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Why Maintaining EU-ECOWAS Partnership is Important in Uncertain Times

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) faces mounting pressures from coups in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, testing its capacity to uphold regional stability and democracy. The withdrawal of these three Sahelian states, effective January 2025, will impact ECOWAS's convening power as the primary subregional organization in the region. Meanwhile, the new Neighborhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI) framework established by the European Union (EU) emphasizes flexibility and shifting funding priorities, which provides opportunities but brings about risks diverting resources and undermining ECOWAS's primary responsibility for regional integration and stability. This brief explores external and internal pressures reshaping EU-ECOWAS ties and recommends to keep ECOWAS at the center of European strategies for West Africa.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Ensure ECOWAS's Centrality in NDICI Funding:** The EU should prioritize ECOWAS as a key partner within the NDICI framework, ensuring a balanced approach to funding that supports both ECOWAS's central role and the EU's strategic objectives. This will safeguard ECOWAS's position as the primary regional actor for governance and security while also benefiting EU interests.
- **Promote Regional Ownership in EU-ECOWAS Projects:** The EU should integrate mechanisms that empower ECOWAS to lead in the designing and implementation of regional projects. This approach would ensure that initiatives align with local priorities and strengthen ECOWAS's leadership in addressing regional challenges.
- **Strengthen ECOWAS's Strategic EU Engagement:** ECOWAS should strengthen its strategic engagement with the EU by clearly demonstrating its unique value in addressing regional challenges. This involves showcasing successful outcomes and leveraging its leadership role to secure support and maintain influence.

Why Maintaining EU-ECOWAS Partnership is Important in Uncertain Times

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) faces mounting pressures from coups in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, testing its capacity to uphold regional stability and democracy. The withdrawal of these three Sahelian states, effective January 2025, will impact ECOWAS's convening power as the primary subregional organization in the region. Meanwhile, the new Neighborhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI) framework established by the European Union (EU) emphasizes flexibility and shifting funding priorities, which provides opportunities but brings about risks diverting resources and undermining ECOWAS's primary responsibility for regional integration and stability. This brief explores external and internal pressures reshaping EU-ECOWAS ties and recommends to keep ECOWAS at the center of European strategies for West Africa.

Established to foster economic cooperation, the Economic Community of West African States has expanded its mandate since the 1990s to tackle rising security challenges. Since then, ECOWAS has been recognized as one of the most effective African regional economic communities and a major actor in the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), originally comprising all 15 West African states, with their varying capacities and diverse colonial legacies. Drawing on field research conducted in April 2023, supplemented by online interviews carried out in December 2024, this brief explores external and internal pressures reshaping EU-ECOWAS ties and recommends to keep ECOWAS at the center of European strategies for West Africa.

The ECOWAS Commission, formed in 2007 and based in Abuja (Nigeria) serves as the administrative arm responsible for implementing decisions and managing regional initiatives (see box 1). Operating through several departments and directorates, the commission's activities are guided by the ECOWAS Protocols and the foundational ECOWAS Treaty of 1975, which was revised in 1993 to align with the evolving needs of the region.

Following the 2006 reforms, ECOWAS enhanced its institutional structures and legitimacy through bodies such as the ECOWAS Parliament and the Community Court of Justice. With a robust normative framework supporting peace, security,

and democratic governance – such as the Protocol on Conflict Prevention and the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy (see box 2) – ECOWAS has aimed to position itself as a key player in addressing regional crises and promoting democratic norms, albeit with mixed success.

In addition to its role in Sierra Leone and Liberia in the 1990s, ECOWAS has achieved notable outcomes over the past two decades, including the restoration

Box 1: ECOWAS's Governance Framework

Five key bodies:

- (1) the Authority of Heads of State and Government,
- (2) the Council of Ministers,
- (3) the ECOWAS Commission,
- (4) the ECOWAS Parliament, and
- (5) the Community Court of Justice.

