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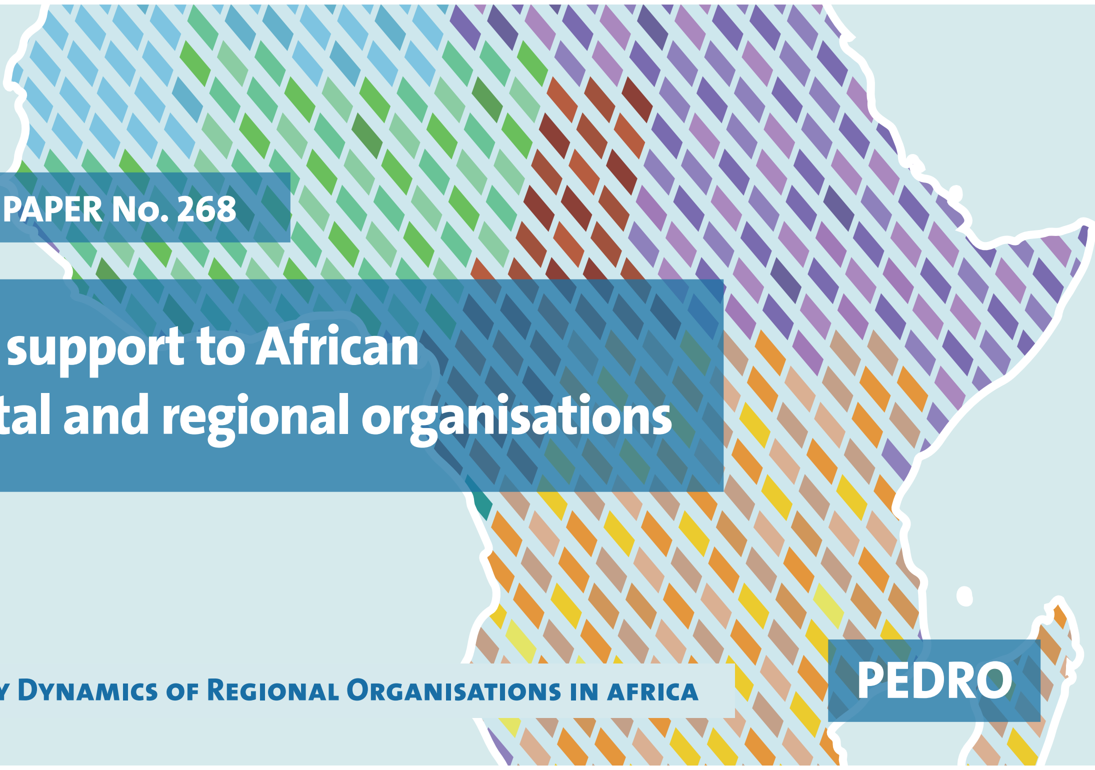

DISCUSSION PAPER No. 268

Rewiring support to African continental and regional organisations

Political Economy Dynamics of Regional Organisations in Africa PEDRO

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With EU programming for the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework underway, a new 'geopolitical' European Commission in place with Africa high on its agenda, and the sixth EU-AU summit intended to take place this year, it is a good opportunity for the EU to rethink its engagement with Africa's regional agenda. Since this paper was written, the outbreak and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has altered the context for regional cooperation dramatically, but many of the issues raised remain valid.

This paper aims to feed thinking on external support to regional organisations. Using a number of short examples, it highlights how regional integration processes on the African continent are complex – in terms of the range of actors, interests and power relations between and within countries – and the need for the EU and other external actors to understand and adapt to the interests and incentives of their African counterparts – whether through the AU, the regional bodies or bilaterally. We draw on two strands of work: evaluations of support to African regional organisations by the EU and the World Bank Group in 2019, and ECDPM research on the political economy of regional integration in Africa.

These are part of a growing body of analysis pointing to the need to support regional integration differently. We argue that more of the same and 'trying harder' will not suffice and propose for a more contextualised and adaptive approach to supporting African continental and regional organisations. International fora such as the planned sixth EU-AU summit and the diplomatic process around it are opportunities to rethink old models of regional development. The COVID-19 pandemic serves to underline the importance of doing so.

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The views expressed in this study are exclusively those of the authors and should not be attributed to any other person or institution. ECDPM welcomes feedback on this paper, which can be addressed to the authors via email to Bruce Byiers at bby(at)ecdpm.org.

Acronyms

AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
AMISOM	African Union Mission to Somalia
APSA	African Peace and Security Architecture
AU	African Union
AUC	African Union Commission
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central African States
ECDPM	European Centre for Development Policy Management
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ESAIO	Eastern, Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean
EU	European Union
IEG	Independent Evaluation Group
REC	Regional economic community
RO	Regional organisation
UN	United Nations
WBG	World Bank Group

1. Introduction – context, purpose and approach[1]

1.1. Purpose, approach and structure

This paper was originally written in a quite different context: with multi-year EU programming under the Multiannual Financial Framework (2021-2027) underway, a new 'geopolitical' European Commission in place with Africa high on its agenda, and preparations for the sixth EU-AU summit intended to take place this year, the aim was to offer inputs to help rethink EU engagement with Africa's regional agendas. With the outbreak and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the context has changed dramatically. But many of the issues remain the same, even if the focus might now change from aspirational agendas to containment and economic revival. Indeed, the relevance of rethinking support to regional cooperation and integration is arguably increased by the cross-border implications, both positive and negative, of the COVID-19 pandemic and the role that continental and regional organisations can play – and are playing – to respond to the pandemic and its impacts.

The paper draws on two important strands of work: a series of evaluations of support to African regional organisations by the EU and the World Bank Group in 2019, and a recently completed ECDPM research project on the political economy of regional integration in Africa across a range of policy areas and regional organisations (PEDRO).

Both strands of work explicitly recognise the complexity of regional integration processes and the difficulty for external partners of meaningfully engaging in them, not least through the regional organisations that ostensibly take the lead. As the PEDRO synthesis paper concludes: "*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*" (Byiers, 2019: p. 17). That conclusion is the point of departure for this note and raises a challenge to the evaluations that seem to recommend to "try harder" rather than rethink regional integration support.

