

SYNTHESIS REPORT

The political economy of Africa's regional 'spaghetti bowl'

POLITICAL ECONOMY DYNAMICS OF REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN AFRICA

PEDRO

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May 2019

This report synthesises the findings of a two-year research project on the Political Economy Dynamics of Regional Organisations (PEDRO). It aims to explain why African countries join multiple, often overlapping, regional organisations despite the complications this 'spaghetti bowl' of agreements creates; and what drives and constrains the regional agendas and processes of these organisations. This may help national and regional policymakers in Africa engage more purposefully with African stakeholders and external partners, and move from commitments and strategies towards more effective implementation.

The findings presented discuss why regional organisations often struggle to promote the functional integration that is sought in Africa. Often the ambitions and scope of regional commitments and support go beyond the political 'room for manoeuvre' of national and regional actors. That implies 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. The nature of the regional 'problem' being addressed is also important, raising questions about the appropriate level and form of regional cooperation to aim for and the role of regional organisations within specific policy areas. It also raises the need to identify and focus on locally-defined problems where there is a clear value-added from working regionally.

The current dependence on external funding also shapes the incentive environment for regional organisations, lowering the cost to countries of agreeing on regional agendas, while arguably also reducing the sense of ownership over downstream implementation. But regional organisations are just one of many conduits for regional integration or cooperation – the role of other regional and cross-border dynamics and actors in shaping regional integration also needs to be understood and factored in.

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Acronyms

ABN	Autorité du Bassin du Niger
AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
AU	African Union
CAR	Central African Republic
CEMAC	Commission Economique et Monétaire de l'Afrique Centrale
CICOS	Commission Internationale du bassin Congo–Oubangui–Sangha
COMESA	Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EAC	East African Community
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central African States
ECDPM	European Centre for Development Policy Management
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
FTA	Free trade area
ICGLR	International Conference of the Great Lakes Region
IGAD	Inter-Governmental Authority for Development
IWRM	Integrated Water Resource Management
LCBC	Lake Chad Basin Commission
MNJTF	Multinational Joint Task Force
NBI	Nile Basin Initiative
NELSAP	Nile Equatorial Lakes Subsidiary Action Program
NTB	Non-Tariff Barrier
PEDRO	Political Economy Dynamics of Regional Organisations
RBO	River basin organisation
REC	Regional economic communities
RINR	Regional Initiative against the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources
RISM	Regional Integration Support Mechanism
SACU	Southern African Customs Union
SADC	Southern African Development Community
TFTA	Tripartite Free Trade Area
UEMOA	Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine

1. Introducing PEDRO

With the recent launch of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and agreement on a comprehensive reform package for the African Union (AU), now seems an opportune time to analyse the political economy dynamics behind those processes. But beyond these headline-grabbing continental processes, a host of regional cooperation and integration initiatives also continue to occupy national and regional policymakers. Africa is often referred to as a 'spaghetti bowl' of regional arrangements due to the multiple, overlapping regional organisations that address multiple, overlapping cross-border issues. Together these raise multiple challenges for the regional organisations, their members, and their external partners.

Disentangling the various interests, incentives and power relations that determine the political traction of regional organisations and the interests of their member states is a daunting task. But it is one which can help policymakers at the regional and national levels, as well as their external partners, to engage in regional cooperation with a clearer view of what is (or is not) at stake. A more politically-informed understanding of regional processes and the forces and interests behind them may also help change the terms of dialogue and debate among those involved in regional policies and their implementation. Moreover, it may help develop a more realistic vision of what regional objectives are desirable *and* feasible.

Previous work looking at the political economy of regional integration in Africa has highlighted various factors that influence which regional commitments are implemented and why. These include structural factors that shape the original 'raison d'être' of regional organisations, the way regional institutions have been set up on paper and how they work in practice, the roles played by regional 'hegemon' or swing states with the power to drive or block regional processes - and the interests of political elites within those countries - and the form and extent of support provided by external partners. This work has found that regional commitments are more likely to be implemented where member state elites have incentives to create the bureaucratic capacity required to deliver on these commitments.¹

This paper synthesises the findings of a two-year research project into the *Political Economy Dynamics of Regional Organisations* (PEDRO) in Africa. The project produced more than 30 studies, covering 17 different regional organisations and a wide range of sectors. The research was framed around three central questions:

1. What is the political traction of the regional organisation or process?
2. What are the member state interests in the regional organisation or process?
3. What sector-specific areas have most potential traction?

By addressing these, the PEDRO project aimed to provide a better understanding of what drives and constrains different regional organisations and reform processes across Africa. A more nuanced understanding of the politics behind the wide range of overlapping regional organisations and processes is intended to help national, regional and external policymakers and practitioners move from policies, statements and commitments to more effective policy implementation.²

¹ These findings are summarised under the PERIA project synthesis paper: <http://www.ecdpm.org/peria>.

² All PEDRO studies, including summaries, are available on the ECDPM website <http://www.ecdpm.org/pedro> along with the map of regional organisations produced under this project: <http://www.ecdpm.org/regionalmap>. The studies are a mix of desk-based work and field interviews, intended to address three main questions: what is the political traction of the regional organisation among its member states? What are the main interests of member states in the regional organisation? What sectors have most potential traction for regional integration. These have been turned into i) a set of regional studies for specific sectors, ii) thematic discussion papers drawing from across regions - on peace and security, regional industrialisation strategies, and river basin organisations among others, and iii) deep dive studies into the political economy of Nigeria and South Africa with respect to the AfCFTA; AU finances and the reform process; the livestock value chain in West Africa; and how Mali engages regionally on its water and energy agenda. All are available at <http://www.ecdpm.org/pedro>

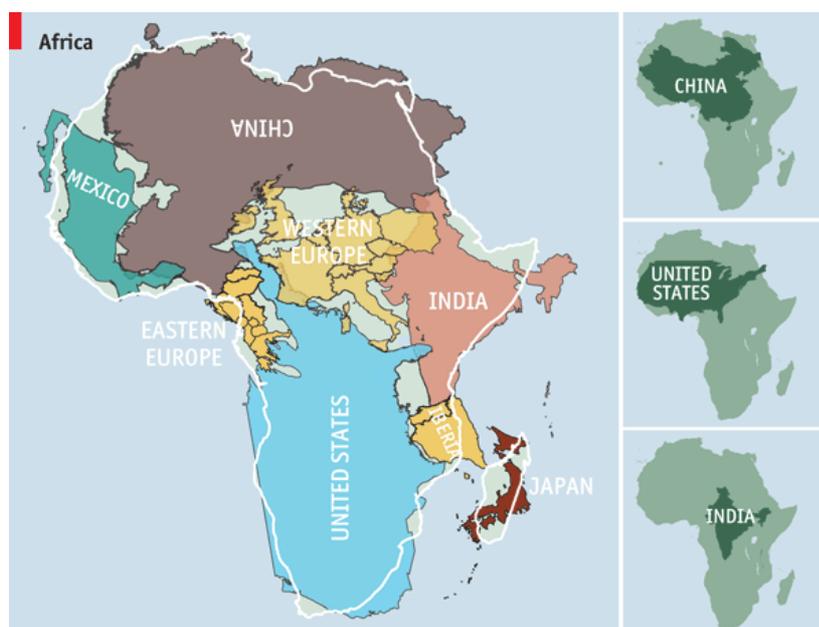
The paper does not summarise all of the studies produced under the PEDRO project, but rather illustrates key themes, commonalities, tradeoffs and cross-cutting challenges that emerge across the various policy areas and regional organisations. Section 2 begins with some reflections on the different drivers that have led these regional organisations to emerge, summarised broadly as *why they're there*. Section 3 discusses how these and other factors have shaped what the regional organisations try to do and are sometimes expected to do - *what they (aim to) do*. Section 4 then goes into some of the tensions that help explain how and where they have traction or not, before Section 5 concludes with reflections for policymakers working on regional integration and cooperation on *what (not) to do*.