Box 2: Key Foundational Documents Relating to Peace and Security, and Good Governance

- ECOWAS Revised Treaty - 1993
- Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (PRMCR) - 1999
- Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance - 2001
- ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework - 2008 and its Plans of Action (PoA)

December 2024, the ECOWAS Authority accepted their withdrawal but left the door open for dialogue, offering an additional six-month period for the three states to reconsider their decision, effectively extending the reconsideration window until the end of July 2025. However, this proposal was rejected, with the three states reaffirming the irreversibility of their decision, which they attributed to the ECOWAS sanctions imposed after the coups. These developments pose significant challenges for ECOWAS and the region, particularly concerning regional integration, growing humanitarian crises, and broader geopolitical stability.

Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso were never economic or political heavyweights within ECOWAS, but their withdrawal challenges the effective implementation

of democratic order in The Gambia (2017), mediation efforts in Togo (2018) and in Côte d'Ivoire (2020), and support for political dialogue in Guinea (between 2010 and 2015). However, it has struggled to respond effectively to recurring military coups or ensure long-term stability in the region, especially in the Sahel. Nonetheless, ECOWAS continues to be regarded as a major actor in peace and security within the region.

However, recent military coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have posed significant challenges to ECOWAS's authority and effectiveness in promoting democratic governance. The failure to enforce a return to civilian rule following these events highlights the limitations of its current strategies (including its highly coercive approach) and raises questions about ECOWAS's role in maintaining regional stability.

On 28 January 2024, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger announced their withdrawal from ECOWAS (see figure 1), a move widely referred to in the media as "Sahelxit," citing the sanctions imposed by ECOWAS following recent military coups in their territories. Despite the subsequent lifting of these sanctions, the three states had already established the Alliance of Sahelian States (AES) on 16 September 2023, which was formally inaugurated in July 2024 under a mutual defense agreement between them.

In accordance with the ECOWAS Treaty, their withdrawal officially took effect on 29 January 2025, after the required one-year notice period. In

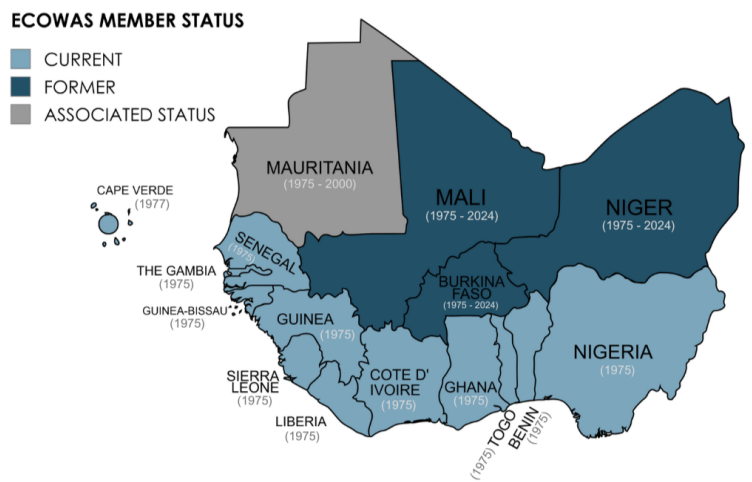


Figure 1: Map of ECOWAS Member States Highlighting the Three Former Members

of its regional agenda. The move reflects an open rejection of ECOWAS's role in facilitating political and economic cooperation. Economically, the withdrawal poses risks, particularly for trade and mobility, though their continued membership in the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) helps preserve key aspects of free trade. However, actions like Burkina Faso's introduction of a new national passport, replacing the ECOWAS one, could create practical barriers to regional integration, affecting cross-border mobility and economic activities. These developments challenge

ECOWAS's role in regional unity and signal growing fragmentation, with potential implications for West Africa's future cohesion and stability.

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ECOWAS's central role in fostering regional integration and addressing security challenges has not only shaped its identity as a key actor in West Africa but also underpinned its longstanding partnership with external stakeholders, particularly the EU. However, as ECOWAS faces unprecedented challenges, including the withdrawal of three Sahelian states, its collaboration with the EU becomes even more critical. At this critical turning point, however, this partnership is now poised to experience shifts with the introduction of the NDICI-Global Europe framework, which redefines funding priorities and poses risks for ECOWAS's role in regional stability and integration.