Using short examples, the paper aims to underline the importance of understanding the complexity of regional integration processes – in terms of the range of actors, interests and power relations between and within countries – and the need for external actors to adaptively engage with these dynamics rather than assume them away. These will be core to all future EU and other external actor efforts to engage differently with their African counterparts, whether through the AU, the regional bodies or bilaterally. The paper does not explicitly address regional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, nor the regional economic risks and opportunities, though the implications do carry over. Those issues deserve and will receive attention in future work.

1.2. Rewiring engagement – but with whom?

Before the new European Commission took office, EU member states reconfirmed "the crucial importance of the EU's strategic partnership with Africa" and their commitment to "face together common and global challenges".[2] In March 2020, the European Commission released one of its joint communications to the

[1] This note was originally prepared for a meeting of the EU Likeminded Group on the theme of EU-Africa relations and external support to regional organisations held in Copenhagen in October 2019.

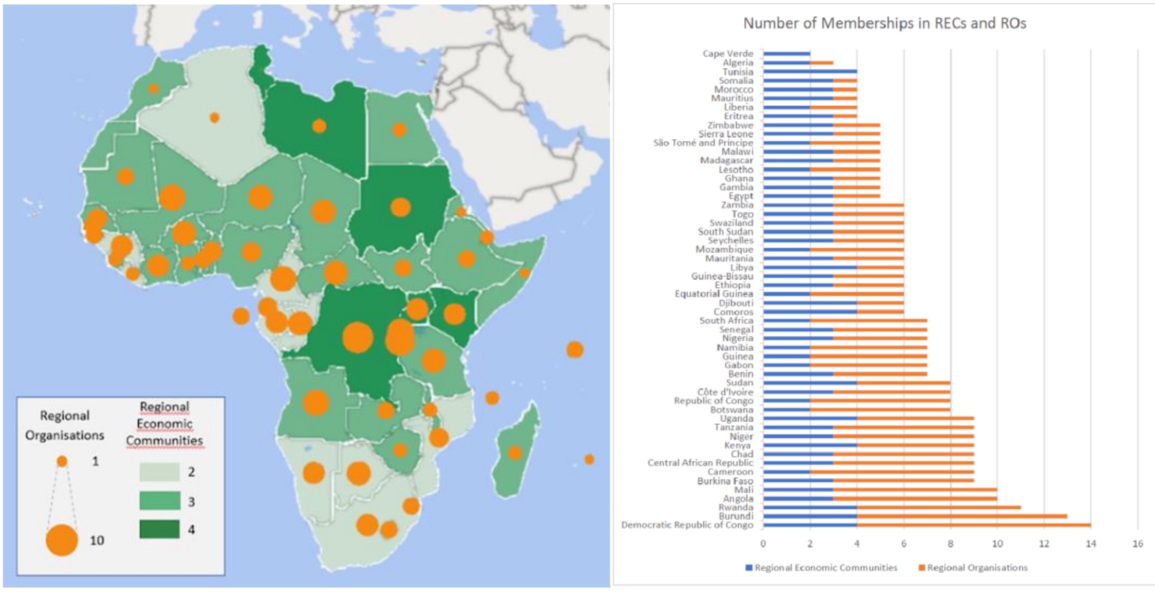
[2] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/06/20/european-council-conclusions-20-june-2019/ The partnership rests on the Joint Africa Europe Strategy, which places the African Union and the European Union at the centre for addressing issues of common concern through political dialogue and a multi-faceted partnership involving aid and underpinned by a broad-based and wide-ranging people-centred approach.

European Parliament and Council entitled "Towards a comprehensive Strategy with Africa" laying out a series of proposed actions for "the EU and Africa" to undertake together in addressing a range of global and joint challenges.[3] These challenges include climate change, instability from expanding terrorism, gloomy prospects for international trade, and populist revivals including those against irregular migration. Though emerging after the Communication, we now know they also include health pandemics.

The EU's main interlocutor for its partnership with Africa is the African Union (AU). The AU is the continental champion of an ambitious Agenda 2063 and, pre-COVID-19, was moving towards free movement of goods and services within the continent through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). This at a time when the European integration model faces numerous pressures, Brexit only being one of them, and while the rate of new trade-restrictive measures introduced by G20 countries reached its highest monthly average since 2009 (IEG, 2019). The COVID-19 outbreak and government responses are adding to these both in Europe and Africa. At the same time, the AU is in the midst of a round of institutional reforms to more effectively play its role, not least to reduce its historical dependency on external finance, and to better coordinate with regional bodies.

Though this year should see the second summit of the EU with the AU, rather than 'Africa', and though the AU Commission and its reform process receive substantial support from the EU, EU-Africa relations go beyond the AU. The AU has eight mandated regional economic communities (RECs) – multi-sectoral regional bodies that do much beyond economic integration. But Africa is a patchwork of overlapping and intertwined regional organisations covering economic cooperation, river basin and lake water management, and peace and security, among others, with almost all countries participating in multiple, sometimes overlapping, regional bodies. Figure 1 illustrates the scale of regional organisation membership on the African continent.

Figure 1: African countries and their membership of RECs and regional organisations



Notes: Economic organisations: 16 (U + 8 AU recognised RECs + 7 other economic organisations); Other regional organisations: 25 (5 energy-based + 15 river and lake + 4 peace and security +1 environmental); Average memberships per country: RECs (3); other RO (4).
Source: ECDPM and FERDI, forthcoming.

[3]See here for the full communication:
https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/communication-eu-africa-strategy-join-2020-4-final_en.pdf

As the EU institutions and European member states engage with and support these regional organisations, as well as national governments and non-state actors, EU-Africa relations imply a complex set of overlapping partnerships with 'Africa'. Together, these raise questions about how EU support might best be applied to support African-driven regional integration under the umbrella of EU-AU relations.

1.3. Regional integration and complexity

There is no one definition or ideal model of regional integration, even if the EU model has often explicitly or implicitly served as one, especially in Africa.[4] In the international development community, regional integration and cooperation are associated with: i) integrating markets by removing regulatory/fiscal barriers and/or harmonising policies; ii) managing or creating regional public goods (including natural resources and infrastructure networks) and limiting or offsetting public 'bads' (spreading diseases, spillovers of violent conflict, etc.);[5] (iii) coordinating or harmonising cross-country and regional policies and strategies.

As with any policy process, regional integration and cooperation generates both 'winners' and 'losers' – or at least those who benefit more or less from regional action. Though the RECs and other regional organisations vary in how they manage these processes, almost all work on a strictly intergovernmental basis with very limited agreement by states to submit to supranational authority. Therefore, final outcomes depend on how different layers of power and politics play out within and between countries at the different stages of negotiation, agreement and implementation of regional agreements.

