

SYNTHESIS REPORT

Regional organisations in Africa

WHAT ARE THE POLITICAL ECONOMY DYNAMICS?

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Multiple memberships

With 55 countries, Africa has more land borders per country than elsewhere in the world – nearly a third of Africa’s mainland states have more than five neighbours compared to around one in ten for the rest of the world.¹

That may help explain why Africa also hosts such a large number of regional organisations. One recent study counts **156 regional organisations**, in Africa, including specialised agencies that cover a wide array of topics where groups of countries seek to collaborate (Soderbaum and Stapel, forthcoming).

Almost all African countries are members of more than one regional economic community – the eight regional organisations recognised by the AU – as well as a number of security or natural-resource related regional organisations. The [Democratic Republic of the Congo is a member of 14](#) regional organisations, [soon to be 15](#) if it enters the East African Community.

While all African countries are members of the African Union (AU), the continental body promoting unity and solidarity among its members (see [ECDPM AU spark explainer](#)).

Figure 1: ECDPM’s regional map tool showing DRC’s regional memberships

Regional organisations

AU-recognised regional economic communities

AU	EAC	IGAD
COMESA	ECCAS	SADC
CEN-SAD	ECOWAS	UMA

Other economic organisations

CEMAC	IOC	SACU
CEPGL	MRU	UEMOA
GGC		

Energy-based organisations

COMELEC	ECOWAPP	SAPP
EAPP	PEAC	

River & lake organisations

ABN	LTA	OMVS
ALG	LVBC	ORASECOM
LCBC	NBI	TPTC
CICOS	OKACOM	VBA
LIMCOM	OMVG	ZAMCOM

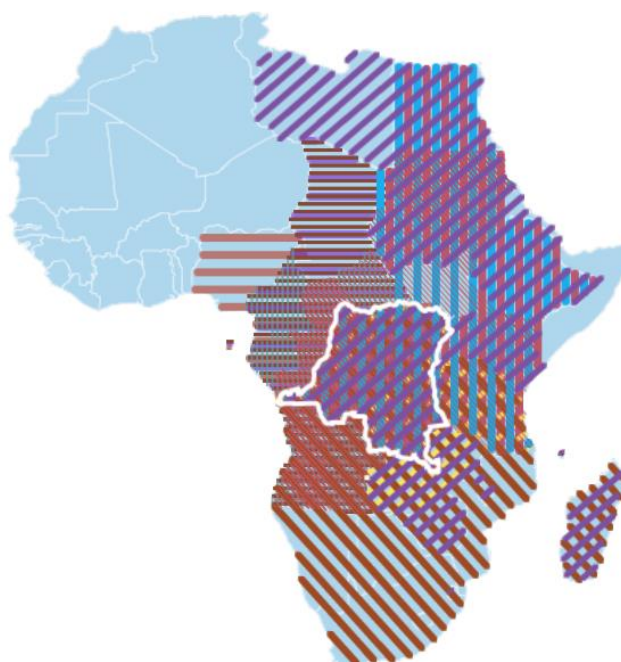
Peace & security organisations

EASF	ICGLR	G5 SAHEL
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Environmental organisations

COMIFAC

Democratic Republic of the Congo
is a member of the highlighted Regional Organisations.



Source: ECDPM Regional Map tool: [here](#)

Multiple regional memberships offer states the necessary fora to coordinate their actions with different members on different issues of common concern – whether in terms of trade, peace and security, climate or other cross-border issues. They generally also lead to regional agreements and commitments that states adopt and agree to

¹ Based on author’s calculations using data from [here](#)

implement. That requires time and capacities that are often in short supply, particularly when spread across multiple memberships and sets of commitments.

Regional organisations also have financing needs. Several regional organisations manage to largely finance themselves through community levies charged on imports – **the AU is the most recent body to seek to use this channel through a [levy on imports](#)**, joining the likes of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Southern African Customs Union (SACU) and West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA).

But many regional bodies are heavily reliant on external partner support. This raises challenges around ‘ownership’ by member states, as well as questions of accountability around decisions taken and sustainability of regional programmes.

‘The AU we want’

In his [2017 Report](#) on the need for institutional reform of the AU, President Paul Kagame identifies a series of problems relating to the above, including overcommitment of the AU on topics and issues that he linked to lack of implementation.

