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# ANCIP POLICY BRIEF

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## Bringing Civil Society Organizations into African Early Warning and Conflict Prevention

Early warning (EW) is a key non-military conflict intervention practice on the African continent. It constitutes one of the five pillars of the African Union's (AU) African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and is also widely practiced by the eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) officially recognized by the AU. Increasingly efforts are being made to include networks or umbrellas of civil society organizations (CSOs) and their field monitor-based information collection capacities into early warning systems at continental and regional levels.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

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- **Capacity-building:** EW CSO umbrellas should be systematically trained by the AU's Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) and functioning regional EWS in the collection and monitoring of data coming from local field monitors.
- **Governance Support:** EW CSO umbrellas should be assisted by the relevant RECs to develop adequate governance structures that improve oversight, accountability, and legitimacy – for instance through advice provided by legal counsel.
- **Reporting Mechanisms:** The link between the AU CEWS, on the one hand, and the RECs/Regional Mechanisms (RMs) and regional EW CSO umbrellas, on the other, should be strengthened in the collection and monitoring of data collected by local field monitors.
- **Stable Finances:** Stable and predictable finances for EW CSO umbrellas should be supplied mainly by the RECs. In addition, strategic partnerships with international donors should be established to mobilize supplementary finances for EW CSO umbrellas.

# Bringing Civil Society Organizations into African Early Warning and Conflict Prevention

Early warning (EW) is a key non-military conflict intervention practice on the African continent. It constitutes one of the five pillars of the African Union's (AU) African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and is also widely practiced by the eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) officially recognized by the AU. Increasingly efforts are being made to include networks or umbrellas of civil society organizations (CSOs) and their field monitor-based information collection capacities into early warning systems at continental and regional levels.

## Civil Society and Conflict Prevention in Africa

Through the AU Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council, a Continental Early Warning System (CEWS, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia) was created during the period 2006–2008. The CEWS is “to facilitate the anticipation and prevention of conflicts”. It consists of an observation and monitoring center (called the Situation Room) and observation and monitoring units of the RMs. This involves collaborating with research centers, academic institutions, and NGOs to ensure the functioning of the CEWS. In general, the Peace and Security Council (PSC) Protocol encourages “non-governmental organizations, community-based and other civil society organizations, particularly women's organizations, to participate actively in the efforts aimed at promoting peace, security and stability in Africa”.

Further, the Livingstone Formula of 2008 highlights the importance of collaborating with CSOs in AU PSC processes and develops modalities for various stages of conflict. With regard to early warning and conflict prevention, it notes that by “undertaking early warning reporting and situation analysis, civil society organizations can assist in enhancing the research and analysis process that feeds information into the decision-making process of the PSC”. Faced with a lack of implementation,

in 2014 the so-called Maseru Conclusions reiterated the importance of strong AU-CSO cooperation, as set out in the Livingstone Formula.

While the AU's CEWS has been operating since 2007, the institutional reform of the AU (which started in 2016–2017) resulted in some setbacks – including the removal of the CEWS from the organization's organigram. As a result, the ability to coordinate and harmonize the REC's early warning systems was lost. This has led to a slight refocusing of the support of international partners for this dimension of the APSA. The AU has only very recently committed to rectifying this situation.

The involvement of CSOs in early warning still faces some challenges in terms of implementing best practices and experiences across the continent, the fragility of many nascent civil society organizations in terms of governance, human resources and capacity, and the dependence on international partners for funding. Therefore, it takes concerted efforts by the AU, RECs, EW CSO umbrellas, and international partners to embed these practices in established processes, utilize existing tools, more efficiently network between the various stakeholders, invest in capacity-building, develop/strengthen regional reporting mechanisms on peace and security, and provide stable and predictable finances to them.