Further, the risks and costs associated with regional integration are often difficult to assess or calculate *ex ante,* while the distributional effects can change over time. This results in a bias towards interest groups and coalitions lobbying in favour of the status quo in a particular regional process. Variations between countries in diplomatic, economic, military and political strength may further reduce the trust among countries, affecting the prospects and direction of cross-country and regional cooperation. All these factors can drive up the costs and time taken to implement regional agreements.

Beyond internal regional dynamics, external actors and factors also shape progress. This can relate to exogenous events linked to climate change, terrorism or pandemics. But also relates to a range of old and new international partners who interact in significant ways with an ever growing number of Africa's regional and sub-regional organisations – the AU, for example, partners with approximately thirty traditional and new donors, including South Korea, Turkey, and China. The nature of these partnerships differs, playing out at the country level, or at the level of continental, regional and sub-regional organisations, or all of the above. Together these factors shape the incentive environment for regional cooperation within which these organisations and national governments operate, with important implications for partners such as the EU who seek to engage more with their African partners.

2. Political economy findings on regional integration in Africa

Though the number and range of summits, meetings, strategies, and decisions of Africa's regional organisations suggest great dynamism, implementation is broadly recognised to lag behind ambitions. In an

[4] The Bank Group defines regional integration as "economic interactions across at least two sovereign jurisdictions that are geographically close and result in integration of factors and goods, and coordination of policy" (World Bank Group Technical Briefing, June 2015).

[5] Regional public goods are services or resources whose benefits are shared by neighbouring countries. Regional natural resources (water rivers and basins), public health (when threatened by pandemics) and the regional environment (as in transfrontier conservation areas) are regional public goods.

official AU report, President Kagame of Rwanda underlined that from 2002 to 2017 the continental assembly of government leaders adopted 1,500 resolutions, yet "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. As a result, we have a dysfunctional organisation in which member states see limited value, global partners find little credibility, and our citizens have no trust" (African Union, 2017: 6). What has been stated at the continental level is generally also the case at the regional level.

Recurring patterns across multiple regional organisations and agendas lead to the following key findings (Byiers et al., 2019).

Key findings:

1. **Regional integration and cooperation are complex processes,** whether in terms of policy and administrative reforms or addressing peace and security. This implies a need to continuously monitor progress, revise ambitions and remain flexible;
2. **What organisations look like does not always translate to what they do** – even if at first glance the well-written, 'best practice' strategies and organisational structures appear necessary, in practice, ad-hoc and/or partial reforms can often be a more realistic step in the right direction;
3. **Domestic political incentives are key** – these shape how each country engages with different regional organisation and on different regional and continental processes, ultimately shaping implementation;
4. **Compliance with regional commitments is ineffectively monitored** – partly as a consequence of the above elements, the cost to countries of not implementing agreements is often low, requiring partners to pay greater attention to the incentives at play and strategies to encourage compliance accordingly;
5. **Regional organisations are important, but powerful regional hegemons or 'swing states' often define the success or failure of regional reforms.** This also needs to be taken into account, and turn support from a technical exercise to one of political negotiation.

The following examples illustrate some of the drivers and blockers to implementing regional programmes, and offer lessons to inform engagement strategies in support of regional integration. They discuss: i) reforms for self-financing the AU; ii) promoting regional peace and security; and iii) national incentives and the AfCFTA. Common to the three case studies is the importance of understanding both *between* country politics that tend to shape how and why regional and continental decisions and commitments are made, and *within* country politics that influence how those decisions play out in practice and in which regional groupings.

2.1. Self-financing the African Union[6]

The African Union's ability to effectively fulfil its mandate has long been hampered by underfinancing by its member states and thus reliance on external partners. This is a problem faced by most, if not all, other regional organisations on the continent. At regular intervals, the AU has tried to reduce its dependence on external funding by introducing measures to increase member state contributions – recent efforts may be getting closer to achieving that objective.[7] Though foreign aid unarguably helps finance the operations and programmes of regional organisations, it can also have negative effects. These include the burdensome transaction costs of fragmented and earmarked donor support, the multiple donor requirements for reporting

[6] The example discussed here draws on Pharathlathle and Vanheukelom, 2019 and Miyandazi and Apiko, 2019.
[7] In 2015, the AU's financial dependence on international partners reached an all-time high of 72% of its overall budget. These figures exclude external support to peace and security. There are no reliable and complete figures over time, partly because an undisclosed and unrecorded amount of donor funding is not reflected in the AU budget.

and accountability, the loss of a 'sense of ownership' flagged in the Kagame report, and an associated lack of transparency.

As agreed with donors, not all donor support to the AU is reflected in the AU budget. This lack of transparency feeds concerns among African member states that external partners influence AU priorities, whether through conditional funding or earmarked support for specific projects. As the Kagame report also noted, foreign aid may discourage African member states from taking more active interest in regional or continental decisions on what gets funded and ultimately implemented. This feeds mistrust between member states and the AU Commission, but also between the AU Commission and the RECs, who often compete with the AU for limited financial resources.

When in 2016, the EU temporarily suspended funding to AMISOM, the AU-led peace support operation in Somalia, over a disagreement about payments to African peacekeepers, it created a financial crisis for the AU. This in turn generated demand within the AU Commission and among reform-minded member states for a package of institutional reforms to address the gap between continental decisions and their implementation by AU member states. The aim was to enhance member states' ownership of the AU agenda by improving financial governance and discipline in the yearly payments by member states to the AU.

AU member states agreed on a 0.2% levy to be applied to goods imported from outside the continent, and to use the proceeds for their yearly contributions to the AU, and to pay these fully and on time. Three years later, in July 2019, only 16 of the 55 AU member states were collecting the new levy, while some other AU member states continued to transfer their dues from other sources of finance. The AU has meanwhile adapted the original 0.2% levy scheme in order to accommodate member states who oppose the levy but support self-financing through other means. While this is a positive step, financing targets are far from being met.[8] The AU introduced some real – but less visible – actions to improve the financial transparency and accountability of the AU Commission towards its member states that are being implemented in a step-by-step way. While these reforms suggest states recognise the importance of financial independence, the levy mechanism provided a means for countries who wanted to but given budget demands and priorities couldn't pay. As such, the AU will likely continue to rely on donors as its largest source of funding for the years to come.