As Kagame put it, *“Honesty requires us to acknowledge that the root problem is not primarily technical, but rather the result of a deeper deficiency....By consistently failing to follow up on the implementation of the decisions we have made, the signal has been sent that they don’t matter”*.

The [Kagame Report](#) was explicit in identifying challenges:

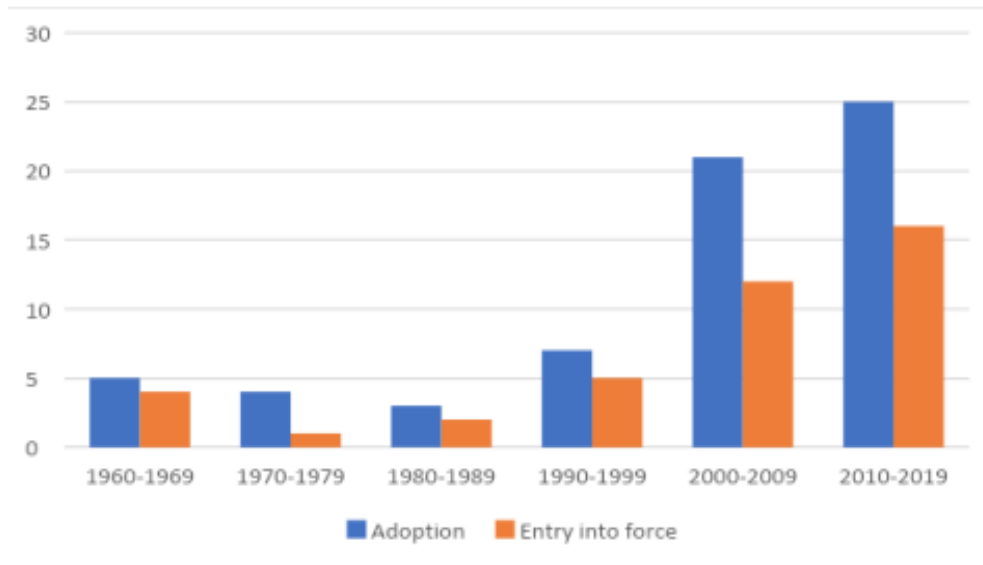
Out of this review emerged a number of key findings, which shaped the proposed recommendations.

- The constant failure to see through African Union decisions has resulted in a crisis of implementation
- A perception of limited relevance to African citizens
- A fragmented organisation with a multitude of focus areas
- Overdependence on partner funding
- Underperformance of some organs and institutions due to unclear mandates or chronic underfunding
- Limited managerial capacity
- Lack of accountability for performance, at all levels
- Unclear division of labour between the African Union Commission, the regional economic communities (RECs), other regional mechanisms (RMs), and member states
- Inefficient working methods in both the Commission and the Assembly

The effects of these challenges are illustrated below. While the AU has become more active in adopting different continental agendas since its inception in 2002, **the gap between signatures and entry into force has also continued to rise.**

Since the AU replaced the Organisation of African Unity in 2002, there have been a growing number of continental initiatives. But these often struggle to get beyond signatures to ratification, never mind implementation. The following graph shows the burgeoning number of AU initiatives since 2000, but also a widening gap between adoptions and entry into force.

Figure 2: Number of continental treaties adopted and entered into force per period



Source: [ACET](#)

In what might be considered a revised ‘theory of change’ for the AU, the Kagame proposals sought to bridge that gap by: Streamlining and prioritising AU activities; increasing financial contributions from member states and thus their sense of ownership of the AU; and thereby increasing accountability of the AU towards its member states and citizens. Combined, these would help lead to a more effective AU.

Following the Kagame Report, recent years have seen a **new wave of dynamism at the African Union**. Two main areas stand out:

1. **Connecting markets and people** – the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement and Free Movement of People Protocol, a highly ambitious project that seeks to alter the development trajectory of the entire continent by promoting trade *within* the continent, both agreements opened for signature at the same time.
2. **Institutional reforms of the AU** – a range of proposals have emerged to address the issues raised by Kagame, in terms of internal functioning of the AUC, and its role in representing member states externally and the outreach of the Union to citizens.

While seeking to address some of the failures of the past, these initiatives nonetheless take place in a complex environment of shifting interests, incentives and power relations that play out between countries, regional organisations and the AU.