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EU-ECOWAS Relationship

The EU has been a key partner to ECOWAS for decades, with their relationship evolving across various domains, including peace and security, governance, and trade. This dynamic has not only bolstered ECOWAS's institutional role but also strengthened its legitimacy as a key actor in regional governance. The EU is a primary funder

of ECOWAS's external projects and relies heavily on ECOWAS's leverage over its member states to support its own security and migration strategies. ECOWAS is also central to the EU as an access point to the West African market. As described by an ECOWAS Commission official, this partnership extends beyond transactional exchanges and involves a degree of "socialization." Over time, the relationship has facilitated project implementation while influencing ECOWAS's institutional practices, aligning them more closely with the EU model for regional governance and integration.

Box 3: EU Financial Instruments Supporting Peace, Security, and Governance

- **9th EDF (2002–2007)**: Marked the start of EU support for ECOWAS's conflict prevention and governance policies, with funds allocated for peacebuilding, arms control, mediation, and electoral observation.
- **10th EDF (2008–2013)**¹: Funding increased significantly, with €119 million allocated for governance and stability. This phase focused on political dialogue, regional development cooperation, and trade, including the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA) while proactively supporting ECOWAS's peace and security agenda.
- **11th EDF (2014–2020)**²: Emphasized the interdependence of development, peace, and security, with €250 million allocated for efforts such as addressing global threats, promoting resilience, and fostering regional integration.

1 European Union. (2008). Regional strategy paper and regional indicative programme (RIP) for West Africa (2008–2013). Retrieved from https://aei.pitt.edu/45274/1/West_africa_2008.pdf.

2 European External Action Service. (2015). Regional indicative programme for West Africa (2014–2020). Retrieved 15 January 2025, from <https://childfundalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/eeas-2015-rip-west-africa-en-3.pdf>.

While financial support is only one element of this partnership, it has been a critical one, grounded in the premise that ECOWAS serves as the central regional organization with leverage over its member states. The financial relationship between the EU and ECOWAS has undergone significant changes, shaped by evolving EU strategies for engaging with regional organizations (see box 3). Initially, under the Cotonou Agreement, the European Development Fund (EDF) served as the primary financial instrument supporting African Regional Economic Communities (RECs) like ECOWAS. Through the Regional Indicative Programs (RIPs), ECOWAS, alongside the UEMOA, played a key role as a Regional Authorizing Officer (RAO), responsible for overseeing fund allocation and project implementation. This gave ECOWAS a central position in shaping regional development initiatives. During the 9th EDF (2002–2007), ECOWAS expanded its influence over policy formulation and implementation, strengthening its leadership in regional development.

Starting with the 10th EDF (2008–2013), the EU raised concerns about ECOWAS's limited absorption capacities, delays in implementation, lack of transparency, and failure to meet EU pillar assessment standards. As a result, the EU reduced the funds ECOWAS could directly manage. By the 11th EDF (2014–2020), ECOWAS was no longer entitled to manage funds directly and retained only limited oversight over fund management and allocation through its role as a RAO. This has led to friction in the relationship between ECOWAS and the EU, with ECOWAS seeking more ownership over the funding, while the EU favors implementing projects through intermediary bodies, such as the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), to manage the funds.

Despite these limitations on direct fund management, ECOWAS remains a key recipient of EU aid, with RIPs negotiated every five years. EU funding has steadily increased over the years, focusing on governance, peacebuilding, and regional stability (see box 4). This continued support highlights the EU's recognition of ECOWAS as a critical partner and an essential access point to the region.

The NDICI and the Shift of the Funding Strategy

The introduction of the Neighborhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe marks a significant transformation in the EU's approach to funding regional and international partnerships. Adopted in 2021 as part of the EU's Multi-Annual Financial Framework (2021–2027), the NDICI replaces several previous financial mechanisms, including the EDF, which had long been a cornerstone of EU-ECOWAS collaboration. With a total financial envelope of €79.5 billion, at least €29.18 billion is reserved for sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting the EU's ongoing investment in the region.¹ However, the NDICI has introduced fundamental changes in funding practices, presenting ECOWAS with many more challenges, in addition to the ones pointed out above.