Within this context, recent efforts to reform the partnership relations between the AU and a core group of donors merit attention.[9] By harmonising aid approaches among this core group, these donors try to reduce the negative effects of fragmented aid. In addition, they try to optimise donor support behind strengthening governance issues prioritised by the AU Commission, such as budgetary discipline and accountability. These efforts will also enhance more predictable and transparent donor funding of the AU programmes, all of which may have positive effects on the accountability relations between the AU Commission and its member states. That ultimately could reinforce incentives for AU member states to pay their annual contributions and increase the elusive but much sought 'ownership'.

[8] The 16 member states applying the levy reportedly transfer some 59.7% of their assessed contributions, compared to countries not applying the levy but paying their yearly contributions through other means, that account for 68.8% of their assessed contributions, thus a higher proportion. Progress in member states' financing was best felt in the *Peace Fund*, a special AU instrument for financing swift responses to peace and conflict related challenges.

[9] The reference to "core donors" is used to distinguish within the larger group of donors of the AU those that have indicated a concern about the negative effects of poorly administered aid on partner bureaucracies, governance systems and institutional growth path. Donors collaborate with the AUC on the main pillars of the AU Commission Strategic Plan. By way of example, one can refer to Australia, Canada, Denmark, the European Union, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, UK and USAID, which collaborated in the past under the pillar of capacity and institution building.

Key findings on AU self financing:

1. **The cost of non-compliance with financing commitments remains low.** Recent institutional reforms by the AU to address a number of interrelated problems identified by key African stakeholders offers a trajectory for change rather than immediate solutions.
2. **Influential member states make a difference.** The strong push by influential AU member states has made a difference in terms of reaching a high-level continental decision on financing. But partial implementation may also reflect that the powerful countries or swing states themselves are not aligned around full implementation with a preference among most large countries to pay their dues but not through the use of the levy [10].
3. **Institutional forms matter, but institutional 'functions' are more important.** Though the comprehensive institutional reform agenda was only partial and far from 'best-practice', the combined pressures from AU member states and bureaucrats in the AU Commission reinforced oversight and budget planning functions with direct involvement of fifteen ministers of finance.
4. **AU reforms are not linear**. Even if big-bang reforms such as those on self-financing are stalling or are blown off-course, step-by-step or partial measures have been implemented. Similarly, partial or incremental reforms of the AU Commission accountability systems may alter the incentive environment for enhanced member state ownership.
5. **Partial or incomplete reforms can be valuable**. Improved financial accountability and transparency by the AU Commission may set in motion positive responses by member states in terms of realistic agenda-setting and reliable funding.

2.2. Promoting regional peace and security[11]

Peace and security is one area in which there has been clear political traction for regional cooperation in Africa. It is also the area where the bulk of foreign aid to African regional cooperation is concentrated. Yet, despite the strong political interest, the African regional peace architectures remain incomplete, and deliver only partial results.[12]

Instability and violent conflict are immediate threats to political survival. This creates powerful political incentives for elites to seek solutions through RECs and the AU. But ideas and critical events matter too. At the end of a conflict-ridden decade, the presidents of Africa's two most powerful countries and new democracies – South Africa (1994) and Nigeria (1999) – were decisive in transforming the Organisation of African Unity into the AU, strengthening its continental mandate and capabilities to address violent conflict and political instability.

The Constitutive Act of the African Union (2000) provided the AU with a stronger mandate than its predecessor and swapped the previous principle of *non-intervention* in member states for the principle of *non-indifference* in situations of grave human rights violations. In 2004, the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) was launched – a comprehensive set of institutional arrangements: on subsidiarity in working with RECs and their regional peace architectures and with the UN; on deliberations with member states on when and how to engage in mediation, sanctions and peace support operations[13]; and on when to intervene in a supranational way. APSA also consists of organisational structures such as the standing Peace and Security Council, as well as the regional and continental standby forces.

[10] South Africa, for example, strongly backed the reforms on improved budgetary and financial governance, but it refused to submit to the continental decision to pay their yearly contributions from imposing a new 0.2% levy, preferring to continue paying its full yearly contribution out of its annual budget.
[11] This example draws primarily on Vanheukelom (2016) and Vanheukelom and Desmidt (2019).
[12] For further analysis of APSA see Williams 2017.
[13] Peace support operations involve operations with military (or civilian) peacekeepers in conflict affected countries.

The EU became the first partner to provide major support through the newly created African Peace Facility. Over a 12year period, EU funding for peace and security in Africa has doubled, with the bulk of the new money being spent on peace support operations. The EU, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, the UK and Sweden have pooled their funding behind the AU's peace and security strategy in an effort to make their aid more effective and less disruptive. These donors support, among other things, an additional 172 temporary staff members of the Peace and Security Department of the AU Commission.

Analysis of how APSA and other regional peace architectures function in specific conflicts leads to two major conclusions. First, since its establishment APSA has managed to step up activities of conflict prevention, mediation and resolution, and has engaged in international and inter-continental diplomacy as well as resource mobilisation to mount or support some of the world's largest and most risky peace support operations. The AU also managed to deliberate with RECs on the choice of action and the distribution of tasks, responsibilities and financial resources. In addition, APSA's Peace and Security Council provided a forum for its member states to negotiate sanctions or other interventions in support of peace and security.

Secondly, however, the ways in which APSA and other peace architectures operated were highly unpredictable. Despite their elaborate design, robust mandates, and the agreed principles and formal *rules of the game* (such as those distributing responsibilities, tasks, costs and labour) many of the arrangements were of an ad-hoc nature and highly contingent upon the often messy, unpredictable and violent conflicts on the continent.

Key findings on continental peace and security efforts:

- **In reflecting on the effectiveness and pertinence of Africa's peace architectures, it may help to think in terms of a 'good-fit' rather than 'best-practice' approach.** The constantly evolving, highly contingent, messy and often deep-rooted violent nature of conflict, combined with the limited levers for conflict resolution and the complex interplay of numerous layers of players, provide a difficult reality in which to operate.
- **What appears to be ad-hoc muddling through can also be seen as adaptation and problem-solving.** Capabilities within the peace architectures to engage in complex, real-life conflicts and to undertake demanding tasks of multi-level political deliberations on mandates, distribution of labour, roles and costs; mobilisation of resources, and combining actions on the ground must be properly appreciated rather than assumed.[14]
- **Africa's regional hegemons – those with comparative diplomatic, military and economic clout – take an active role within Africa's peace architectures.** This can lead them to influence the direction these peace architectures take, or occasionally to work through alternative channels, depending on how ruling elites see their interests served.
- **Yet, smaller countries have at times managed to punch above their weight and influence the direction of peace architectures.** They have done so using their networking power, by playing the pan-African solidarity card and relying on a joint resistance against external pressures or conditionalities. For example, Burundi – a major troop-contributing country to peace support operations in Somalia – managed to avert a supranational decision by the AU during the political crisis in 2016.