**Best Practice: WANEP in West Africa**

West Africa has been the first of the five African regions – the others being North, Central, East, and Southern – to systematically include CSO-based information gathering into its own early warning system. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS, Abuja, Nigeria) works closely with the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP, Accra, Ghana). Founded in 1999, WANEP celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2024. In 2004, WANEP signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with ECOWAS to support ECOWARN, the REC’s early warning system. The MoU has been renewed every five years following the evaluation of the cooperation (most recently in 2024). Later, in 2015, the AU Peace and Security Department (PSD, now Political Affairs, Peace and Security or PAPS) entered into a MoU with WANEP. The latter is also a member in the Peace and Security cluster of the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC, Lusaka, Zambia), which is the union’s body to give CSOs a voice in the AU. The EW CSO umbrella is also the West Africa regional representative and current chair of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), a network linking more than 250 EW CSOs worldwide.

In practice, WANEP sends field monitors to ECOWAS member states to contribute through regular incident and situation reports to national and regional early warning. WANEP is solely responsible for deciding who becomes a field monitor based on its own criteria. These are more open than the criteria that CSOs must fulfil for AU ECOSOCC membership, which are considered strict and thus exclude many CSOs, especially smaller ones, from participating in AU matters ex ante. Led by national secretariats and coordinated by a regional secretariat, reports feed into ECOWARN and through the Africa Reporter tool also to the AU CEWS (which was developed by the AU and shared with the RECs – see box 1).

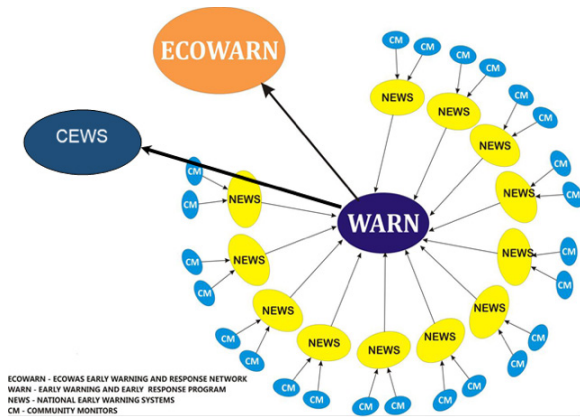


Figure 2: The WANEP Structure. Courtesy: WANEP 2025

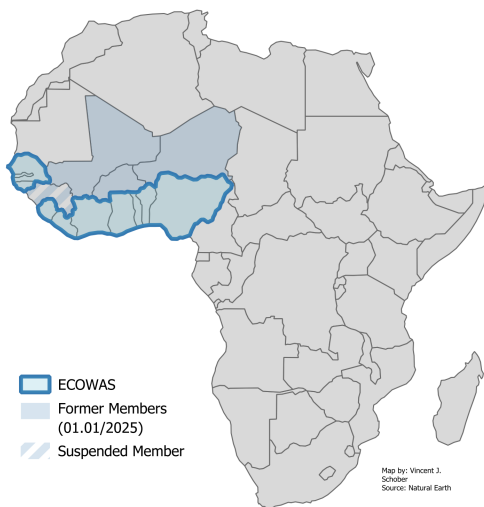


Figure 1: Map of ECOWAS member states

Gradually, WANEP has produced not just incident and situation reports but by going a step further also a series of analytical formats such as policy briefs, quarterly reports, a WARN Bulletin, thematic reports, and a Peace and Security Outlook. The stand-alone structure of WANEP in West Africa therefore provides an opportunity for WANEP to produce its own analyses, reports, etc. to feed into ECOWARN and to inform local populations, governments, etc., based on the data and information collected by its network partners.

Over the past 25 years, the bottom-up information collection and monitoring has become a reliable source of information for early warning, at least in West Africa and the Horn of Africa. It complements the various efforts of both ECOWAS and the African Union in this field. ECOWAS member states are accepting that CSOs play a role in early warning. This is an important game changer in a continent

where in many AU member states the insistence on “national sovereignty” still trumps collective peace and security commitments and responsibilities.

