



POLITICAL ECONOMY DYNAMICS OF REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN AFRICA

PEDRO

The International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR): More than a conference platform?¹

This paper sets out to better inform stakeholders about why the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) and its national level stakeholders operate as they do. It concludes with implications for support.

Political traction, member states interests and potential

The International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) emerged in the early 2000s as a response to the ongoing conflicts in Eastern DRC. It bridges states belonging to a range of regional communities, most notably the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and has taken up the role of a dialogue mechanism to address regional conflicts in the Great Lakes region. In attempting to build a more substantive regional role, its agenda has also expanded to cover various conflict-related issues aimed at tackling the root causes of conflict in the region. It now has 12 member states and 7 so-called co-opted members while South Africa has also closely followed proceedings.

Despite a broadening mandate, the focus of the ICGLR has effectively remained on peace and security challenges in Eastern DRC. This was most clearly reflected in the engagement of the ICGLR under the Ugandan presidency during the crisis in 2012-2013 to address the M23 rebel movement operating in Eastern DRC. However, cooperation has principally dealt with the conflict in Eastern DRC and not much beyond that - the ability of ICGLR to contribute effectively to prevent conflicts in the Central African Republic, South Sudan and Burundi has led to disappointment regarding its role in the wider region. Political elites in member countries appear to protect the status quo and resist interferences from regional organisations, following the principle of strict adherence to sovereignty.

Meanwhile, the broader ICGLR agenda has suffered from a lack of regional priority setting and mixed member state engagement. The organisation's operational costs have mostly been covered by member states but contributions to programmatic work have been far below expectations. The ICGLR Secretariat, for its part, has little political leverage to effectively monitor and enforce implementation, and is constrained by a weak mandate, limited capacity and few resources. This, in turn, has led to dissatisfaction with the functioning of the Secretariat and the ICGLR as a whole, lowering the willingness of both member states and international partners to provide the necessary funding.

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One initiative where ICGLR received international recognition and substantial donor support is the Regional Initiative on the Fight Against the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources (RINR). This regional initiative was a response to global pressures to delink the illegal exploitation of and trade in minerals from the financing of conflicts, which was a key element of the US Dodd Frank Act (2010). The RINR sought, among other things, to certify the trade in “conflict-free” minerals. It aligns with economic interests and incentives of dominant players in the region such as Rwanda, the DRC, Tanzania and more recently Uganda, primarily through securing investments and trade flows to the mineral sector. However, it remains to be seen to what extent RINR is able to contribute to further regional integration and peace building.

Efforts have been made by ICGLR to formalise public participation in regional decision making. A parliamentary forum and several civil society fora have been set up, including for women, youth and the private sector. Plans for an overarching Civil Society Forum have not yet been fully realised, partly due to a lack of funding. The existence of multiple fora has to some extent allowed different interest groups to get a voice in the wider decision-making process. In this regard, the Regional Women’s Forum has successfully pleaded for a Declaration against sexual and gender based violence, while the Regional Youth Forum addressed the issue of youth employment. However, their impact is limited, while their proliferation raises questions on effectiveness and risks resulting in competition for resources. Civil society in the region remains weak, and political engagement with ICGLR is limited.

Member state interest in the ICGLR varies. Congo-Brazzaville, the Central African Republic, Sudan and South Sudan are situated at the periphery of the Great Lakes region and have so far not appeared as prominent ICGLR actors, though Congo-Brazzaville has taken the chair of the ICGLR as of Oct. 2017. Zambia, Tanzania and Kenya are all constructive and overall stable supporters of the ICGLR, albeit with varying degrees of involvement. Kenya in particular has become a driving force of the ICGLR, supporting the Secretariat as well as civil society initiatives. Rwanda, the DRC and Tanzania, and more recently also Uganda, have prioritised the ICGLR agenda on conflict minerals, boosting their own roles as mineral exporters and transporters. Finally, Angola, Uganda, Rwanda and the DRC have most pro-actively participated in the ICGLR peace and security agenda, with Uganda hosting the negotiations in the M23 crisis. South-Africa and Malawi, two non-ICGLR members, contributed troops and cooperated with Tanzania to help solve that crisis. Burundi, while one of the oldest ICGLR members, has been constrained by severe internal conflicts, preventing a pro-active engagement.

The membership of ICGLR member states in other regional organisations leads to overlapping mandates and instruments. However, while several of the conflicts and challenges addressed through the ICGLR might be dealt with through other organisations, the situation in the East of DRC has revealed a vacuum of regional responsibilities as the conflicts have spread across the borderlines of EAC and ECCAS. Although the multitude of overlapping regional platforms raises questions on effectiveness, it also allows ICGLR member states to choose the platform best suited to the political constellations, priorities and capacities of those involved at a point in time. In this regard, ICGLR has been a useful platform for reducing tensions among member states and creating a relatively conducive environment for dialogue, collaboration and partnership.