[14] Mediation, sanctioning, mounting peace support operations, assessing/endorsing ad-hoc sub-regional arrangements as in the Mali case. Another example in West Africa involves the Lake Chad River Basin Commission. This was an existing single-purpose sub-regional organisation, whose mandate was extended to deal with conflict as the Commission covered most countries affected by the jihadist insurgency and instability cause by Boko Haram since 2009, whereas ECOWAS and ECCAS did not.

2.3. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)[15]

The recently launched African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) has been hailed as an important milestone for economic integration in Africa. But the challenges that come with creating a continental market with all AU member states cannot be underestimated. Regardless of progress made on the AfCFTA negotiations and the continental trade governance architecture, the degree to which member states implement the AfCFTA will depend largely on national dynamics. These include the incentives and interests of political elites and influential private businesses, as well as the 'rules of the game' that govern state-business relations.

Taking the case of trade policymaking in Nigeria and South Africa – Africa's two largest economies – is helpful in identifying what informs their engagement with the AfCFTA, and how this may affect their approach to implementing the AfCFTA in the future.

Nigeria has long been seen as a champion of African integration, and the country's officials played a leading role in the AfCFTA negotiations. However, domestic opposition to trade liberalisation also runs deep. Dependence on oil and an inconsistent and poorly implemented economic policy create an unfavourable business environment and have contributed to a domestic manufacturing sector that is unable or unwilling to compete in foreign markets or with foreign companies in the domestic market. Nigeria's powerful, well organised and politically-connected industrialists use informal channels to successfully lobby the government for protection from imports, playing on fears of de-industrialisation and job losses.

The result is an opaque and highly restrictive trade regime characterised by protectionist policies that generate rents for local firms and public officials. This, in turn, creates a strong incentive to oppose trade agreements that might threaten the source of their rents. Those keen on trade integration are less organised and less able to influence policy making. The private sector as a whole distrusts the Nigerian government's ability to address its concerns about the domestic business environment and institutional capacity gaps, and is wary of the potential impact of trade liberalisation.

Domestic opposition from trade unions and influential private sector actors with direct access to the President led to a significant delay in Nigeria's signature of the AfCFTA Agreement. While Nigeria has belatedly come on board, domestic opposition to the AfCFTA remains. If the specific concerns of domestic stakeholders in relation to the AfCFTA – such as doubts about the government's ability to enforce AfCFTA rules of origin, or to address corruption at border posts – are not sufficiently addressed, these powerful actors may well seek to block Nigeria's implementation of the AfCFTA. On the other hand, the AfCFTA process has also inspired the creation of new domestic initiatives and coalitions of actors in support of trade integration in Nigeria. These initiatives and coalitions may be crucial in pushing for effective AfCFTA implementation by Nigeria.

In South Africa's case, there are much stronger formal institutions that govern state-business relations, foster inclusive policy making and inform government positions on trade negotiations. South Africa is also facing high unemployment and inequality, and has a history of competitive politics with both populist pressures, clientelist demands and efforts by reformists to transform the economy. Against this background, the South African government's approach to industrial and trade policies has been to both protect sections of the domestic manufacturing industry and innovate. This has led South Africa to take particularly strong positions on, among other things, rules of origin during the AfCFTA negotiations. South Africa's ability to push its agenda on rules of origin has not only complicated the AfCFTA negotiations, but also risks limiting the potential benefits of the AfCFTA to other AU member states.

[15] This case study draws on Woolfrey et al. (2019).

There also appears to be surprisingly little interest in the AfCFTA from the private sector in South Africa. This may be due – at least partly – to the fact that many of South Africa's export-oriented industries, particularly in the services sector, have been able to penetrate other African markets, even in the absence of a continental trade agreement. The AfCFTA may even pose a risk to the dominant market positions some South African firms have achieved through investing in small, but fast-growing, African markets. It would be unwise to expect such firms to 'champion' AfCFTA implementation.

Key findings on the AfCFTA:

- **Regional trade agreements do not automatically lead to meaningful economic integration.** This is evidenced by the various partially implemented African regional trade agreements and the numerous non-tariff barriers that continue to impede intra-African trade.
- **Full implementation of the AfCFTA Agreement will only take place when this is in the interests of political elites and influential private sector actors.** The degree and effectiveness of AfCFTA implementation by AU member states will therefore largely be determined by domestic political economy dynamics, including the interests of political elites and influential private sector actors in relation to trade integration and their capacity to effectively further these interests.
- **In Africa's largest economies there are private sector actors that support trade liberalisation under the AfCFTA and those that oppose it**. Various factors, including broader socio-economic realities, global competitiveness and the nature of state-business relations determine the relative capacity of each group to organise and effectively lobby government, including through informal and opaque channels.
- **Development partners seeking to promote AfCFTA implementation will need to base their efforts on a solid understanding of member states dynamics.** This is needed to identify potential actors, coalitions and initiatives to partner with or support in terms of AfCFTA implementation.

3. Supporting regional integration differently: learning from evaluations

The above three cases provide a taste of the complexity of regional dynamics and of moving from regional commitments to implementation. In all three cases, international partners provide substantial support. The two biggest donors – the EU and the World Bank Group (WBG) – recently published major evaluations of their longer term support to regional organisations and regional integration.[16] Many of the findings of these evaluations – including on complexity – corroborate the findings from our own political economy analyses. Yet while the evaluators recommend adapting support strategies to the complex nature of regional integration, the recommendations stop short of fully taking complexity on board.