2. Why all the regional organisations?

Regions as building blocks?

The African continent covers roughly the same area as the European Union and five countries: China, India, Mexico, Japan and the US (See Figure 1). That 54 African countries cover the same area as these six economic areas, with 16 landlocked countries among them, highlights the large number of borders that must be overcome to generate economies of scale through larger markets. This is the logic underpinning Africa's regional economic communities (RECs) and their role as 'building blocks for African economic integration' under the AU.

Figure 1: A continent of continents



Source: *The Economist* 2010³

Thinking of regional organisations as 'building blocks' suggests some degree of uniformity among RECs, or of a well-structured division of labour. But this is not the case. Different RECs are at different stages along the path to economic and political integration, and are likely to remain so for some time. The division of labour according to 'subsidiarity' - attributing roles so that issues are dealt with at the most appropriate level, be it local, national, regional or continental - makes sense on paper, with on-going AU reforms intended to re-examine how the AU interacts with the RECs. But as the examples in this report show, the choice of which

³ The Economist, 2010: The true size of Africa. Africa is bigger than it looks on most maps of the world, Nov 10th 2010. <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2010/11/10/the-true-size-of-africa>

organisations address which issues and how, has less to do with formal divisions of labour than the outcome of negotiation, bargaining and power games between and within states and different regional organisations.

In a similar vein, overlapping regional economic groups such as the Commission Economique et Monétaire de l'Afrique Centrale (CEMAC) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS); or the Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine (UEMOA) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), respectively, are engaged in discussions about 'rationalising' their activities to avoid overlap and duplication. But as discussed in the studies covering these organisations, such ambitions ignore their different origins, histories, allegiances among leaders, regional balances of power and influence, levels of integration reached, and the overall sense of belonging created. In practice these aspects take precedence over considerations of efficiency or eliminating overlapping tasks and mandates, thus undermining arguments for rationalisation even if that appears to invite chaos. The PEDRO studies highlight the need to understand each regional organisation for what it is, with its own history, context and alliances of members, all of which shape what are realistic integration and cooperation objectives.

Beyond trade

Beyond economic integration, there are many other issues to be addressed regionally. With 63 transboundary river basins covering 64% of the continent's land area (UNEP 2010), numerous transboundary forests, and regional spillovers from conflicts, there is again an *a priori* logic for collective action to address these through regional integration and cooperation.⁴

The desire to *share and preserve* existing regional public goods such as rivers, lakes and forests and to *create and maintain* regional public goods such as regional markets for trade in goods and services, energy, transport or food security; or the need to minimise public 'bads' created by the cross-border effects of conflict and climate change; all call for regional cooperation. This is recognised in the growing importance that RECs give to peace and security - ECOWAS and the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD) stand out in this regard - or to natural resource management, where the SADC Regional Water Strategy is an illustration. Regional organisations frequently also have a norm-setting mandate, setting standards for their members in terms of governance and democracy principles, and policies to promote gender equality and youth opportunities. Though each of these have different levels of political traction at a regional level, all ostensibly have a cross-country element that requires at least some coordination of national level actions.

Beyond RECs

Just as African states are in many cases circumscribed by arbitrarily defined boundaries, so too are regional groupings. Cross-border challenges and opportunities are not always confined to the borders of a REC, but rather span multiple regional groupings. In such cases, inter-REC coordination is necessary. This partly explains the demand for the Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA) among SADC, the EAC and COMESA. But it can also mean a need for additional organisations to work on inter-REC issues, helping explain the co-existence of the AU-REC framework alongside multiple other regional bodies.

Another case in point is the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC). Though ostensibly a water management organisation to manage an important regional public good, the LCBC was chosen as an intergovernmental structure to accommodate the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), a joint military effort between Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria under Nigerian command to combat the threat of Boko Haram in the region. This was needed as the main countries involved include both ECOWAS and ECCAS members. Neither the one nor the other could legitimately be used to address this transboundary security threat. Similarly, the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) was set up following the DRC

⁴ Although the UN recognises 54 states, the African Union also includes the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic.

military crisis to fill a gap given the need to include countries from the Southern African Development Community, the EAC and ECCAS.

CICOS is another interesting example. This river basin organisation, dealing with the wider Congo river basin, was essentially formed out of CEMAC countries plus the DRC, which has by far the dominant stake in the Congo river basin. CICOS was later joined by Angola, also a tributary country. This raises the question of why CEMAC was the host REC and not ECCAS. As our study describes, the demand for setting up CICOS did not come from the DRC - which historically considered the Congo river a purely national waterway - but from its francophone CEMAC neighbours. The CAR and Congo Brazzaville used CEMAC as a forum to lobby the DRC for cooperation on shared waters and navigation rather than the wider ECCAS which risked entangling other countries and interests.⁵

The need for complementary structures to address regional issues arising between two RECs helps explain the plethora of African regional organisations. But regional organisations are not always responses to current regional needs.

The long arm of history

Though the need for coordination provides the logic for regional organisations, most are not new creations. Many are continuations or reconfigurations of colonial arrangements, for example the East African Community (EAC) or the francophone UEMOA and CEMAC arrangements in West and Central Africa respectively. The Franc CFA is less the result of successful recent monetary integration than an inheritance from the past. Many river basin management organisations originally started out as technical bodies to facilitate navigation between newly independent African countries - the Commission Internationale du bassin Congo–Oubangui–Sangha (CICOS) emerged from the Tripartite Commission between Congo-Brazzaville, Central African Republic (CAR) and Zaire in 1978 to coordinate navigation on the Congo River, and later the Ubangui and Sangha rivers. Rather than bottom-up collective action, many regional bodies reflect path dependency. This has implications for the political incentives and power relations at play between and within states. As such, geography and history both continue to play a role in shaping which countries participate in which regional organisation and how.

