



POLITICAL ECONOMY DYNAMICS OF REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN AFRICA

PEDRO

The African Union: How to become fit for purpose?¹

This paper sets out to analyse the African Union (AU) to better inform stakeholders about why regional organisations and national level stakeholders operate as they do. It looks in particular at peace and security, transnational infrastructure development, and food security. It concludes with implications for support.²

Main findings

The institutional reforms that accompanied the transition from the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) to the African Union at the beginning of the millennium have strengthened the role of the African Union Commission (AUC) as a central administrative pillar of the AU Organs. With a substantially expanded mandate and policy agenda, in barely 15 years, the African Union has become present in multiple global fora, acts as the political champion for the continent, and has rallied regional organisations and its 54 member states behind the aspirational Agenda 2063 for the African continent.

When South Africa's Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma was elected AUC chairperson in 2012 - the first time a representative of a 'swing state' took on such powerful position - she advanced a programme to reform the Commission in major ways. One was to slim down the agenda by introducing comprehensive administrative reforms to improve, among other things, results-based planning, budgeting and management. The other was to broaden the domestic resource base of the continental body. Both ambitions seem to have fallen short of their targets. The recent Kagame report on yet another round of AU reforms has warned that there had been previous, unsuccessful attempts and that "previous recommendations have remained largely unimplemented" (AU, 2017, p. 17). This sobering message makes it especially relevant to ask questions about the AU's political traction, the interests of member states, and the areas in which it can deliver on continental objectives and development outcomes.

¹ Based on a March 2017 Background Paper by ECDPM, available at www.ecdpm.org/pedro/backgroundpapers. The Policy Brief and Background Paper were prepared under the BMZ-financed project on the *Political Economy Dynamics of Regional Organisations (PEDRO)*. This paper builds on an earlier paper conducted under the *PERIA* project. Author: Jan Vanheukelom (jvh@ecdpm.org). Project team leader: Bruce Byiers (bby@ecdpm.org).

² Other AU related papers under PEDRO deal with promoting governance and the migration agenda.

The AU has been effective in developing the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) to deal with a number of violent conflicts and political crises on the continent. It was effectively mobilised to sanction unconstitutional transfers of political power, prevent conflict, and roll out - or engage in - peace operations. Since the year 2000 more than 50 peace operations have been undertaken in 18 African countries. In general, peace and security is the area where member state interests align best to engage through the AU - or regional organisations - as the risks of non-action may be dangerous and costly for influential member states or coalitions of member states. In particular, swing states (e.g. Nigeria) tend to use multiple spheres of influence to shape the peace and security agenda, although the nature or characteristics of the violent conflict determines how they use they influence APSA involvement. Swing states may play important roles, but have proven to be impotent in a number of Africa's sticky violent conflicts. This then underlines the relevance of the AU playing a role.

Political traction in other sectors such as transnational or cross-border infrastructure development and food security has been less pronounced. Unlike peace and security, there have been few member states that take a lead to drive these continental programmes. Rather, national leaders have agreed on - and may even have pushed for - both the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA) and the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) at the highest AU level, without ensuring measures and arrangements to implement their commitments. There is minimal reputational risk, and there are no sanctions or other costs for member states that don't implement agreed policies. Government leaders seem to find implementing agricultural reforms and infrastructure development within the AU framework unattractive, as they may find it hard to demonstrate the immediate positive benefits or the costs of regional inaction in these sectors. In contrast to peace and security, these sector characteristics in agriculture and infrastructure make them less amenable for implementation or continental cooperation through the conduit of the AU.

External factors, such as donor influences and crises or critical junctures, also affect the interests and incentive environment around the AU. Although the AU member states endorsed the CAADP programme at the highest level, it took an external event to trigger more energetic responses at national and regional levels. Rising food prices in 2007-08 led to food riots in 14 African countries, raising the sense of urgency and interest among a number of member states and regional economic communities (RECs), thus increasing the number of member countries signing up to CAADP.

While signing up was easy, implementation of the CAADP agenda has proved to be extremely difficult. Different incentives were at work: the promise of additional donor resources in return for achieving CAADP targets created incentives for ruling elites to adopt agricultural strategies and plans without necessarily undertaking the necessary and hard work of structural reforms. However, a number of ruling coalitions faced political incentives to engage in genuine structural reforms of the agricultural sector to preserve their hold on power. Ethiopia and Rwanda, for example, engaged constructively with the continental agricultural programme for the additional opportunities CAADP offered in terms of funding and legitimisation.

Strong country interest is also crucial in transnational infrastructure development. The AU flagship programme on infrastructure development in Africa highlighted that few additional financial resources have been mobilised through PIDA from member states or from external partners. Its design has been overly technocratic and top-down, with little involvement of the key private and public actors that are needed for the financing of infrastructural regional public goods, or their future use. Many of the transnational projects that were selected on the PIDA priority list, existed prior to and independently from PIDA. Hence, its additional traction through the continental PIDA programme is being questioned.

In the area of peace and security, the AU institutions have added value by contributing to curbing transboundary harmful spillovers of a number of violent conflicts. On the other hand, the added value of a continental approach in the sector cases of infrastructure and agricultural development remained limited due to lack of political traction within member states to engage in such continental programmes.

Implications for support

1. Continue core support to institutional strengthening for AUC

- The AU is the only pan-African organisation with the political mandate, legitimacy and institutional capacity to develop continental African principles, commitments, standards, programmes and policies, and the mandate to oversee their implementation.
- There is a basis for support for institution and capacity building to the AUC in partnership with other donors to a) strengthen the donor partnership, b) strengthen core public management and governance functions where there is traction in the AU institutions.

2. Support peace and security through APSA partnerships

- Peace and security is central to the future of the AU. The AU facilitates global, regional, multilateral and bilateral partnerships to address regional and global security challenges.
- The AU has proven to be adaptive in this field, where most of its human and financial resources are invested; even if the underlying causes of political and security crises remain unresolved and solutions in the sphere of peace operations are strongly militarised.
- The EU was the first donor to substantially support the continental peace architecture. Meanwhile, the donor group has extended, so there is a need to divide labour and harmonise efforts. Given the responsiveness of APSA to specialised non-state actors, this potential for effective cooperation on problem solving and specific issues such as gender sensitivity deserves attention and support.
- Depending on the nature of the conflict the roles of RECs and the continental peace organisations need to be carefully balanced, with sufficient attention to enable AU-REC cooperation in often volatile conflict settings.

3. The AU infrastructure programme (PIDA) and food security programme (CAADP) offer limited potential for effective regional support

- The broad range of development challenges, governmental agencies and private or civil society stakeholders at different governance levels make these pan-African initiatives unwieldy with unclear outputs and outcomes.
- The added value of supporting transnational infrastructure development, agricultural reforms and food security is clear, but the merits of doing so through a continental programme seem limited, though specific CAADP sub-processes or particular PIDA projects may be conducive to effective regional cooperation. Lessons from AU initiatives such as CAADP and PIDA could be used to help focus roles and improve coordination among initiatives.

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 **P**olitical **E**conomy **D**ynamics of **R**egional **O**rganisations, 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.