Unlike the EDF system, which by relying on RIPs placed RECs like ECOWAS at the center of fund allocation, the NDICI prioritizes “flexibility.” It opens funding to a broader range of actors, including states and non-state entities, without necessarily requiring the funds to be channeled through a regional organization. This shift aligns with the EU's transition from the African Peace Facility (APF) to the European Peace Facility (EPF) in 2021, emphasizing



Figure 2: Jutta Urpilainen, on the right, and Omar A Touray, President of the ECOWAS Commission during the signing of EU-ECOWAS Financing Agreement at the ECOWAS Commission. © European Union, 2023. Photo by Sodiq Adelakun. Licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Photo ID: P-062009/00-31, 19.10.2023. Source: EC – Audiovisual Service.

¹ European Commission. „EU Proposes €5 Billion New Partnership with the ACP Region under NDICI-Global Europe Framework.” European Commission, 17 March 2021. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/pt/ip_21_1267.

Box 4: Selection of Projects under the 10th and 11th EDF

- **EU Support to ECOWAS Regional Peace, Security and Stability Mandate (ECOWAS-EU PSS)¹:**
 - **Project Period:** First phase of the project was initiated in 2013 and spanned different stages through 2019
 - **Objectives:** Contribute to building and maintaining peace, security, and stability in West Africa to ensure conditions for development
 - **Funding:** Total funding of €29 million
- **Support to the ECOWAS Commission on Organizational Development: Institutional Support to ECOWAS (ISE)² :**
 - **Project Period:** First phase of the project was initiated in 2019 and spanned 2023
 - **Objectives:** Strengthen institutional capacities within the ECOWAS Commission and the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development (EBID)
 - **Funding:** Total funding of €4 million, co-funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)
- **Organized Crime: West African Response (OCWAR) Projects³ :**
 - **Project Period:** Projects initiated in 2020, concluded between 2022 and 2024
 - **Objectives:** Support ECOWAS member states in countering criminal activities, including the fight against cybersecurity threats and cybercrime (OCWAR C); combatting trafficking in drugs, human beings, and firearms (OCWAR T); and addressing cross-cutting issues, such as money laundering as well as the financing of terrorism and fraud (OCWAR M)
 - **Funding:** Total funding of €41 million
- **ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture and Operations (EPSAO) Project⁴ :**
 - **Project Period:** First phase of the project was initiated in 2019 and spanned 2023
 - **Objectives:** Strengthen ECOWAS mechanisms for promoting and maintaining peace and stability
 - **Funding:** Total funding of €20 million, jointly cofinanced by the EU (€16.4 million) and the BMZ (€4 million)

1 European External Action Service. (2019). ECOWAS and the European Union. Retrieved from https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/56207_en.

2 Kirchner, L., Ba, N., & Agu-Nweke, E. (2021, July). Institutional support to ECOWAS: Enhancing effectiveness, efficiency, and impact of ECOWAS programmes in West Africa. Retrieved from <https://www.giz.de/en/downloads/giz2021-en-institutional-support-to-ecowas.pdf>.

3 European External Action Service. (2020). The EU and Germany partner with ECOWAS to fight organised crime in West Africa with a EUR 41 million flagship program. Retrieved from https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-and-germany-partner-ecowas-fight-organised-crime-west-africa-eur-41-million-flagship-program_en.

4 European External Action Service. (2019, July 27). Support to ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture and Operations (EPSAO). Retrieved from https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/56232_en.

a more EU-driven approach to addressing regional challenges.² While this flexibility offers the EU greater scope to collaborate with diverse partners, it reduces the automatic involvement of RECs, thereby sidelining organizations like ECOWAS.