### Box 1: The Africa Reporter

The Africa Reporter is an online field data gathering and analytical tool that is tailored to the CEWS indicators and templates to facilitate the submission of incident and situation reports. Incident reports are irregular reports that describe the attributes of certain events or incidents that are of interest to the early warning mandate of the CEWS. These reports are irregular because they focus on the episodic occurrence of events. Situation reports are regular assessments of an area of reporting, with a focus on emerging conditions of conflict, instability, and other related situations. The regular submission of these reports will help to calculate associated risk scores and build a baseline for the specific area of reporting.

In addition to occasionally briefing the ECOWAS vice president, WANEP is authorized to address ambassadors to ECOWAS – i.e., decision-makers – in quarterly briefings based on the WARN reports. However, it has been noted that warnings and recommendations are frequently disregarded in favor of the interests of national governments. Over the last five to ten years in particular, a culture of denialism regarding the many challenges to peace and security (including violent extremism and terrorism, as well as poor governance) has spread among member states.

### Going beyond ECOWAS and WANEP

Taking lessons from the West African experience of WANEP and ECOWARN, the idea of partnering with EW CSO umbrellas in the different African regions was envisioned by the AU CEWS and the RECs. In May 2012, the AU CEWS, in partnership with the RECs and RMs, held a consultative workshop with CSOs in

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The aim of the meeting was to create awareness and understanding among CSOs on the mandate, structures, operations, and status of the operationalization of the CEWS; develop effective working methods between the CEWS and CSOs to enable the emergence of an effective, practical, and sustainable relationship; and elaborate upon the modalities for engagement and effective participation of CSOs in conflict prevention and early warning with the CEWS and RECs/RMs. As a follow-up, the CEWS and RECs organized a second consultative meeting with CSOs and research centers in March 2015 to discuss and agree on modalities for strengthening collaboration on early warning and conflict prevention. A major outcome of the meeting was the identification of CSOs and research institutions from each of the five AU regions to coordinate data collection activities and thematic research initiatives.

Although these two meetings were fruitful, their implementation has been ad hoc as well as lacking a clear strategy for engagement between the CEWS and CSOs/research institutions. Additionally, in the context of increasing violent conflicts on the continent and the imperatives of preventing and mitigating latent conflicts from degenerating into crisis, the collaboration between the CEWS and CSOs/research institutions cannot be overemphasized. This echoes the salient points of the second consultative meeting of March 2015, which identified the following measures to enhance collaboration around early warning and conflict prevention:

- identifying the Africa Reporter tool as an important online platform to facilitate the exchange of information between the AU CEWS and CSOs,
- organizing regular meetings with AU field/liaison offices, the RECs, and CSOs to review indicators for data gathering,
- organizing capacity development and training for CSOs on CEWS methodologies, tools, as well as other areas to ensure the quality of engagement with the AU,
- harmonizing collaboration between the AU CEWS and the early warning systems of the RECs/RMs with CSOs on relevant areas, and
- advocating a regional approach with EW CSO umbrellas, instead of individual CSO institutions, for a more organized approach towards collaboration.

This paved the way for collaboration between the AU and WANEP in early warning field data collection, starting August 2017. For the AU CEWS, this was a major boost as it greatly improved the analytical capacity at the AU through a boost in primary data. The creation of a WANEP liaison at the AU following the signing of an MoU between the then AU Commission's Peace and Security Department and WANEP facilitated a more seamless partnership in addressing peace, security, and governance issues in the West Africa region. This also helped the CEWS to start searching for partners in other African regions. The embedding of the WANEP liaison officer in the organizational processes of the PAPS is an expression of great trust in this civil society partner. This modality set out in the MoU allows for an ad hoc and informal exchange to discuss possible initiatives around conflict prevention.