[16] Over the period 2008-15 EU support amounted to €4.3 billion financed under the 10th and 11th European Development Funds. Three evaluations cover the three regions and RECs in Central Africa (€0.5 billion), in West Africa (€1.2 billion) and in the Eastern and Southern Africa and Indian Ocean Regions (as of now referred to as ESAIO) for a total portfolio of €2.6 billion. The Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) evaluated a $37 billion portfolio of the WBG's support to regional integration over the period 2003-17. Other evaluations consulted include Mackie et al. (2017) on the implementation of the EU's African Peace Facility, the European Court of Auditors' reports (on the European support to APSA and on the effectiveness of EDF support for regional economic integration in East Africa and West Africa), and an unpublished Evaluative Assessment of the Joint Programming Arrangement and Joint Financing Arrangement of the AU Commission (2018).

The EU evaluation of its support in Eastern, Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean (ESAIO) illustrates the discrepancy between findings and recommendations. It notes that the EU has a poor understanding of the complexity of regional integration and is therefore often far too ambitious given the limited duration of its interventions and restricted financial and human resources allocated to the work. Similarly, its evaluation of West African regional support finds that the "underlying assumptions and political economy affecting the progress of regional integration and the likely effectiveness of external support were not fully examined or challenged" (EC, 2018: 60). This over-optimism is fed by a "shallow understanding of the country level political backing behind regional decisions" and of "the parties that stand to gain or lose as a result of integration (...) with regional integration often remaining a stated objective that the region's political leaders do not actually support" (idem).

Hence, the evaluators recommend donors improve performance by:

1. Widening the range of partners
2. Strengthening institutional support and capacity building to regional organisations
3. Rearranging the donor deck
4. Investing in knowledge-building and political economy analysis

These recommendations make sense and offer a good basis to work on. But from a political economy perspective, there is a concern about the political and bureaucratic incentives under which donors themselves operate. Conflicting interests, a tendency for risk aversion and for quick and visible wins may stand in the way of adaptive approaches that are more aligned to the requirements of working in complex environments. For each cluster of recommendations, this section suggests how to move from trying harder to supporting regional integration differently.

3.1. Widening the range of partners for regional integration

The EU, unlike the World Bank Group, has historically prioritised working with and through Africa's regional organisations.[17] In the past, doubts about the effectiveness of promoting regional integration through regional organisations, had resulted in attempts by the EU to shift its programming accordingly. The 11th European Development Fund affirmed the need for a dual regional-national approach, and for a stronger role for the private sector in EU support for regional integration. Despite the advantages of the EU's network of Delegations to most African states and all REC secretariats, evaluations find that it does not sufficiently connect these dots.

The EU is in a position to work beyond the officially recognised RECs, including through national level governments, sub-regional organisations or agencies, and through a stronger emphasis on non-state actors, especially the private sector. Despite this policy, the EU has limited experience of working with alternative partners, especially with regards to the private sector. The Independent Evaluation Group evaluation confirms a similar pattern for the World Bank.[18]

[17] The WBG only engages in one strategic partnership with an African regional organisation in Africa, more particularly with the AU Commission.

[18] The Independent Evaluation Group EG recommends something similar for the WBG and suggests to intensify its partnerships with traditional and non-traditional regional stakeholders to promote collective action and knowledge sharing, and to crowd-in new partners, most notably private sector and international industry associations.

Recommendations by the evaluators:

- **Put regional issues on the agenda for national policy dialogue**, and hold "more intense political dialogue and policy dialogue" with RECs and other regional organisations.
- **Increase the pressure at the level of member states to comply with regional commitments by strengthening the conditionality of aid** and by creating incentives through "allocating additional financial envelopes (for example by topping up budget support)" to be granted to all member states on the condition that they all implement regional commitments.
- **Work more through non-state actors** such as civil society organisations and the private sector.

The three cases discussed in Section 2 confirm the need to look beyond the *duly mandated* regional organisations when exploring ways of supporting regional integration. In the case of peace and security, AU and RECs play substantial roles in facilitating and legitimising regional decision-making and in enabling – and occasionally enforcing – regional agreements. Yet in most other cases, country and sector specific conditions are such that national level political dynamics – including the agency exercised by non-state actors such as well-connected private sector actors or interest groups – supersede the influence and roles of regional organisations. Unlike the experience of EU integration, the supranational element in Africa's integration through regional organisations tends to be limited, or only exists on paper. In other words, in most sectors, regional integration comes about from bottom-up dynamics with only a limited role played by regional organisations.

So what roles can donors play in supporting regional integration? As the Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) puts it, they can play the roles of funders, enablers and/or conveners. How donors mix these roles and implement them will, however, be contingent on the particular context and sector in which they operate. Yet, in their search for visible and timely results within the timeframe of a project cycle, donors are often tempted to *drive* the process rather than support it. As the case of self-financing of the AU clarified, poorly calibrated, opaque and fragmented aid can inflate agendas and weaken the accountability of regional organisations towards their member states. This then has negative knock-on effects in terms of the trust required for further regional institutional development.

More robust political dialogue with national governments or topping up bilateral aid is not likely to alter the incentive environment neither for national implementation of regional decisions nor for trust-building. In Africa's middle-income, regional hegemon and swing states, the likelihood of external aid being able to tip the scale towards implementation is extremely limited. In lower income countries such old fashioned conditionality pressures are likely to incentivise partner governments to resort to mimicking the preference of donors rather than to implementing agreed policies or commitments (Andrews, 2013).

3.2. Strengthening institutional support and capacity building

Evaluations of regional support generally concur that the "partners' commitment and capacity were overestimated", leading to overoptimistic timeframes and overambitious results. They also conclude that donor-driven capacity development with regional organisations or other partners has not been effective.

EU support to regional cooperation has led to outputs from regional organisations, but "there are few areas for which these outputs have been translated into significant contributions to deliverables" (EU, 2018: 57). In other words, people have been trained, awareness levels have been raised, regional community policies or regulations have been adopted (ranging from free movement of goods and people, designing quality standards or common rules for truck axle loads, etc.). However, accountability remains weak while compliance systems do not function well, generally because member states have not implemented community policies or rules. The IEG evaluation found that more than 25,000 people had been trained under WBG support (stakeholders from regional entities, government, the private sector and others) but that there was no evidence on whether the training led to better capacity or to deliverables such as increased levels of trust and confidence, essential enablers for long term success (IEG, 2019).

On the positive side, the IEG evaluation found that when regional organisations were involved from the start, capacity building and strengthening did generate more positive results.

Recommendations by the evaluators:

- More effectively link the design of capacity-building processes to an analysis of the main bottlenecks (West Africa).
- Apply systems to monitor and evaluate outcomes of capacity-building activities.