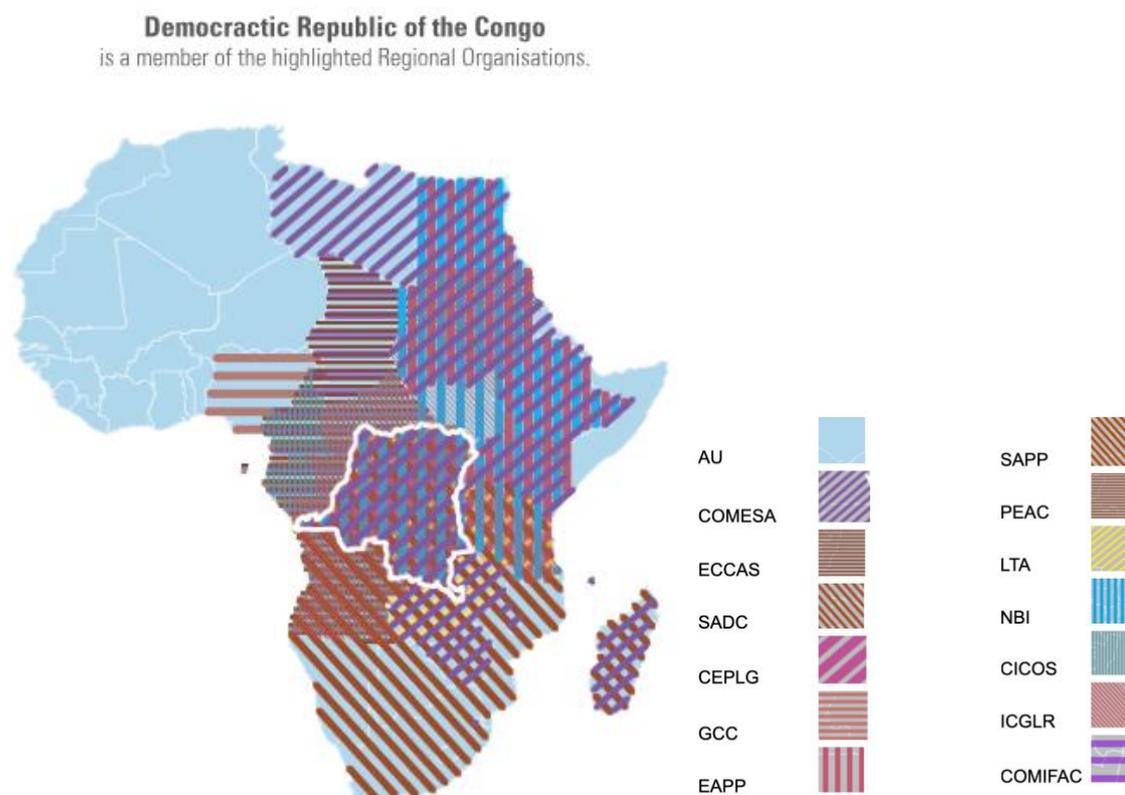
Regional bodies everywhere

On average African countries are a member of eight regional organisations. These include the eight AU-recognised RECs, long-standing customs, economic and monetary unions such as the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), UEMOA and CEMAC, and a range of regional organisations covering river basin management, peace and security, energy, or forestry.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) currently holds the crown for memberships of 14 African regional organisations.⁶ Though other factors are surely at work, discussed below, geography and country size clearly play a role. Different parts of the DRC are integrated with different neighbouring countries and therefore regions, which strengthens the case to be a member of multiple regional organisations. Of the eight AU-recognised RECs, the DRC is a member of three, namely the Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), SADC and ECCAS. Recent reports further suggest renewed requests in 2019 to join the EAC. While anecdotally some European Union (EU) officials have in the past suggested that 'each country should just choose one region', what may be more important is to understand what countries and their leaders seek from each of these regional blocs.

⁵ CEMAC also helps with the financing of CICOS, since its members contributions are taken from the CEMAC Community Integration Tax.

⁶ See ECDPM Talking Point here: <https://ecdpm.org/talking-points/regional-organisations-africa-mapping-multiple-memberships/> and <http://www.ecdpm.org/regionalmap>

Figure 2: DRC and its multiple memberships⁷

Source: ECDPM 2018 <http://www.ecdpm.org/regionalmap>

Multiple memberships, multiple reasons

African countries seek different things from different regional organisations. Although both the EAC and IGAD ostensibly share the same goals under the African economic architecture, the IGAD and EAC studies underline how the Kenyan government places more emphasis on market integration within the EAC, which is more advanced than IGAD in integrating markets. IGAD serves Kenyan and (possible Ugandan) interests in promoting peace and security in South Sudan and Somalia - key risk factors for the Kenyan and Ugandan economies and populations. Kenya therefore seems to have different objectives from membership of the two RECs, at least at present. Those objectives may change with time - Kenya's interest in economic integration with the IGAD countries may increase as Ethiopia's economy continues to grow and open up to the region, potentially creating significant opportunities for Kenyan firms. The dynamism in the EAC partly derives from the interest of Kenyan businesses in exploiting the wider EAC market.

Even in the economic realm, different RECs offer different benefits to their members - our studies on COMESA and the EAC discuss how Kenya benefits from COMESA to protect its markets, for example from the dumping of sugar, in ways which it cannot do under EAC regulations. Though not Kenya's sole reason for remaining in COMESA, it illustrates how different interests can be served by different regional organisations even in the same policy realm.

Another reason for joining multiple regional organisations is to access larger markets. Having left ECCAS in 2007 to focus its efforts on EAC integration, Rwanda re-joined ECCAS in 2016, when membership was no

⁷ Included here are: AU, COMESA, ECCAS, SADC, CEPGL, CGC, EAPP, SAPP, PEAC, LTA, CICOS, NBI, ICGLR, and COMIFAC.

longer seen as an either-or decision. Being a member of both clearly opens up wider market possibilities. Zambia markets itself as a gateway to both COMESA and SADC markets, respectively, allowing it to play a role in trade with the large economies of Egypt and South Africa. The recent requests by Morocco and Tunisia to join ECOWAS and COMESA, respectively, also highlight the changing nature of interests and demand, and growing drive of these countries, and Morocco in particular, towards their neighbours in sub-Saharan Africa (although admittedly it also reflects the moribund state of the Arab Maghreb Union, another AU-recognised REC).