In 2018, a collaboration with the Southern Africa Partnerships for the Prevention of Conflict (SAPPC, Harare, Zimbabwe) started with a training on the Africa Reporter, in Manzini, eSwatini. In addition, in early 2019, the first meeting with CSOs from nine East and Central African countries was conducted to kick-start the process of supporting the creation of a CSO umbrella in the East Africa region through the Eastern and Central Africa Civil Society Organizations Network (ECONET, Kampala, Uganda). This was followed by a joint benchmarking visit by ECONET and SAPPC to WANEP in September 2021, organized by the AU CEWS, as a lesson learned exercise. The visit was aimed at enhancing and strengthening the early warning capacities of CSO umbrella networks as well as gaining experience in establishing their national and regional governance structures.

SAPPC is composed of loosely structured CSOs in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. It represents the Southern Africa chapter of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Conflict (GPPAC), which consists of 15 regional networks. SAPPC member CSOs are partnering with the CEWS for the collection of incident and situation reporting from their specific countries through the Africa Reporter tool.

As for ECONET, the Covid pandemic in 2020 stalled the process of operationalizing the CSO umbrella. Despite some ad hoc opportunities to meet virtually and continued participation of very few CSOs on the Africa Reporter tool, the push for

capacitating ECONET was not restarted until 2023. During a meeting with the AU and RECs/RMs of the region held in Nairobi (Kenya) in November 2024, ECONET reaffirmed to complete the establishment of appropriate country and regional governance structures through a rigorous work plan for 2025 and 2026. A reconstituted steering committee tasked with the responsibilities and duties for the establishment of ECONET as legal entity and fully operationalizing ECONET as a regional CSO.

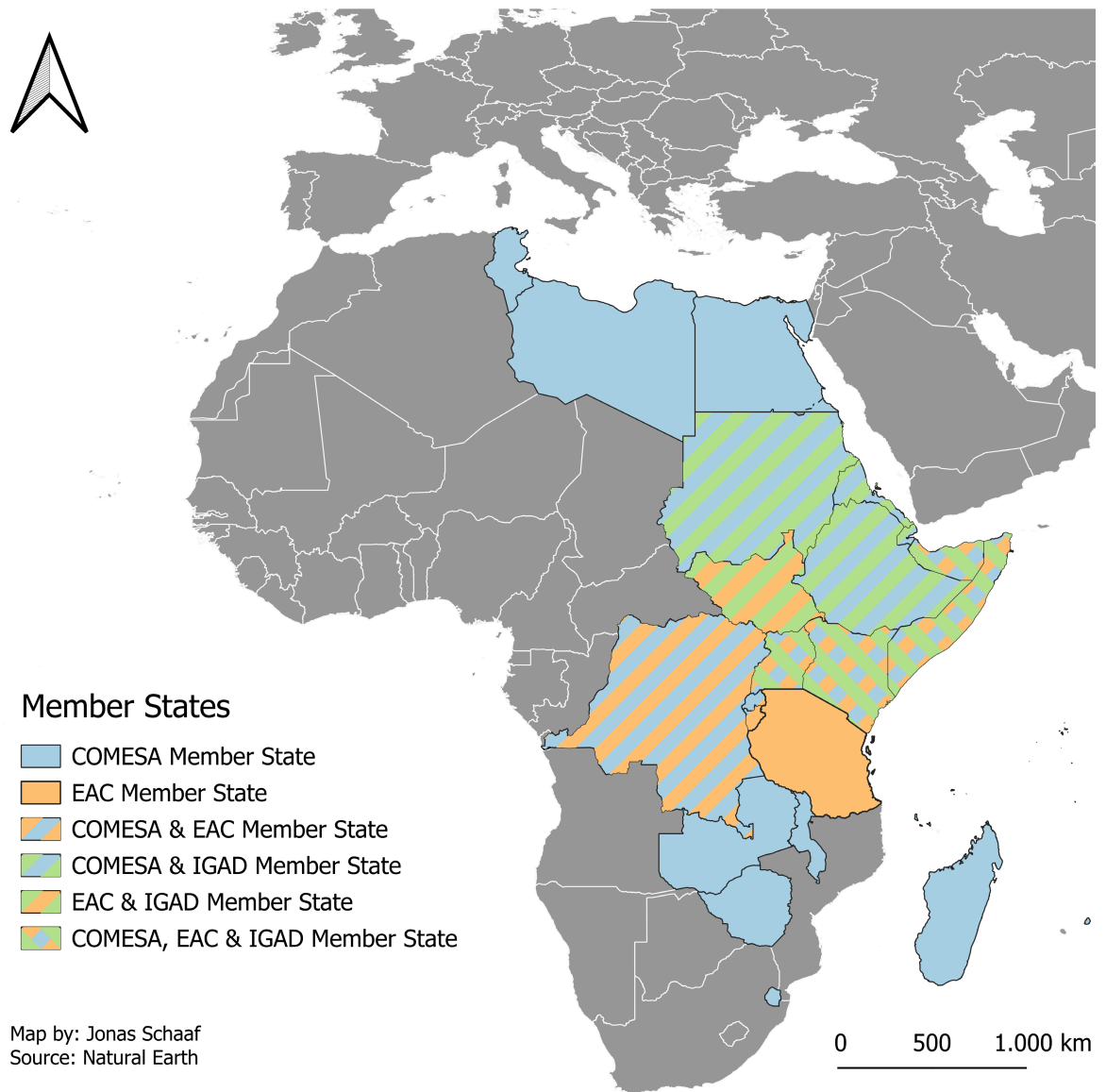
Meanwhile, a new situation has arisen regarding the possible cooperation with research institutions through the launch of the Network of Think Tanks for Peace (NeTT4Peace) by the AU commissioner for political affairs, peace and security in February 2023. The network brings together 15 research institutions, 3 per African region. It is intended to help the AU to harness important academic expertise in the field of peace and security, including conflict prevention. However, the topic of early warning has not yet dominated the NeTT4Peace agenda.