Understanding the drivers and constraints to regional cooperation

Given the wide array of actors engaged with the AU on its many agendas, and oft-cited frustrations among policymakers and their international partners about progress and implementation gaps, ECDPM has been working to understand the *Political Economy Dynamics of Regional Organisations* ([PEDRO](#)).

This research programme is focused on better understanding, and promoting discussion of, the interests and incentives of the range of different actors who seek to cooperate and integrate around regional agendas and ambitions, including international partners. That means exploring the interaction of a range of actors and factors that shape *domestic* politics, and how they interact with *regional*, *continental*, and *international* relations.

Previous research explored what drives and holds back regional cooperation across a range of regional organisations and sectors. Findings from that work are summarised in [this tool, covering 17 key regional organisations](#). **The summary report of that project talks about the challenge of disentangling the ‘spaghetti bowl’ of African regional memberships, citing:**

“...a need to recognise that barriers to progress on regional integration and cooperation often arise from the continual flux of political bargaining processes between and within countries, and not simply a lack of finance and capacity.”



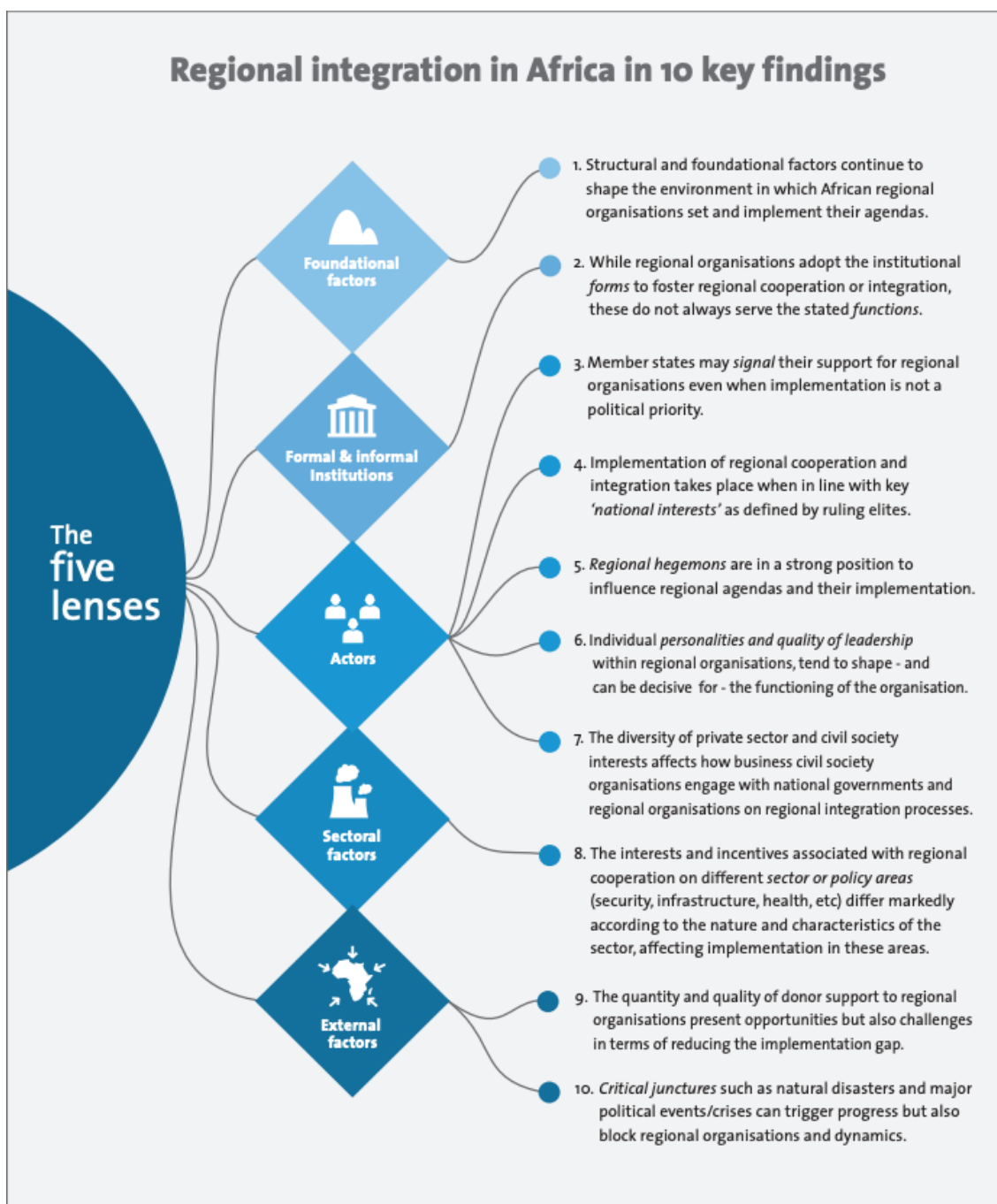
Photo courtesy of [ToniEtyang via Pixabay](#)

