa is the main investor and trade partner in CEE. (The country has embassies in the Visegrad countries.)

Economic re-engagement seems to be helping the inclusive growth both in CEE and SSA. A number of CEE countries have been trying to diversify their export structure and at the same time they have been looking for new markets for their businesses. Bearing the Chinese strategy in mind, some CEE countries consider SSA as an investment destination where labour is cheap and bottomless and by tapping the business opportunities they try to maintain their strong economic growth rates. Partly by building on the Cold War links, CEE countries can export their technologies and skills with which their SSA counterparts may realize their growth and development goals. In addition to the socialist links, the CEE countries never colonized SSA and in the eyes of many Africans they are regarded as equal partners.

Understanding the impact of diplomatic missions on bilateral trade

Growing international trade and the establishment of international organizations and institutions have made economic diplomacy even more important than before. Embassies and consulates are fundamental in helping private businesses reduce international business related transaction costs and barriers (Naray, 2010).

A number of authors point to the fact that diplomats prepare the ground for free trade and help the development of the export markets (Plouffe and van der Sterren, 2016). Diplomatic representations are relevant in minimizing potential risks that businesses encounter in their foreign operations. Diplomatic relations can take the forms of state visits, new trade missions, consulates, embassies. These are equally significant determinants of bilateral trade between countries. Afman and Maurel (2010) go so far and claim that facilitating exports is one of the explicit objectives of foreign diplomatic missions. Anderson and Marcouiller (2002) claim that there is a high level of trade among high-income or capital-abundant countries as they generally have a higher level of trust. They argue that high levels of mistrust and insecurity acts as a hidden tax which increases the transaction cost of international trade, impeding trade among developing countries. There are a number of various forms: political, legal, credit risk and these may discourage potential exporters from entering foreign markets. However these risks may be reduced if there are established diplomatic or political ties between the countries. It is not too distant to link the low level of trade among developing countries to these potential risks because the trade among developing countries is more characterized by high levels of mistrust and insecurity.

Unfortunately there is a limited number of papers on the role of embassies and consulates on international trade and in most of the cases political economy and international business research deals with the impact of economic diplomacy on cross-border trade flows. However Okano and Heijmans (2008) point to the fact that diplomats lobby host governments to secure national political and economic interests. Apart from this, we are quite far from understanding the real forces at play but it seems to be clear that any official and diplomatic interaction can help build stronger bilateral trade flows.

This part of the paper tries to collect the most recent research findings which can be useful for the diplomats of the V4 countries as well. The paper of Rose (2007) has been usually mentioned as a seminal one. The author finds a significant link between foreign consulates and bilateral exports. Countries usually continue to increase the number of their highly costly foreign missions mainly to support economic relations with the chosen countries as well as to maintain the consular affairs or political interest (Rose, 2007). The paper is built on a cross-sectional analysis of the annual average bilateral trade over the period of 2002 and 2003 from 22 large source countries to 200 destinations in the world. A number of control variables are used and the paper finds positive and statistically significant (6-10 percent) embassy effect on exports.



A number of other authors came to the same conclusion. Nitsch (2005) for example claims that state visits play an important role in fostering trade. He uses a large data set covering the travel activities of the heads of state of France, Germany, and the USA between 1948 and 2003. According to the results, state and official visits are positively correlated with export. A typical visit is associated with higher bilateral exports by about 8-10 percent when holding other things constant.