## Recent Dynamics

In 2023, the AU newly amalgamated Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security (DPAPS) and the Governance, Peace and Security (GPS) unit of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA, Lusaka) as well as the EW units of the East African Community (EAC) and the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) teamed up to transfer WANEP's good practices to East and Southern Africa, and to enhance the collaboration between CSO umbrella organizations and the RECs/RMs in early warning. The aim was to strengthen multistakeholder conflict prevention architectures in Africa.

The support targets the EW CSO umbrella bodies in East and Southern Africa. The EW CSO umbrellas targets include ECONET and SAPPC – including its Zambian chapter, the Southern African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (SACCORD, Lusaka). These EW CSO umbrella bodies are supposed to collaborate with COMESA, SADC, IGAD, and the EAC in addition to the AU. Currently this is work in progress, including building the necessary operational technical and analytical capacities as well as functional structures.

The broader aspect of the support also targets



**Figure 3:** Map of COMESA, EAC and IGAD

AU member states, including Sierra Leone (support for the National Infrastructures for Peace, NI4P, through the Independent Commission of Peace and National Cohesion) and Zambia (support for the NI4P through the implementation of the Country Structural Vulnerability Mitigation Strategy, CSVMS, under the Continental Structural Conflict Prevention Framework, CSCPF – see box 2).

The AU, RECs, and WANEP as well as an Addis Ababa-based project by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GIZ) in support of APSA (and the African Governance Architecture, AGA) are aiming at strengthening

NI4Ps in the context of the AU-led CSCPF. This is a structural conflict prevention instrument to assess a country's long-term resilience and vulnerability to violent conflict and, on that basis, develop country-specific CSVMS. Like the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), a CSVMS is being adopted by AU member states on a voluntary basis and implemented in consultative multistakeholder processes. In contrast to the APRM, this process also involves the RECs. Against this background, the AU and RECs (most notably COMESA) want to increase support to CSOs umbrellas working in these processes. After the inaugural process in Ghana in

2017–2018, today this includes Côte d'Ivoire, Zambia, Malawi, and upcoming processes in Kenya as well as several other COMESA member states that have showed interest.