But multiple memberships are not only about markets. The ECOWAS studies highlight the role of the eight UEMOA bloc of countries as a counterweight to Nigerian hegemony in shaping the 15-country ECOWAS agenda. Similarly, all members of CEMAC are members of ECCAS. Though partly about path dependency - UEMOA and CEMAC pre-date ECOWAS and ECCAS - even these 'sub-RECs' can play a specific role, thus justifying their continued existence. As well as a shared history among members, UEMOA and CEMAC have common currencies and a regional central bank. UEMOA is deemed by many as being more operational and able to further advance effective implementation than ECOWAS although they share similar goals that theoretically render UEMOA obsolete. This raises important questions about the ECOWAS ambition to introduce its own common currency, planned to be in circulation by 2020 - will the UEMOA countries prefer to stay with the French- and Euro-backed Franc CFA or put their lot in with the Nigerian and Ghanaian economies?

Finally, multiple memberships can relate to countries seeking objectives beyond the original purpose or principal role of regional organisations. Our analysis of the Autorité du Bassin du Niger (ABN) shows how countries use the regional body as a way to raise finance for long-held country-level hydro-electric projects. With the increasing availability of climate-related funds, this topical interest rather than issues *directly related to regional water management* may lead to new demands on river basin organisations. This then points not only to the different interests countries have in regional organisations, but also the need to see these regional organisations for the role they actually play and the purpose they serve for their member states, rather than what they are 'meant to do'.

Complementing or competing?

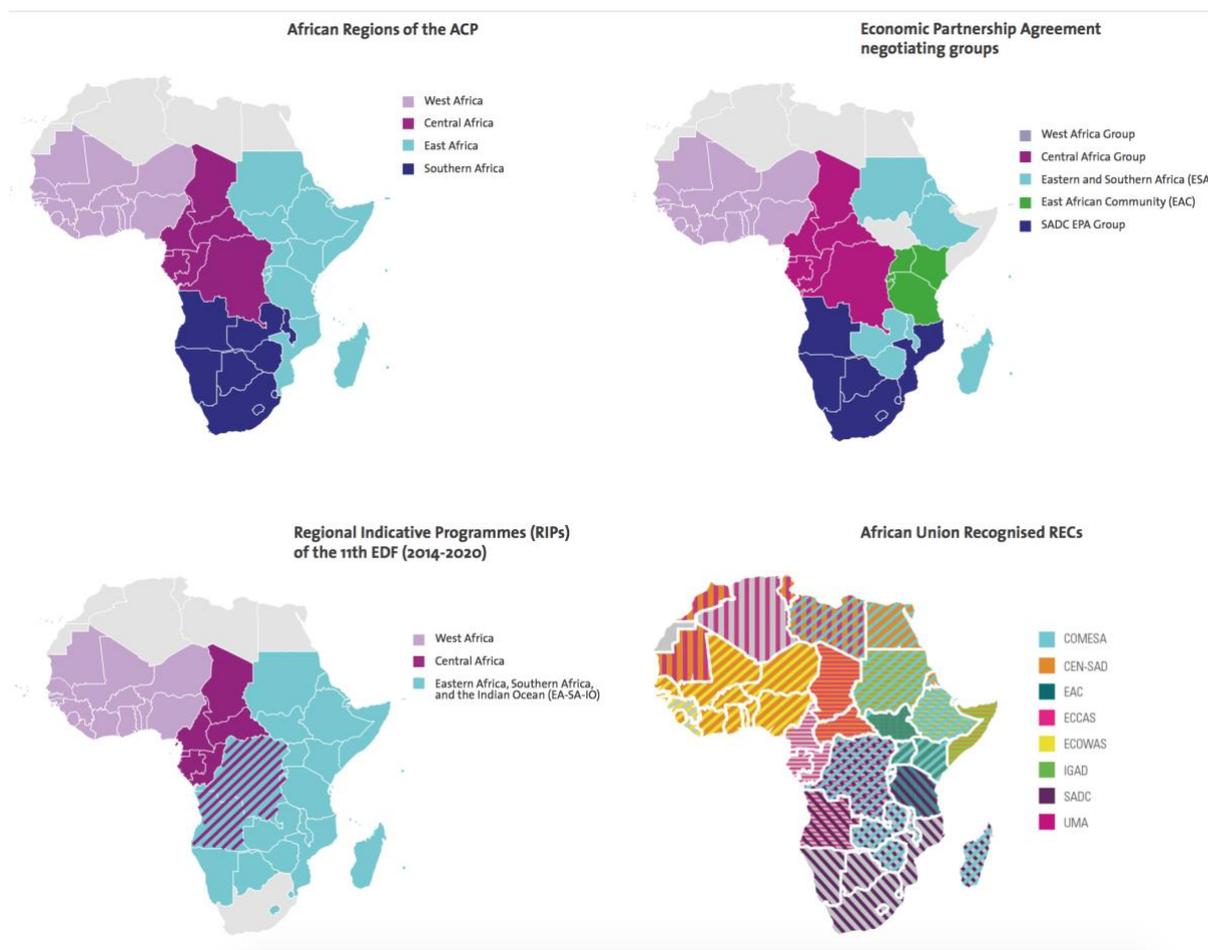
If countries are members of several organisations working on the same topics, is this necessarily bad? River basin organisations raise interesting questions around subsidiarity and complementarity with respect to multi-purpose regional organisations such as the RECs. What is the appropriate level at which to address water issues? River basin organisations allow a focus on one resource and restrict membership to the countries directly affected by that resource - for example the entire Nile basin is covered by the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI). But at the same time, the principles underlying Nile usage might also apply to other rivers in the Horn of Africa - thus there is also a logic for IGAD to design a regional water policy that harmonises practices on the Nile Basin to apply to other rivers. Though critics suggest that IGAD simply wants a regional water policy to emulate other RECs such as SADC or ECOWAS, there is a deeper question about complementing river-focused efforts in the wider region to provide consistency but also avoid competition or duplication: Ethiopia is upstream of all its neighbouring countries but generally does not engage in regional approaches to water, preferring a bilateral approach. This implies taking different approaches for each river, to the potential cost of its neighbours. A regional water policy in principle could provide a basis for addressing such inconsistencies.

While different regional bodies may be able to complement each other, there is even a line of argument that these overlaps may even be necessary. Authors de Waal and Ibreck (2016) suggest that complex regions such as the Horn of Africa require "not only a multilateral approach, but also an approach of multiple and overlapping multilateralisms". By offering different fora and channels for discussion, these can help in regions

of “persistent turbulence” created by long-running, inter and intra-state conflicts, rivalries, alliances among states with widely varying capacities to govern.

External partners including the EU have long struggled to work with the complexity of overlapping regional organisations in Africa. In some cases, they have developed frameworks to try and rationalise African regions from a purely geographical perspective (Medinilla & Bossuyt 2018: 10), creating yet another layer for coordination.

Figure 3: Different EU approaches to African regionalism



Source: Medinilla & Bossuyt 2018: 11

But the main difficulty is perhaps less the fact that memberships overlap, but that it can be difficult to distinguish which regional functions organisations really perform and how to strengthen governance and organisational capabilities to effectively implement these functions.