Afrman and Maurel (2010) highlight the importance of ad valorem tariff reductions and the role of diplomatic missions in transition countries. Economic diplomacy is generally linked to growth in bilateral trade especially when there is a developing country among the trading partners (Veenstra et al., 2011). The paper of Yusuf (2017) tries to estimate if there is a causal relationship between the presence of an embassy and international trade using the example of 37 new embassies of Turkey between 2006 and 2014. Actually he analyses the impact of presence of foreign missions on trade by using Turkey's unique expansion in its foreign mission network. He concludes that the presence of an embassy increases export value by 27 percent and its increase comes mainly from volume effect. Also, he argues that an increase in differentiated goods exports explained almost all of the change in total export value. Creusen and Lejour (2011) try to find out the determinants of the entry decision of new exporter firms using the international trade transactions of Dutch firms between 2002 and 2008. They find stronger effects such that the presence of foreign missions stimulated both the entry decision and volume of trade by 5-20 percent. Segura-Cayuela and Vilarrubia (2008) study the trade impact of foreign missions through a cross-sectional bilateral trade analysis. They conclude that presence of a foreign service increases exports around 11-18 percent and this increase comes from the extensive margin channel. Gil et al. (2008) measure the impact of regional export promotion and find that diplomatic representations and trade promotion organizations have significant effects on aggregate bilateral trade. Martincus et al. (2010) focus on the impact of export promotion institutions on trade. By dealing with Latin American and Caribbean countries over the period of 1995 and 2004, they explore the existence of potentially asymmetric effects of export promotion institutions across export margins. Their results suggest that diplomatic foreign mission and trade promotion organisations tend to be associated with larger exports along both margins. Also, they claim that opening an office abroad seems to contribute more to increasing the number of goods sold abroad than to expanding average exports and this contribution is larger than that of additional diplomatic representations. Afrman and Maurel (2010) perform panel data analysis by using the new foreign mission openings in Eastern Europe after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. They specifically focus on the pairwise trade between 26 OECD countries and 30 transition countries in three observation periods (1995, 2000, and 2005) excluding the within group trade. The resulting impact is positive and high in magnitude (around 40%), but its statistical significance disappears when controlled for the pair and time fixed effects.

Contradicting the previous studies, Head and Ries (2009) performs a single country analysis by investigating the impact of the Canadian trade missions on the exports of Canada. By using

a panel of before and after the treatment periods, the authors run regressions for various treatment time spans (1-4 years). They handle the reverse causality by controlling unobserved characteristics with fixed effects and including the lag of the dependent variable among control variables. Their study finds no statistically significant effect on Canadian exports.

Van Bergeijk et al. (2011) argue that in general embassies have a larger impact on trade when comparing them to consulates. In addition they claim that honorary consulates have limited value added. Later Moons and Bergeijk (2013) confirm that embassies represent a more pronounced effect of economic diplomacy. Consulates, state visits, trade missions are less efficient in fostering stronger bilateral relations. Basically they compare 29 empirical studies on trade and investment impact of economic diplomacy, which contains embassies, consulates and other diplomatic facilities, investment and export promotion offices, trade and state visits. Actually they conclude that primary studies conducted on a single country basis will in general show a lower significance of the coefficient while studies using embassies as a proxy for economic diplomacy tend to produce higher t-values. Lederman et al. (2006) find that export promotion agencies have a strong and statistically significant effect on the total exports of countries.

Moons and van Bergeijk (2016) find that the impact of diplomatic exchange is conditional on the level of development of the trading partners. They argue that the effect of diplomatic exchange is more significant for South-South, North-South and South-North trade compared to North-North trade. Yakop and van Bergeijk (2011) show that diplomatic representations are even more relevant for developing countries as they contribute more significantly in enhancing South-South trade than North-North trade.

Afesorgbor (2016) focuses on economic diplomacy in Africa and examines the impact of regional integration and commercial diplomacy on export flows among African states. The effects of the two instruments are compared on bilateral trade by employing a gravity model for 45 African states over the period of 1980 and 2005. According to the results, bilateral diplomatic exchange is a relatively more significant determinant of bilateral exports among African states compared to regional integration.