## Current Challenges

There are three major challenges facing this agenda. First, for a long-time early warning and especially structural conflict prevention have not

been prioritized, neither by the African Union nor by the RECs. That only seems to be changing now. In the face of numerous internal conflicts, coups d'état and transnational terrorist threats, military intervention practices, conflict management, and conflict resolution continue to dominate the day-to-day business of the AU/RECs.

Second, like in most other policy fields, EW CSO umbrellas in East and Southern Africa are fragile – in terms of governance, human resources, and capacities. Their governance structures are often not robust, lacking clear internal rules, participatory involvement of members, and accountability; the structures set up in the member states are very, very uneven when it comes to activities. Staffing levels are thin. Capacities to carry out early warning are still limited, both technically and analytically. And most EW CSO umbrellas depend on a few leading personalities. Finally, it should not be overlooked that the political space for CSOs in several AU member states has been shrinking for years.

And third, to function as intended, CSOs would be heavily dependent on contributions from international donors. This presents CSOs with a further dilemma regarding participation in AU affairs: the ECOSOCC criteria for membership stipulate that a CSO's basic resources must be at least 50 per cent derived from contributions of its members, and voluntary external funding must be declared. If a CSO receives direct or indirect financial or other support from governments, this must also be disclosed. In this regard, CSOs must exercise caution to maintain a delicate balance between their own contributions and external funding. So far, neither the AU nor the RECs can provide extensive funding for the EW CSO umbrellas.

### Box 2 : CSCP

The Continental Structural Conflict Prevention Framework (CSCP), endorsed by the PSC in 2015, details the African Union's policy on structural or long-term conflict prevention. It describes a voluntary country self-assessment process, the Country Structural Vulnerability Resilience Assessment (CSVRA), which is assisted by the AU and the relevant REC. The CSVRA is designed to facilitate the identification of a member state's structural vulnerability to conflict at an early stage. Emphasis is placed on the potential drivers of conflict in the following areas:

- (1) socioeconomic development;
- (2) good governance, rule of law, democracy, and human rights;
- (3) security sector;
- (4) environment and climate change;
- (5) gender and youth;
- (6) post-conflict peacebuilding; and
- (7) transitional justice and reconciliation.

After this process has been concluded, the country will develop a tailor-made strategic and medium- to long-term Country Structural Vulnerability Mitigation Strategy (CSVMS).

## Conclusions

Field data collection and monitoring by EW CSO substantially adds value to the efforts undertaken by the AU and RECs/RM in continental and regional early warning and structural conflict prevention. It brings in additional and sometimes unique data that currently already supplements the early warning efforts of the AU, ECOWAS, and IGAD. The recent process to create similar CSO mechanisms in other RECs offers opportunities to boost the capacities of existing early warning systems and strengthen an

important field of non-military conflict intervention practices. Through the participation of CSOs, it also contributes to taking the AU's goal of creating a union of the people a step further.

However, two remaining challenges still need to be overcome. The first concerns the fragility of the EW CSO umbrellas, which often still lack capacities, appropriate governance, and accountability structures (i.e., a solid institutionalization) as well as solid links with the RECs. And second, there is still an unhealthy dependence on international donors for financing, which can only be overcome if the RECs mobilize their own financial resources. Early warning does not come for free. However, the cost of containing violent conflict is much higher.

## Further Reading

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### About the authors

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**Taye Abdulkadir** works with the AU Continental Early Warning System (CEWS). He played a major role in the conceptualization and operationalization of the technical aspects of CEWS tools and processes, both at the AU and the RECs/RMs. He has been working extensively with CSOs from West, Central, Southern, and East Africa regions in the areas of field data collection for early warning as well as domestication of national peace infrastructures in AU member states and implementation of country-led structural conflict prevention efforts. Taye Abdulkadir has been working in the areas of peace and security for more than 19 years. He is currently a PhD candidate in global studies at Leipzig University.

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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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