3. What do African regional organisations (aim to) do?

Pragmatic responses or mission creep?

Whatever their origin, regional organisations ostensibly aim to address shared regional challenges or to provide particular regional public goods. They seek to promote common markets, common responses to conflict, coordinated approaches to natural resources, and harmonisation of policies to facilitate exchange

and cooperation. But over time the agendas of most regional organisations have expanded dramatically to include new areas, leading to 'agenda inflation'. Whether due to external funding, the search for relevance among member states, or following global policy trends, expanding agendas have added to the difficulties of implementation.

While ECOWAS was set up to promote economic integration, not least between the francophone UEMOA countries and their anglophone neighbours, especially Nigeria, the focus quickly expanded to include and indeed prioritise security, an area where its mandate has grown significantly. IGAD, started out as the UN-initiated Inter-Governmental Agency for Drought and Development in the Horn of Africa, but is now best known and appreciated for its role in peace and security in the Horn of Africa. Other examples of expanding agendas include the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR). This began as a forum to help promote dialogue among heads of state, but has since become recognised for its Regional Initiative against the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources (RINR) - a key element underpinning conflict in the region and one with wider implications for employment and economic transformation. The success of the RINR is due to the strong interest of the ICGLR member states Rwanda and DRC in particular, to be able to sell their minerals on the international market. But however useful, the relation to ICGLR's original mandate is quite loose. Other examples of agenda expansion include CICOS that went from a focus on navigation on the Congo-Ubangu-Sangha river basin to becoming a fully-fledged river basin organisation with an integrated water resource management approach. Even COMESA began as a free trade area (FTA) but with REC status has added other areas to its mandate including industry, agriculture and gender among others.

Though 'agenda inflation' sometimes stems from a sense that regional organisations must engage on *all* issues that affect development in their member states - particularly for the eight AU-recognised RECs - to be relevant they must work on issues of interest to their members and where there is finance.

Looking across the experiences of the different regional organisations, it is striking how both single-purpose (e.g. river based or drought-focused) and multi-purpose organisations (e.g. the RECs) are pulled towards these broader, multifaceted agendas. The logic may stand that peace and security, economic development, agriculture, trade, energy access, water access and social issues are ultimately all connected. Yet, taking a 'holistic approach' across such a range of topics requires a level of institutionalisation, capacity and commitment to coordinate and cooperate that is rarely in place. While often these interconnected issues are a challenge to address within one country, doing so among several countries brings additional complexity.

Collective action, or a collection of actions?

In practice, the agendas of regional organisations often comprise lots of activities that are not necessarily 'regional' in scope. That is, not all issues addressed are attempts to overcome collective action failures at the regional level. Instead, many initiatives undertaken by regional organisations look like projects in one or more countries, that just happen to be implemented by a regional organisation. This raises questions about the value added of addressing them at a regional level, which is all the more important given the agenda inflation issues discussed above.

As our IGAD study cites, IGAD claims to coordinate and help implement "most projects of all RECs". While this sounds impressive, these are often isolated projects in member states, which raises the question of why IGAD is best placed to deliver these. Such an approach to regional integration is arguably part of building trust among neighbours, something that is certainly relevant in IGAD, but it also seems to reflect the limited traction for genuine regional collective action.

The challenge for regional organisations is to work on issues where there is a genuine benefit from regional cooperation, a demand for regional action, but also where member states are willing and able to cooperate

and can raise the budget to do so. Although member states may have an interest in promoting gender equality or food security, what this means for regional collective action requires further examination rather than simply a strategy.

Regional industrial policies also illustrate this challenge. Though regional approaches to industrialisation seem to make sense at first glance - industrialisation and economic transformation are high on the African agenda and might benefit from cross-country synergies and economies of scale - our studies highlight the challenges of coordinating national responses within an agenda where national (or narrow elite economic) interests often prevail. The EAC, ECOWAS, COMESA and SADC all have regional industrialisation strategies, but all face the same challenges of coming up with mutually beneficial activities while each member attempts to raise its own value added in specific sectors, sometimes at the expense of its neighbours.

While governments often profess to support coordination and cooperation at the regional level, their political interest is more directly felt at the national level. National industrial strategies are generally about boosting value addition *within* national borders, using tools such as import and export bans that then undermine regional commitments. Though 'collective self-reliance' is frequently cited as an objective for regional collaboration, this would mean, for example, that countries prioritise processing of their raw commodities *within the region* over exporting these for processing elsewhere. In practice, however, producers care about the price they receive for their products, not where they are processed once sold. The case of livestock in West Africa also illustrates the contradiction between regional value chain ambitions expressed through UEMOA and a recent cross-border livestock ban by Côte d'Ivoire intended to promote the national livestock and meat industry. Contradictions between regional objectives and national interests, whether narrowly shaped by national elites or via democratic processes, make it difficult for regional organisations to encourage implementation, even where a strategy has been agreed by Heads of State.

This raises questions about what a useful regional industrial strategy can and should do to complement national strategies. The COMESA industrial strategy has components that focus on piloting specific approaches in member states, for example in the leather sector. But this also highlights that different sectors arguably open space for different levels of regional coordination, integration, cooperation, or lesson-sharing, and are exposed to different levels of demand for action or intervention.

Dialogue platform or club diplomacy?

The question of when and where regional organisations really have added value also raises questions about how they operate in practice, their levels of ambition, and relevant benchmarks for success. While 'frustration with lack of progress' on integration is regularly cited, particularly in relation to long-passed deadlines for implementing regional decisions, such as establishing a customs union in SADC, a more favourable view is often that regional organisations are fulfilling important functions in a complex international environment. Some point to African regional organisations as flexible, adaptive responses to complex transboundary issues (e.g. Juma and Mangeni, 2018).

Regional organisations are often said to play a useful role as a platform for high-level discussion among Heads of State in regions of conflict. In regions such as the Horn of Africa or the Great Lakes Region, IGAD and ICGLR have clearly played an important role in this regard. Indeed, one of the main cited benefits of IGAD is to operate as a platform for previously warring Heads of State to discuss key issues at very short notice in an attempt to avoid further conflict. The ICGLR has also played this role in the Great Lakes Region, providing a forum for dialogue among previously warring parties.

However, this is a more limited role in comparison to the stated ambitions of many African regional organisations. Though some have described African regional organisations as a form of club diplomacy and summitry, primarily used for regime boosting at home, the trust-building role of 'dialogue platforms' may be a necessary part of a longer trajectory towards more meaningful integration, capacity-building, cooperation and regional problem-solving, not least in the area of peace and security. The NBI case also highlights how collaboration and trust-building at a technical level around data collection and creating a better regional understanding can itself also lead to a more common regional understanding of the challenges faced.

Minimising harm, or maximising benefits?