The NDICI introduces two key changes with significant implications for ECOWAS. First, the EU has become more assertive in aligning funding with its strategic interests and values. Unlike previous frameworks, the NDICI explicitly prioritizes EU objectives – such as migration control and the EU's green agenda – alongside the needs of partner countries. This stronger political framing raises concerns about ownership for organizations like ECOWAS, which emphasize regional autonomy and equitable partnerships. In particular, the EU's focus on migration has been shown to directly conflict with ECOWAS's interests, as migration control often undermines the region's priorities for mobility and development. By placing migration at the forefront, the EU not only diverges from ECOWAS's priorities but also risks imposing policies that contradict the region's goals for integration and stability.³ This misalignment could lead to a mismatch in funded initiatives, weakening ECOWAS's ability to shape development agendas crucial to West Africa's cohesion.

Second, the geographizing approach under the NDICI enables the EU to fund programs through various configurations, such as multi-country collaborations or direct engagement with individual states, rather than automatically involving RECs. While this approach aims to address issues at the most appropriate level, it marks a shift away from EU previous financial instruments and from the previous strength of the APF, under which RECs played a central role that greatly supported the coordination and harmonization of policies, such as in early warning.

NDICI and EU-ECOWAS: Emerging Implications

Although the NDICI has been officially implemented, its full impact on EU-ECOWAS relations remains uncertain. A key question is how NDICI programming principles will influence this relationship, particularly in terms of balancing EU priorities with the needs and goals of African partners. Discussions with officials from both the EU delegation and ECOWAS reveal a sense of cautious anticipation, with clear concerns from ECOWAS that the EU might more overtly prioritize its strategic interests under the NDICI framework. This could lead to projects that align primarily with EU goals, such as focusing on securing access to critical minerals for the EU's green agenda rather than reflecting shared priorities.

The 2024 Compendium of EU-Funded Development Cooperation Activities with Nigeria and ECOWAS⁴ provides insights into the NDICI's current funding direction. Cooperation projects are categorized under four main areas: (1) green and digital economy; (2) human development; (3) governance, peace, and migration; and (4) regional cooperation. In the peace and security domain under the regional cooperation area, several ongoing projects are still continuing under the 11th EDF. Examples include the support to West Africa Integrated Maritime Security (SWAIMS) and the support to ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture and Operations (EPSAO).

The only project directly involving ECOWAS under the NDICI is the second phase of the ISE project (see box 4). The project focuses on strengthening ECOWAS's institutional capacities to meet compliance standards with the EU pillar structure, ultimately creating more opportunities for ECOWAS to access funds dedicated to promoting regional and economic integration in West Africa. However, this effort appears paradoxical under the NDICI, where the role of ECOWAS (and other RECs) is not clear and the EU has signaled a diminished interest in requiring ECOWAS to adhere strictly to EU pillar compliance.

2 Herpolsheimer, J. (2024). Studying practices of interregional security governance and space-making between ECOWAS and the European Union. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 12(4), 554–571. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2023.2235411>.

3 Czaika, M., & de Haas, H. (2019). „The Effects of EU Migration Policies on Migration Dynamics in West Africa.“ *Comparative Migration Studies*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0115-9>. Clingendael Institute. (2020). Policy Brief: EU-West African Migration. Retrieved from https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/Policy_brief_EU-West_African_migration_November_2020.pdf.

4 European External Action Service. (2024, January). EU-Nigeria development cooperation programmes compendium. Abuja, Nigeria. Retrieved from <https://eeas.eu.com/sites/default/files/documents/2024/EU%20COMPENDIUM%20PUBLIC.pdf>.

Preparations are also underway for the second phase of the EPSAO project, which will incorporate a governance component. While specific details are still being finalized, this phase is anticipated to engage a broader network of multilateral actors. It still remains to be seen what role and position ECOWAS will have in the second phase of the EPSAO project.

Developments are still unfolding under the NDICI, and so far, there have not been major disruptions to the relationship between the EU and ECOWAS. However, the continuation of business as usual, to some extent, does not diminish the potential long-term impact of the NDICI, which is expected to gradually redefine the dynamics of EU-ECOWAS engagement.

Reduced involvement in EU-funded initiatives risks weakening ECOWAS's coordinating role, undermining its institutional stability, and fragmenting regional responses to transnational challenges.