Implications for support

1. Support to the ICGLR should focus on its role as a regional dialogue mechanism to deal with issues of urgency, particularly around peace and security challenges

- As the only regional organisation bridging the EAC, SADC and ECCAS, bringing together all relevant stakeholders in the Great Lakes Region, the ICGLR has been valuable as a dialogue mechanism to address violent conflicts in the Eastern parts of DRC. Support could nurture this role and help the ICGLR Secretariat to strengthen its institutional capabilities, including for generating evidence-based knowledge.
- But while the ICGLR has proven to be a valuable dialogue platform for specific conflicts, this seems mainly the case for Eastern DRC. Recognising the limitations of ICGLR and focusing on its strengths could help avoid duplication with other regional organisations with overlapping mandates.

- Many ICGLR protocols related to humanitarian or social development are aspirational with little scope for implementation or enforcement. This implies that external partners should adapt the level of ambitions to the areas where the organisation has traction.

2. The types of support should be adapted to the contexts in which the ICGLR seeks to operate and mature institutionally

- Contextual variables include the differences in commitment between ICGLR member states - ranging from disinterest to pro-active participation. While some members seek political stability, others engage through the ICGLR for economic reasons. The potential for ICGLR to grow institutionally and develop capabilities to implement parts of its vast agenda will depend on these interests and political incentives at national level.
- This also implies that external partners tailor their support in such ways as to help the ICGLR Secretariat to navigate these structural features and differences, including member states' mistrust for intrusive external support.
- Rather than assume that there is sufficient commitment to implement the ICGLR agenda, donors should assist the regional organisation in identifying and strengthening coalitions of reform minded stakeholders around specific thematic or sector challenges.
- This will also require support that adapts to the changing context, either through ICGLR, or through ICGLR in partnership with other regional organisations. For example, in the natural resource agenda, cooperation between ICGLR and EAC can enhance effectiveness.
- While ICGLR's coordination role could be strengthened, the principle of 'non-interference' remains strong, undermining donor-driven capacity and institution building approaches.

3. Increased civil society engagement would help define the regional value added of ICGLR initiatives on sexual and gender based violence and youth employment

- Regional civil society fora have been vocal on youth employment and the fight against sexual and gender based violence, benefiting from support from donors and some ICGLR member states. But there has been little implementation or monitoring, suggesting little political traction and a need for more thought on what civil society expects from the ICGLR and vice versa.
- Meanwhile, the existence of multiple civil society fora raises questions about effectiveness, with the risk of increased competition and overlap between the fora.

4. More lessons could be drawn from the ongoing regional efforts against illegal exploitation of natural resources through RINR, also with a view on its future potential

- This regional initiative thrives on aligned political and economic interests, yet questions remain about the extent to which RINR supports shared regional benefits or primarily individual states.
- The possible revocation of the Dodd Frank Act by the USA Trump government will have effects on the mining and trade of precious minerals in the region, that need to be studied and anticipated.

Behind the formal structures of regional organisations is a messy world of regional power and politics. This messiness is often difficult to capture in the language of development cooperation and institutional development. Working with regional organisations and their programmes therefore implies engaging with complex, multi-level power and interest dynamics.

PEDRO, the Political Economy Dynamics of Regional Organisations, is an ECDPM project that looks at the politics behind regional organisations, and the structural factors, institutions and incentives that ultimately define the way in which countries and different stakeholders engage at a regional level. PEDRO covers 17 African regional organisations and 11 policy areas. For each of these, ECDPM has applied a political economy approach to help understand the dynamics and their effects in different regions and policy areas.

The studies are framed around three key questions: the first relates to the political traction of the regional organisation as this helps assess whether the regional organisation has enabled regional decision making and if it has contributed to implementation. The second focuses on the member state interests in engaging with the regional organisation, especially the more resourceful and powerful ones (the so-called 'swing states'). The third looks at the areas with most traction where regional and national level interests seem to be most aligned for regional outcomes.

The reports aim to present information and insights that can help regional stakeholders navigate the obstacles and better respond to reform opportunities. Rather than providing specific operational recommendations, the political economy approach encourages more reality-based discussions among practitioners and reformers about feasible ways to address regional challenges. It is hoped that this may help tailor the ambitions and approaches of donors and reformers and help identify ways to support national or regional champions or coalitions to take regional cooperation and integration forward.