As the above discussion suggests, part of the challenge for regional organisations lies in the different nature of regional public goods. Cooperating and integrating around trade, peace and security, or river basin management each bring different political imperatives and possibilities that alter incentives to engage, the benefit of doing so, and the potential costs of inaction or failure to implement. Whereas our studies suggest that limiting cross-border spillovers from conflict is a clear driver of peace and security collaboration through the likes of IGAD and LCBC, they also suggest that aspirational regional agendas around e.g. trade and industrialisation get less implementation buy-in from their members. The attempt to create future benefits across a region, where the potential beneficiaries are hard to identify and generally not organised to demand such changes, carries less urgency than current, cross-border emergencies created by conflict or disease.

This is illustrated by ECOWAS' move to enforce the election results in Gambia in 2017. After long-term incumbent Yahya Jammeh refused to be ousted after the surprise election result, it took a collective threat of force, led by Nigeria and Senegal through ECOWAS (backed by the AU and UN), to bring the result about. ECOWAS lent this threat legitimacy, also making it more credible and acceptable to the international community than two states simply deciding to intervene.

In other areas, the nature of the regional public good means that failure to implement reduces the overall potential benefit. But the impacts of non-participation also vary across policy areas. In regional trade, the size of the regional market and thus the opportunities for economies of scale in production are a key part of the logic for regional trade. But the scale of the benefits depends on who is willing to actually implement the agreement. Though a continental FTA without Nigeria might still be larger than any existing agreement, it would still be missing a major section of the market. In a similar vein, as our energy-related studies show, bilateral energy connections often exist between pairs of countries but offer limited benefits compared to fully functional power pools with regional energy markets.

As these and many other of the issues discussed in this section highlight, much relates to domestic politics, and the willingness of states to fully engage in the regional organisations and agendas they subscribe to on paper.

Coordinating policies and collective action at regional level

ecdpm

The world of possibilities: Creating, maintaining, sharing and preserving of regional public goods

The world of necessities: minimising public regional risks

Norm-setting role



Influencing factors for the implementation of regional policies



ALIGN REGIONAL GOALS WITH NATIONAL INTERESTS

Any reform creates winners and losers - if private or public sector workers see that regional integration will lower their power or economic opportunities, regionally agreed issues may be undermined in practice.



EFFECTIVE ENFORCEMENT MECHANISMS

Particularly if there is limited monitoring or enforcement, when national blockages arise, there is no penalty to counter them.



GREATER TRUST BETWEEN STATES

Mistrust comes out as a collective action failure - nobody wants to move first if it might undermine internal groups, while the benefits may take longer to come - and if there is little certainty of others doing it.



PRIORITISING REGIONAL AGENDAS

A 'holistic approach' at the regional level to cover a wide range of policy areas may imply spreading limited capacity increasingly thinly, losing focus, and thus lacking effectiveness.



SUPPORTING NOT DRIVING COOPERATION

With most regional organisations still depending on external funding for the majority of their budget, external influences can shape the framework and policy agenda.



4. What shapes the political traction of regional organisations?

Institutional forms or function?

All of the above discussions - on the number of regional organisations, their overlaps, their origins and logic, and their wide and expanding agendas - point to one of the key challenges that comes out of the PEDRO project: the contrast between the institutional forms that regional organisations take and the actual functions they fulfil.

The institutional forms of many of the RECs and other regional organisations are based on external models. The African Union, numerous RECs, river basin organisations and regional power pools, all based their establishing documents on models imported from Europe. The CEMAC and ECOWAS discussions point to this influence in particular. Such emulation can take the form of mimicking of imported policy models, or copying of organisational forms that insufficiently take account of existing capabilities, norms and the real 'rules of the game'.

At the same time, the majority of our studies show that effective power and initiative remains with the heads of state. Though regional Commissions have the legal status to propose rules and encourage implementation, and most regional bodies have consultative bodies to engage with citizens, power and initiative nonetheless remains very much in the hands of the Heads of State. It is perhaps this characteristic that encourages high levels of rhetorical support for regional integration - particularly at high level summits - which then contrasts with implementation when summit decisions are faced with domestic interests, pressure and interest groups, where the momentum of the high-level announcement is quickly lost.

This is illustrated in our analysis of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), where in spite of Nigeria leading negotiations and endorsement from formal trade policymaking bodies in the country, private sector interests managed to persuade President Buhari at the last minute not to sign the Agreement establishing the AfCFTA. While the formal channels for negotiation and approval had supposedly produced consensus on signing the agreement, informal channels of influence finally held sway against this 'consensus'. This reflects how the formal structures of regional agreements and organisations can be undermined through informal channels. Another telling example is the Grand Renaissance Dam, which the Ethiopian government unilaterally decided to build according to its own specifications, in spite of agreements through the Nile Basin Initiative to share river waters and avoid harm to downstream countries.

Within this discussion, it is also important to stress the role of national leaders and individual personalities. A case in point is the ongoing AU reform process. One concern raised in our study is whether the momentum achieved under the leadership of President Kagame will be maintained now that he is no longer AU chair. Questions remain whether the new Egyptian chair will have the same drive, capacity, and interest in pushing for a more efficient AU that can rely on African financing and thereby escape the spectre of donor dependency. The new chair and other leaders may also be more cautious in pushing AU reforms for fear of alienating other African leaders. Past successes in regional integration or collaboration are often more related to national leaders and their incentive or interest in cooperation than the existence of formal structures.

If member states do not work through the formal regional institutions for deciding and implementing decision, this hinders the regional organisation in playing its role. In a somewhat circular logic, this sometimes translates to member state frustration with regional secretariats at the lack of progress in regional agendas, when the base of the problem remains domestic politics and failure to implement.

Though this also relates to the specific areas of regional cooperation, and to the level of ownership or accountability around regional agendas.

Finance & accountability

A major element in explaining this gap between rhetoric and implementation is money. Even if there is a strong logic for regional cooperation and market integration, and though one might accept the logic for overlapping regional groupings and mandates, all these memberships come at a cost. There is an opportunity cost for government staff in following, attending and contributing to different regional fora with a thinly spread set of officials - interlocutors complain how South African trade officials are always off negotiating some regional integration issues, whether to do with SADC, SACU, the Tripartite FTA or the AfCFTA. Secondly, there is the cost of paying membership fees to each of the different regional organisations and financing the actual projects at a regional level.

As a member of the AU, EAC and ECCAS, Rwanda commits to applying each of their community levy schemes, implying cumulative levies on its imports. Even if a small percentage charge, after rejoining ECCAS Rwanda has had to renegotiate its levy given its EAC commitments, the new AU-related levy of 0.2% on imports from outside Africa, and its related reluctance to add further import levies. Other countries keen to pay their bills will face similar challenges.