That work also pointed to the need to better define or understand the nature of the regional ‘problem’ being addressed and for regional policymakers to be more explicit about where there is a clear value-added from working regionally – the nature of the regional objectives and [type or regional public good involved](#). Doing so raises questions about the appropriate level and form of regional cooperation to aim for, from [the challenges of regional industrial policy](#), to the benefits of [‘muddling through’ in peace and security](#).

The current dependence of many regional organisations on external funding lowers the cost to countries of agreeing on regional agendas, while reducing the sense of ownership of implementation.

This then forms part of the challenge that the Kagame reforms seek to address at the continental level.

Our previous analysis of regional political economy dynamics arrived at **ten key findings that shape regional cooperation**. These also form the basis for exploring the recent set of continental reforms.



Source: [ECDPM brochure](#)

Delving into some continental agendas in PEDRO II

The above findings form an important basis for exploring more recent reforms taking place at the regional and continental levels through our most recent [second PEDRO project](#).

Although the Kagame report lays out a theory of change that seeks to address interests, incentives, and accountability, the reforms target 'formal', or 'visible' institutions in the form of organisational structures, agreements and strategies. But as the above findings show, **a range of other less visible factors shape how these play out in practice.**

In this light, the PEDRO project looks into **several reform case studies in terms of the political economy dynamics that shape progress around these:**

1. [the politics of achieving the ambitions of the AfCFTA agreement](#)
2. [AU-REC relations around the AfCFTA and free movement protocol](#)
3. [how the AfCFTA might help promote industrialisation in Africa](#)
4. [the implications of the AfCFTA for a continent-to-continent trade agreement with the EU](#)
5. [the revised AUC elections process](#)
6. [the merger of the political affairs and peace and security directorate \(PAPS\) merger](#)
7. [the AU new partnerships strategy](#)
8. The power and politics of [AU-UN relations around peace and security](#)

Though operating on different themes and at different levels, all of the reform areas face the same challenge: **how to get beyond the fact that *formal institutional reforms and agreements are necessary but not sufficient for actual impact on the ground.***



Photo courtesy of [Ian Taylor via Unsplash](#)

Further, although the AU is often understood to have a hierarchical relation with the eight recognised RECs and member states, in reality there is a more complex set of interests, incentives and power relations between the three, and indeed other relevant regional organisations, non-state actors and external partners.

Member states are the source of regional and continental agreements through their Heads of State and Government; but regional organisations and the AU are then tasked with promoting those initiatives and encouraging implementation by those same member states; while the RECs and other regional bodies have their own relations and legitimacy among member states; where external support is often financial, but through that also can steer agendas, whether explicitly or implicitly.

As the papers highlight, policymakers and their supporters must understand and grapple with this array of complex relationships that mean that actors and factors may undermine or block reform progress to protect the status quo.

This is not to be defeatist, but rather to encourage policy makers to explore where there are entry points and political traction rather than focusing only on getting a policy that is 'right' on paper. In each policy area there is wide contestation that can cause delays and derail progress, but also sometimes the potential to convene and garner support for reforms.

How these complex relationships then play out differently in different thematic areas is discussed in the following two summaries:

- [The AfCFTA – The political economy of connecting markets and people](#)
- [AU reforms – The political economy of adapting internally and externally](#)

This synthesis note was created by Bruce Byiers and Isabell Wutz building on the work and inputs of Philomena Apiko, Amanda Bisong, Bruce Byiers, Alfonso Medinilla, Martin Ronceray, Lidet Tadesse and Ueli Staeger (external). For information about this guide and to know more about ECDPM's work on African institutions and regional dynamics, and on the PEDRO II project, please contact Bruce Byiers at bby@ecdpm.org.

[Click here to discover our previous work on Political Economy Dynamics of Regional Organisations in Africa](#)