The conclusions of the studies are quite uniform but most of the studies are far from being generalizable as they are built on limited data and we have to be cautious when controlling for the factors influencing cross border trade volumes. However almost all of the studies confirm that diplomatic ties promote and facilitate trade. (Plouffe and van der Sterren, 2016)



Summary and Conclusions

We have seen a remarkable shift in the interest in SSA since the early 2000s. The old and new trading partners alike have been (re)discovering the importance of economic diplomacy and are trying to attach a higher importance to the role of embassies and consulates in fostering bilateral trade. The paper briefly introduced this renewed interest and showed that the V4 countries have been active in the SSA region also. They have opened and reopened a number of diplomatic missions with the aim of breathing a new life into the export and import links. As the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and the Slovak Republic never colonized any country in the African continent and owing to the communist times they have limited experience with embassies as trade promotion tools in the region, a literature review on the role of embassies in fostering trade may be useful for the diplomats and for the economic decision makers. After synthesizing the research findings, it turns out the diplomatic missions in general are valuable assets and they can effectively help businesses find new export markets. Despite the fact the opening and maintaining an embassy is an expensive venture, it counts to be a growth opportunity and contributes to the export diversification of the V4 region and by spurring the trade links and economic growth it may contribute to solving the migration issues as well.

Conflict of interest

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exist for this manuscript.

Notes on contributor

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Appendix 1. Diplomatic missions of the V4 countries in SSA

Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Slovak Republic
Angola (H.C.)	Ethiopia (Embassy + H.C.)	Angola (Embassy)	Ethiopia (Embassy + H.C.)
South Africa (Embassy)	Ghana (Embassy + H.C.)	Benin (H.C.)	Kenya (Embassy + H.C.)
Nigeria (Embassy)	Kenya (Embassy + H.C.)	Ethiopia (Embassy)	Nigeria (Embassy + H.C.)
Botswana (H.C.)	Nigeria (Embassy + H.C.)	Gabon (H.C.)	South Africa (Embassy + H.C.)
Ghana (Embassy)	Angola (Embassy, H.C.)	Gambia (H.C.)	Madagascar (H.C.)
Burkina Faso (H.C.)	Botswana (H.C.)	Ghana (H.C.)	Mauritius (H.C.)
Kenya (Embassy)	South Africa (Embassy + H.C.)	Cameroon (H.C.)	Seychelles (H.C.)
Cameroon (H.C.)	Djibouti (H.C.)	Kenya (H.C. + Embassy)	Uganda (H.C.)
Cape Verde (H.C.)	Cote d'Ivoire (H.C.)	Madagascar (H.C.)	Comoros (H.C.)
Congo (H.C.)	Guinea (H.C.)	Mauritania (H.C.)	Tanzania (H.C.)
Congo (H.C.)	Cameroon (H.C.)	Mozambique (H.C.)	Togo (H.C.)
Cote d'Ivoire (H.C.)	DRC (H.C.)	Nigeria (Embassy)	Guinea (H.C.)
Ethiopia (Embassy)	Madagascar (H.C.)	South Africa (H.C. + Embassy)	Ghana (Embassy + H.C.)
Djibouti (H.C.)	Mali (H.C.)	Rwanda (H.C.)	Mozambique (H.C.)
Gabon (H.C.)	Mauritius (H.C.)	Senegal (Embassy)	Senegal (H.C.)
Guinea (H.C.)	Mozambique (H.C.)	Sudan (H.C.)	Zimbabwe (Embassy)
Senegal (H.C.)	Namibia (H.C.)	Tanzania (Embassy)	Malawi (H.C.)
Zambia (Embassy)	Sao Tomé and Príncipe (H.C.)	Zambia (H.C.)	Zambia (H.C.)
Malawi (H.C.)	Seychelles (H.C.)	Zimbabwe (H.C.)	
Mali (Embassy + H.C.)	Sierra Leone (H.C.)	Uganda (H.C.)	
Mauritania (H.C.)	Sudan (H.C.)		
Mauritius (H.C.)	Tanzania (H.C.)		
Mozambique (H.C.)	Uganda (H.C.)		
Namibia (H.C.)	Zambia (H.C.)		
Sudan (H.C.)	Cape Verde (H.C.)		
Niger (H.C.)			
Rwanda (H.C.)			
Senegal (Embassy)			
Seychelles (H.C.)			
Tanzania (H.C.)			
The Gambia (H.C.)			
Uganda (H.C.)			
Zambia (Embassy)			
Zimbabwe (H.C.)			

Note: H.C. indicates honorary consulate; source: Foreign Ministries of V4 countries.