But regional organisations receive only a small share of their financing from their member states. Today most regional organisations are characterised by delays and indeed non-payment of contributions by members - that is, they do not foot the bill of their regional memberships. So, any disincentive to sign up to multiple regional organisations are weak: it is cheap, there is limited peer pressure from other member states (mostly limited to signing on to strategies and statements rather than actual implementation) and staying on the outside will mean exclusion from discussions. The low-cost to joining a regional organisation is only possible due to the availability of external finance and lack of enforcement of regional commitments, discussed below.

This dependence on foreign funding is partly what triggered the AU reforms proposed by President Kagame. Though reforming the African Union (AU) had been on the agenda for some time, our study finds that a shift in donor funding brought about a financial crisis within the AU. This then created the political traction for an ambitious reform agenda, including self-financing the AU. Subsequently, the highest AU body agreed to introduce a levy of 0.2% on all eligible imports to the continent, as a mechanism through which member states could reliably and timely finance the AU (Apiko and Aggad, 2018).

Though implementation of the new levy and wider AU reforms are still on-going (and anecdotally, also subject to resistance from some member states), beyond capacity to deliver, actual implementation depends on interests and incentives to do so, including the disincentives and perverse effects of foreign funding.

The underlying assumption of the AU reform process is that self-financing the AU will incentivise states to hold the continental body accountable and be clearer about the role it might play, and make them more likely to implement what they have agreed at the AU level. Whether or not this happens will emerge with time. But if the logic behind this assumption is correct - that member states don't hold their regional organisations accountable because they largely don't pay for them - it may explain why there is such limited accountability in the relations between member states and their regional organisations.

Although there are discussions in many regional fora on how to encourage or incentivise member state contributions, most African regional organisations remain predominantly reliant on external financing to stay

afloat⁸. This detaches political decision making at Heads of State summits from budgetary or policy implications with added knock-on effects on the overall performance and governance of ROs, contributing also to rapidly expanding agendas

The influence of external actors on regional organisations goes beyond money and is frequently part of agenda expansion and institutional mimicry. The donor pressure to mimic ideal-type policy or institutional models, for example, comes across in the case of river basin organisations and the promotion of the *Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM)* approach. The international best-practice model of IWRM has become extremely influential in how river basin organisations (RBOs) are run, how they define their agendas, and in particular how they are financed. Influential donors have promoted this model, conditioning aid to its application. However, as discussed in our SADC water study, the IWRM approach is criticised for focusing on a normative approach to water ‘conservation’ that does not fully respond to the interests many African states have in using water resources for energy production or large-scale irrigation. Since donor funding for regional organisations is conditioned on IWRM approaches, IWRM-focused agendas have been widely adopted. Not surprisingly, these often lack genuine political traction among member states. In the case of the ABN and the LCBC for example, this leads to a parallel, project-based focus on IWRM, while negotiations between member states on major infrastructure remains the core business of the organisation, even if these are not always in line with the principled approach these member states officially adhere to through their regional bodies. The array of IGAD technical projects discussed above, though framed as the regional body operating locally to establish trust across borders, is arguably also a result of fragmented donor ambitions and financing.

In addition, external sponsors often expect too much in too short a time span, leading to premature load-bearing (Andrews et al, 2017), a phenomenon that weakens rather than strengthens such organisations. This blocks them from developing the core functions - such as accountability and reporting functions - for creating ownership and delivering regional added value.

Compliance in whose interest?

Regional agendas are formally negotiated and agreed by member states. Yet donor dynamics, as described above, also add to the agenda, often in ways that distort accountability relations with member states, contaminate levels of trust, and disincentivise collective action and ownership. While this is part of the explanation of weak implementation of regional agendas, which is heightened by the limited financial implications of membership, the combination of these are also generally accompanied by ineffective enforcement mechanisms.

The history of regional trade integration in Africa suggests that it cannot be taken for granted that member states will follow through on the commitments they make at a regional level. In many cases the decisions and commitments made by African leaders in regional fora are inconsistent with domestic political dynamics back home, or with the interests of powerful domestic actors. Given the lack of enforcement mechanisms, leaders can get away with making regional commitments and then not implementing them when domestic obstacles to doing so arise. In the case of Nigeria, such obstacles arose even before the AfCFTA was signed.

The lack of regional enforcement mechanisms to push states to implement what is agreed, whether it be to reduce tariffs on regional trade or transfer funds, lowers the cost of non-compliance for member states. Combined with the low cost of membership due to external finance, and it becomes clearer why regional agendas often struggle for traction.

⁸ ECOWAS stands out as an exception where its community tariff means its running costs are roughly 80% self-funded though other investments and projects are financed externally, and its total budget is not known.

Nonetheless, some attempts have been made to encourage compliance in different regional arrangements. Our COMESA study discusses the COMESA Regional Integration Support Mechanism (RISM), which, though also externally financed, managed to align with national incentives, providing finance according to progress in implementing regional agreements. The EAC, SADC and COMESA are also implementing a Non-Tariff Barrier (NTB) monitoring mechanism, relying on user experiences and reporting to hold governments to account in removing NTBs, while the EAC has a Scorecard mechanism on how states are performing in implementing regional commitments.

Though these seem to provide a basis for stronger accountability between regional organisations and their states and members, the lack of legal frameworks or strong institutions to enforce compliance seems to reflect a deliberate choice by member states, rather than an accident of history or lack of capacity. The dissolution of the SADC Tribunal in 2012 is a case in point. Overall, solidarity among members seems to feature strongly in regional cooperation, alongside peer pressure not to miss out, and of course actual regional public good provision.

5. Conclusions - what (not) to do?

Seeing like a region

When the Economist magazine cited “lack of staff”, “lack of powers to enforce decisions”, and “dreadfully slow decision-making procedure” which meant the regional treaty was “not being applied”, it was not about Africa but the European integration process (The Economist, 1982). More recently, the suggestion that “when it comes to elevating form over substance, and confusing a proliferation of meetings and acronyms for a deepening of ties, [this regional organisation] is the master”, it was about ASEAN (The Economist, 3 September, 2016). Regional integration is tricky everywhere, so it is worth highlighting that the challenges to regional integration are not uniquely African.

Looks may also be deceiving. In *Seeing Like a State*, James C. Scott (1998) discusses numerous grand ‘development projects’ through the ages and their unforeseen consequences and failings. His point is that ‘seeing like a state’ does not necessarily lead to statehood. The regional comparison is striking. Adopting the formal trappings of a regional economic community or integration arrangement does not necessarily translate into regional integration or cooperation with the necessary shared ambitions and commitments to bear costs in the name of regional public goods. This is evident from the multiple studies discussed in this paper.

As the first section has described, there is a clear logic for many if not all of the African regional organisations. It may be geographical, bridging regions across a vast continent; sectoral, providing a platform for coordination or cooperation around a specific regional agenda; or it may be historical, building on past cross-country administrative structures. But whichever it is, these aspects continue to play a role in today’s integration efforts and can frame how countries and their leaders see regional opportunities and potential threats to national interests or their political survival.