Effective capacity development and learning in regional organisations – or with state and non-state actors for that matter – is very dependent on whether conditions are conducive for this to take place. External support for capacity development seems to work better when there is concrete demand or ownership over the process in which this is embedded. Political incentives at the national level, and bureaucratic incentives at the regional level are key to having genuine demand for capacity building, where national demand is often linked to the policy priorities of national level ruling elites and how these elites see their interests served through influencing regional organisations.

In the AU's institutional reform example, reform-minded member states created demand for the mutually reinforcing reforms of self-financing and of improving capabilities and systems of financial governance. In doing so, they relied on – and strengthened the hands of – high-level bureaucrats within the AU Commission in response to crises as opportunities for capacity development and 'learning by doing'. This case further illustrates that such reforms and capacity development are partial and non-linear. Multiple push and pull factors are simultaneously at work. Yet, while the long-term ambition of self-financing of the AU may not come about immediately, there is sufficient drive behind step-by-step reforms that are more in line with their technical and political feasibility through a series of feedback loops. It is hoped that these help lay the foundation for further reforms.

All this then points to the need for external players to abandon wholesale and linear programming of capacity support modelled on best practice regional institutions. One main task for donors is to become more knowledgeable about these opportunities, about the priorities of problem-solving as set by national and regional level players and about the organisational and bureaucratic capabilities and ownership on which to build. Capabilities and ownership should not be assumed but analysed. A major question is to figure out where there is a sufficiently strong coalition of actors with a sufficiently strong interest in improving the functions and capabilities required for solving self-identified regional problems or creating regional added value.

3.3. Rearranging the chairs on the donor deck

The previous recommendations point to the need for donors to put their own house in order to improve support to regional organisations and processes. For the EU, which is the largest donor in volume, human resources and levels at which it intervenes, this is particularly demanding. Four levels at which the EU conceives and manages its regional partnerships are of particular relevance.

First, the coherence between various European policy domains is often not aligned to what is politically desirable and technically feasible in the African regional context. The West Africa evaluation points to insufficient coherence in the peace and security arena between the EU's coordination, foreign and security policies, and its development policy. In West Africa, the EU doubled its regional envelope from the 9th to the 10th European Development Fund. Yet, this was not informed by African demand or a fair assessment of absorption capacity.[19] Rather, it "had more to do with the stakes involved in the negotiations of a free-trade agreement between West Africa and the EU." The EU doubled its financial allocations once more from the 10th to the 11th European Development Fund in order to respond more to "new interdependencies between the two regions (notably on security and migration) than to specific integration objectives within the West African space" (EU, 2018: 63).

Secondly, the EU is a house with many doors. Its architecture, however, was not put to optimal use for the complexity of the challenges encountered on the ground. The quality of consultation, cooperation and coordination between the EU headquarters and its field offices, but also between its regional delegations in Africa and its delegations to African countries was not up to scratch to modulate and steer European support to where it could contribute effectively to regional development outcomes. According to the EA-SA-IO evaluation there was a "proliferation of EU instruments and programmes" that caused confusion, with a tendency to try to solve too many problems at once in some areas.

Thirdly, both the IEG and the West Africa evaluations clearly state that staffing levels in donor agencies are generally inappropriate to deal with regional cooperation. In the words of the IEG: "[e]ven though regional integration operations require more time and resources to design and implement than non-regional integration operations, teams managing regional integration operations are neither more experienced, well-resourced, nor more stable than those managing other operations." (IEG, 2019: xvi).

Finally, all evaluations point out that the EU and the WBG have insufficiently invested in partnering with other donors. As the West Africa evaluation notes, there is little coordination between the EU Commission and the EU member states that engage in regional partnerships or programmes in that region: "Coordination among donors is insufficient, with all development agencies ultimately bound by their own institutional mandates across regions" (IEG, 2019: xvi). Inevitably, this lack of donor investment has negative spill-overs on the already heavily taxed capabilities of Africa's regional organisations and national bureaucracies.

Recommendations by the evaluators:

- Increase staffing levels for regional cooperation in Brussels and in the field, upgrade and adapt the staffing capabilities (IEG) and beef up operational budgets.
- Expand the tasks of EU Delegations to include: intensifying political and policy dialogue with regional organisations and other regional players; consulting between various country level EU delegations in the region; learning from the successes and failures of past programmes; identifying ways to improve the definition of realistic objectives; and engaging in political economy analysis to feed into all this (see further).
- Take a longer term perspective as efforts to support regional integration may have long gestation periods and require "patient capital" (IEG, 2019: xviii).
- Invest in "deepening and promulgating collaboration with development partners, regional economic communities and state actors by streamlining institutional procedures among development partners" (idem).

[19] An earlier study by the European Court of Auditors (2009) had already pointed out that "overestimation by the Commission of the Regional Organisations' management and absorption capacities has led to the formulation of project objectives that were too ambitious with too wide a range of activities and project budgets that are too large" (European Court of Auditors, 2009: 27).

In light of the evaluation findings, these recommendations are sound. But from a political perspective, they beg the question why they have not yet been implemented. These recommendations are in line with key objectives and principles[20] that both developing and development partners already solemnly agreed on at the international forum in Paris (2005) and subsequently reiterated in Busan (2008), Accra (2009) and other capitals. Basic political blockers, institutional disincentives and bureaucratic mechanisms within donors obstruct attempts to adapt organisational systems, the managerial culture, ambitions, programme design and implementation arrangements to working in complex environments.

The example of doubling aid to regional organisations in West Africa in two subsequent rounds of EU programming shows that there are still incentives to (and indeed an assumption that) equate aid volumes with influence. These incentives and assumptions affect donor priorities, orient the management culture and channel limited human resources into a spending mode in the pursuit of overly ambitious targets. Linear managerialism, moreover, prevents donor administrations from self-correcting or adapting to often unpredictable changes and opportunities in the regional context.

As seen with the examples of peace and security and continental free trade agreements, multi-level dynamics are non-linear and contingent upon numerous political economy actors and factors outside donor control. Numerous uncertainties around who stands to gain or lose from such regional processes at country level (all cases), and the fragmented nature of external funding (self-financing of the AU, conflict and peace) call for a purposeful shift in approach rather than a rearrangement of the chairs on the donor deck.