The shift towards the NDICI underscores the EU's evolving approach to development cooperation, prioritizing flexibility and inclusivity. Reduced involvement in EU-funded initiatives risks weakening ECOWAS's coordinating role, undermining its institutional stability, and fragmenting regional responses to transnational challenges. As individual states increasingly align with EU objectives, the coherence of regional strategies may deteriorate, further eroding ECOWAS's influence. More broadly, the marginalization of ECOWAS, alongside other RECs, poses a significant threat to APSA, which relies on strong and capable regional organizations to effectively manage conflict and promote stability.

The Way Forward: Mitigating the Risks

ECOWAS is currently grappling with significant challenges stemming from political developments in West Africa, particularly in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. These crises have severely tested its ability to uphold democratic norms and address

regional instability, placing unprecedented pressure on its institutional and operational capacity. Simultaneously, the EU's NDICI-Global Europe introduces a new funding framework that emphasizes flexibility and alignment with EU priorities. While this shift opens up opportunities for innovative partnerships, it also risks diverting resources from ECOWAS to other actors, potentially undermining the organization's role at a critical moment.

The intersection of these internal political crises and external shifts in funding priorities threatens to diminish ECOWAS's influence at a time when its leadership in regional stability and governance is most essential. The NDICI and its programming principles, aligned with the EU's Global Gateway approach, prioritize EU interests in ways that could unintentionally disrupt the established dynamics between the EU and ECOWAS. Over decades, the EU-ECOWAS partnership has bolstered ECOWAS's institutional capacity and strengthened its legitimacy as a key actor in regional governance. However, the NDICI's emphasis on flexibility and shifting priorities risks undermining these gains.

Recommendations

To address these challenges, both the EU and ECOWAS must take proactive steps. The EU must acknowledge ECOWAS's critical role as a gateway to the West African region and a key partner in fostering regional integration, governance, and peace. A funding strategy that marginalizes ECOWAS risks weakening the organization and further fragmenting the region. The EU must remain mindful of the unintended consequences of its flexible funding approach, ensuring that its support bolsters ECOWAS's institutional capacity rather than sidelining it.

First, the EU should thus prioritize ECOWAS as a central partner within the NDICI framework. This approach ensures balanced funding mechanisms that do not over-rely on state or non-state actors while allowing the EU to remain conscious of potential unintended consequences of the NDICI's flexible funding. In doing so, the EU can consistently monitor the policy's impacts and maintain close dialogue with ECOWAS, thereby safeguarding its leadership role in governance and security

across West Africa. This measure helps prevent the unintended marginalization of ECOWAS at a critical time for the region.

Second, the EU should also empower ECOWAS to lead the designing and implementation of regional initiatives. This approach ensures that projects align with local and regional priorities while reinforcing ECOWAS's legitimacy as the primary REC in West Africa. In doing so, the EU can learn from the successes and address the limitations of the APF by preserving and improving mechanisms that require RECs to coordinate efforts through the AU and member states. Strengthening these mechanisms will help ensure harmonized policies and alignment across regions, particularly in areas such as early warning and conflict prevention.

Third, for its part, ECOWAS must adapt to the evolving funding landscape by reasserting its relevance in EU partnerships. This includes addressing institutional weaknesses that limit its ability to absorb funds and implement projects effectively. Additionally, ECOWAS must focus on diversifying its funding sources to reduce dependency on any single partner and to strengthen its resilience in the face of shifting donor priorities. ECOWAS should thus strengthen its engagement with the EU by clearly articulating its value in addressing regional challenges. This involves showcasing successful outcomes (an area ECOWAS has struggled with, as acknowledged by its own people) and leveraging its leadership role to secure sustained support and maintain influence.

Further Readings

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The Competence Network “African Non-military Conflict Intervention Practices”

The competence network African non-military conflict intervention practices combines empirical basic research with theory building and strategic policy advice. Funded by the German Ministry for Education and Research for the period 2022–2026, the collaborative project will (1) establish an online database of non-military interventions of the African Union (AU) and Regional Economic Communities (RECs)(from 2004 onwards), (2) empirically reconstruct non-military intervention practices and routines by specific African actors, and (3) advance the theoretical debate as well as strategic policy advice on these issues.



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