Despite these logics, governments in Africa see their interests served by intergovernmental bodies in marginal ways. This encourages these governments to behave opportunistically within short time-frames with insufficient attention to the longer term strengthening of those regional functions needed to supply regional public goods. Membership of multiple regional organisations is but one manifestation of this lack of traction for providing regional public goods. The abundance of organisations and regional institutional forms that do not generate functions and capabilities required for producing regional added value is another, as is the lack of financial commitment of many member states towards their regional organisations.

In helping to fill the financing gap that most regional organisations face, fragmented donor funding creates incentives for regional organisations and their member states to focus on establishing institutional forms - in terms of organisational structures and policy frameworks - rather than developing the capabilities to perform the functions needed to ensure regional coordination and specific problem solving. Overreliance on donor funding also risks subverting accountability relations between regional organisations and their members, and can sometimes undermine or change the ambitions set by the regional organisations and their members.

At certain historic junctures there have been slight breakthroughs where regional organisations start to perform or function differently and produce regional outcomes. This has been widely observed in matters affecting peace and security. To a lesser extent it is also an element of the African Union's response to a financial crisis when it began to introduce comprehensive institutional measures to strengthen budgetary planning, budget execution and transparency in the AUC.

Going sub-regional

Given the difficulty of aligning incentives among very heterogeneous countries with different objectives and needs in specific areas and regional groupings, sub-regional cooperation offers one way to overcome blockages and perhaps increase a sense of ownership of 'regional' processes. Some RECs such as SADC and the EAC have for several years taken a 'corridor' approach to connect countries along major transport routes, and in their industrialisation strategy aim to promote specific value chains across countries. Such approaches can bring together countries that are connected by physical transport infrastructure or similar sectoral interests. It also reduces the number of countries and actors involved, thus raising the chances of aligning interests among countries. The Nile Basin Initiative covers the whole Nile River, but does so with two sub-groups for the two sub-basins - the Blue Nile and the White Nile. This leads to subsidiary programmes that can then focus on the issues where there are aligned interests - the Nile Equatorial Lakes Subsidiary Action Program (NELSAP) is under the NBI but autonomous in its work on promoting cross-border energy transmission lines.

The additional challenge for regional organisations is to operate at a sub-regional level in a way that adds value to the bilateral mechanisms that are often easier to put in place. In most river basin organisations, for example, priority issues or transboundary problems are geographically concentrated. In the Congo basin this is the case with for example the Ubangui river (DRC and CAR) and the Malebo Pool (DRC and Congo Brazzaville). In the Lake Chad basin, one of the main challenges is to maintain the southern tributaries of the lake, which primarily concerns Cameroon, CAR and Chad. The proposal for an interbasin transfer between the Ubangui river and Lake Chad in turn would primarily concern DRC, CAR and Chad. These different configurations of bilateral and trilateral relations take place with implications for the wider region or river basin. The challenge is to find a balance between variable geometry and maintaining a level of regional coherence.

Thinking and working regionally, politically

A broad conclusion from this analysis is the need for policymakers in regional and national structures, as well as their external partners, to think and work differently around regional integration and cooperation. That implies revising the ambitions and scope of regional integration processes and support according to a more grounded understanding of why the regional organisations are there, what really drives and constrains their operations, and what it is that member countries actually seek from them. That has the following implications:

Firstly, recognising that barriers to progress are not only about capacity building, finance and political will, but also the result of between and within country interests and bargaining processes that are continually in flux. Member states' politics can be at cross-purposes to regional commitments, for example in river use or trade agreements, even where these agreements have been signed by Heads of State. Though regional

integration and cooperation may increase welfare in general within a region, there are often winners and losers from such processes. If the prospective losers are powerful enough, they may well try to impede the regional processes. Promoting regional integration and cooperation requires understanding and working with these between and within country political dynamics, interests and incentives. It also requires making decisions as to whether to adapt regional processes to underlying power relations - i.e. to work 'with the grain' - or to attempt to alter the grain by, for example, working with new actors outside regional organisations to change underlying power relations.

Secondly, it means focusing on local or member state-defined 'problems' that require some degree of regional cooperation or problem solving. Given the current low cost of regional participation, statements of intent or regional commitments must be read as an aspiration, and the first of many steps required for implementation. In a similar vein, defining when and how to work regionally is not about 'best practice' institutional forms but understanding ways of working within the context that to perform a function. Adopting the organisational form of a Commission rather than a Secretariat does not change the functions related to regional budgets, agendas, accountability and compliance, and which in turn create regional added value. Supporting the strengthening of regional organisations needs to be a mean towards producing or sharing regional public goods.

Thirdly, it implies the need to return to thinking about subsidiarity and regional subgroups for specific topics - where is there a genuine value-added from working regionally? This implication links to the question of who defines the transboundary or regional problems. Externally identified problems are less likely to gain traction, even with finances attached. It also links to the question about the nature of the regional (public) good. If a regional initiative is simply about providing a funding mechanism for technical assistance at country level without any other regional benefits, such as generating functional spillovers, it is questionable that it should be carried out by a regional organisation. The PEDRO studies suggest that initiatives to develop infrastructure to link subgroups of states gain more traction among/within participating states than do region-wide efforts to liberalise trade, especially given uncertainty about the winners and losers of such liberalisation.

Building on these points, how might regional organisations and their members prioritise better in order to avoid agenda inflation? This is partly answered by the suggestion to work with sub-regional groups on clearly identified, and member state-defined regional or sub-regional 'problems'. An additional implication is the potential need to work in a more bottom-up way, building regional agendas around regional and sub-regional issues that impinge on national politics and that national governments are politically committed to supporting. This is also valid for external partners who must scale and redesign support strategies to reduce overload and enhance potential synergies between support for regional organisations and national level support. Too often, development partners work through regional organisations independently from national programmes. They also tend to project their own priorities onto regional agendas, taking the aspirations articulated through regional organisations as legitimation for their action. Our studies show that these aspirations - even when taken in the form of Summit decisions - are often superficial and at times even mimicking external priorities, without having much traction among local stakeholders.

Finally, regional organisations are not the only basis for regional integration or cooperation. Much of the analysis that this paper summarises suggests that regional policies, strategies and institutional setups are necessary but not sufficient for regional and cross-border cooperation to take place. Indeed, much cross-border cooperation takes place outside formal channels, whether it be in terms of informal cross-border trade or ad-hoc meetings or approaches to joint decision making. The biggest difficulty for African regional integration is perhaps not that it is lacking, but that it is happening in ways that challenge conventional policies, conventional ways of implementing them and conventional ways of supporting them.

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In addition to structural support by ECDPM's institutional partners: The Netherlands, Belgium, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Sweden, Switzerland, Denmark and Austria, this publication mainly benefits from funding of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

ISSN1571-7577

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