The approach taken by the AU Commission and its core donors around joint programming and joint financing is a telling example. This multi-stakeholder partnership is far-from perfect and needs to mature over time. But in adapting to opportunities and taking an incremental approach to supporting an AU agenda with a fair degree of political traction, this type of aid may strengthen incentives for further buy-in by key stakeholders and may contribute to the types of trust-building and problem-solving that constitute basic building blocks of developing regional organisations and institutions.

3.4. Invest in knowledge management – use of political economy analysis

The EU evaluations recommend strengthening EU knowledge about various aspects of regional integration. The evaluators recognise the relevance of political economy analysis to help identify partners and “areas of assistance that are likely to yield results” (EC, 2017). The West Africa evaluation specifies that the programme design of EU regional support predominantly follows a “rights-based approach (thereby reproducing one of the main traits of European construction) without paying sufficient attention to the analysis of stakeholders’ coalitions in favour, or not, of furthering regional integration” (EC, 2017: 61). In other words, in the absence of political traction or ownership over regional policies and their – often national level – implementation, support to regional dynamics or organisations won’t yield results.

The World Bank Group has already taken concrete measures to integrate political economy analysis to inform its support to regional integration. Political economy diagnostics have been undertaken in a range of sectors, including transport (e.g. Byiers et al., 2014), but also around transboundary water management, one of its biggest regional programmes in Africa (World Bank Group, 2017).

[20] In the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005), to begin with, donors for example had agreed to invest in adapting the aid systems in such ways as to respect ownership from developing partners, strengthen their systems and institutions (the ownership principle) and reduce bureaucratic overload by among other things improved cooperation among donors (the harmonisation principle).

One overall recommendation by the evaluators was:
For donors to undertake more political economy analyses, especially during the early phase of programming. The West Africa evaluation even specifies that these analyses ought to be undertaken by "mixed teams of European and West African researchers" in order to gain a better understanding of the political and economic obstacles to enhanced regional cooperation and integration in West Africa in the different sectors of activity." (EC, 2018: 66).

Having used political economy analyses to unpack the complexity of regional organisations and regional cooperation and integration dynamics in Africa, we can echo this call for more systematic use of political economy analysis. But there are two caveats and one critique. First, a one-off or standalone political economy analysis has only limited value. The likely changes in composition of power, interests, ideas, incentives and stakeholders in complex regional contexts necessitate regular updates of the political economy analysis – various events also widen or narrow the scope for cooperation – thus advocating more of a political economy *approach*.

Secondly, a political economy analysis, however solid, does not provide a license for action. Analysis does not automatically translate into effective programming, programme implementation and learning. There needs to be a dialogue on the findings of the analysis, on assumptions about how change may happen, about the types of roles for and contributions by donors, as well as about adaptations to potential changes in the political economy environment.

The lack of progress on needed reforms of donor approaches to effective partnerships and development has regularly been criticised. It may be more productive to answer the 'why' question, and extend the scope of political economy analysis to donors as a way to feed multi-stakeholder discussions on the types and degrees of donor harmonisation, division of labour and compliance that are not only desirable but also politically and technically feasible.

4. Concluding remarks: more of the same or time to rewire regional integration support?

Two meta-evaluations of donor support to regional organisations and regional integration recognise the limited effectiveness of external support and the complexity of regional dynamics and support by donors. The evaluators recommend the EU and the World Bank Group take action: (i) to widen the range of partners; (ii) to strengthen institutional support and capacity building; (iii) to rearrange the donor deck; and (iv) to invest in knowledge-building and political economy analysis.

This paper, however, argues that taking complexity seriously implies a more profound rethinking and rewiring of donor support. Hence, doing more of the same by merely *trying harder* will not suffice. The growing body of political economy analysis of regional dynamics and of donor behaviour points to the need to support regional integration differently.

For donors – in particular the EU – to take complexity seriously would imply among other things, the ten following measures:

1. Analyse and question underlying assumptions of support strategies about political will, ownership and capabilities through rigorous and regular political economy analysis of the context.

2. Adapt ambitions and budgets in function of the context analysis and sector specific political traction behind regional dynamics.

3. Balance the mixture of donor roles of enabler, convener and funder in ways that rally behind rather than replace African drivers of regional integration.

4. Extend the partnership beyond the usual suspects of regional integration by looking for coalitions behind functional cross-country or regional problem solving.

5. Reassess risks in relation to the negative effects of poorly targeted and managed aid, and the negative knock-on effects from prioritising EU interests in one-sided or ill-advised ways in developing partnership relations with Africa's regional organisations.

6. In capacity support for regional organisations, prioritise key organisational and governance functions that matter for building trust, strengthening accountability and enhancing capabilities of regional conflict resolution, mediation and functional problem solving, looking for opportunities for gradualist, imperfect but locally driven regional outcomes.

7. Avoid the over-design of support programmes and results-orientation that is informed by best-practice templates that enjoy no political traction.

8. Re-organise donor incentives so as to encourage practices of adaptation, flexibility, experimentation and learning in support of what works in terms of good fit rather than best practice.

9. Create the enabling conditions for staff to engage with African stakeholders and undertake the appropriate analyses – including political economy analyses of donors.

10. Invest in reducing the political economy constraints within donors so as to overcome their collective action failures in interpreting and implementing the self-imposed principles of *good donorship*. Effective partnerships and collective action don't happen; they are constructed.

Such measures require high-level political and bureaucratic authorisation or endorsement within the EU. Conduits for mobilising such support may emerge from discussions among EU member states that support regional cooperation in Africa. But international fora such as the 2020 AU-EU summit can also provide momentum to demonstrate the relevance of doing regional development differently, and encourage the political authorisers to create the required space.

With the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, existing support to national governments and regional bodies is inevitably being diverted to addressing the immediate health risks and economic impacts. Beyond providing and sharing information at a regional level, with increasing constraints to trade and movement of people across borders, the role for regional bodies is likely to grow. Even if immediate reactions have generally taken a national stance first, both the African Union and several RECs are developing their regional coordination and crisis response, and regional initiatives are underway to support economic recovery and facilitate international support. All of the challenges to supporting regional organisations here will remain relevant, and indeed heighten, with the ongoing pandemic. That said, the external shock to political and economic relations between and within countries may also offer opportunities for reforms that had heretofore been politically unfeasible. A final challenge for donors will therefore be to identify and seize these opportunities, building on emerging initiatives and working with local and regional actors.

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