



# ANCIP

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INTERVENTION PRACTICES

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# Studying African Non-Military Conflict Intervention Practices

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## Summary

Interventions by African regional organizations like the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have been gaining increasing scholarly attention. This working paper aims at shifting the scholarly focus in studying forms and consequences of African interventions toward the manifold practices enacted in those interventions. The analysis specifically concentrates on non-military interventions, which have so far been neglected in the study of African interventionism. In so doing, this working paper draws on and contributes to a burgeoning body of literature that places center stage individuals working in and with African regional institutions as well as the growing emphasis on studying the enactment of African regional policies “on the ground.” The paper results from an ongoing collaborative network project that has allowed scholars to develop a shared conceptual vocabulary and to collectively study African non-military conflict intervention practices across different actors, institutions, and conflict situations. The main objective of this paper is to establish a conceptual foundation for the study of African non-military conflict intervention practices and to explain our understanding of their “constitutive elements” – what we understand by “non-military conflict interventions,” what it means to examine “practices,” and also what is “African” in African non-military conflict intervention practices. The paper concludes by outlining some potential avenues for further research.

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## 1. Introduction

Since its inception in 2004, the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the African Union (AU) has met more than 1,250 times to discuss and eventually take decisions on matters of peace and security on the African continent. On the one hand, though being the AU's central decision-making organ relating to peace and security, the PSC is not the only institution relevant for and involved in African efforts to address violent conflicts and insecurities on the continent. On the other hand, the AU, at the continental level, is not the sole forum for discussing and deciding on such matters either: At the subregional level, African Regional Economic Communities (RECs), such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) or the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), have evolved into important locales for the regulation of (violent) conflict in West Africa and East Africa, respectively. Despite the often-aspirational character of the AU and RECs, their development and expansion of norms and institutions to address (violent) conflict in Africa have not remained only on paper. Rather, the AU and RECs have become over the past two decades regular and active interveners in their member states. As shown in figure 1, based on data from the SIPRI Multilateral Peace Support Operations Database, since 2011, the number of African-led interventions has increased steadily and in 2022, for the first time, even surpassed the number of interventions deployed by the United Nations (UN).<sup>1</sup>

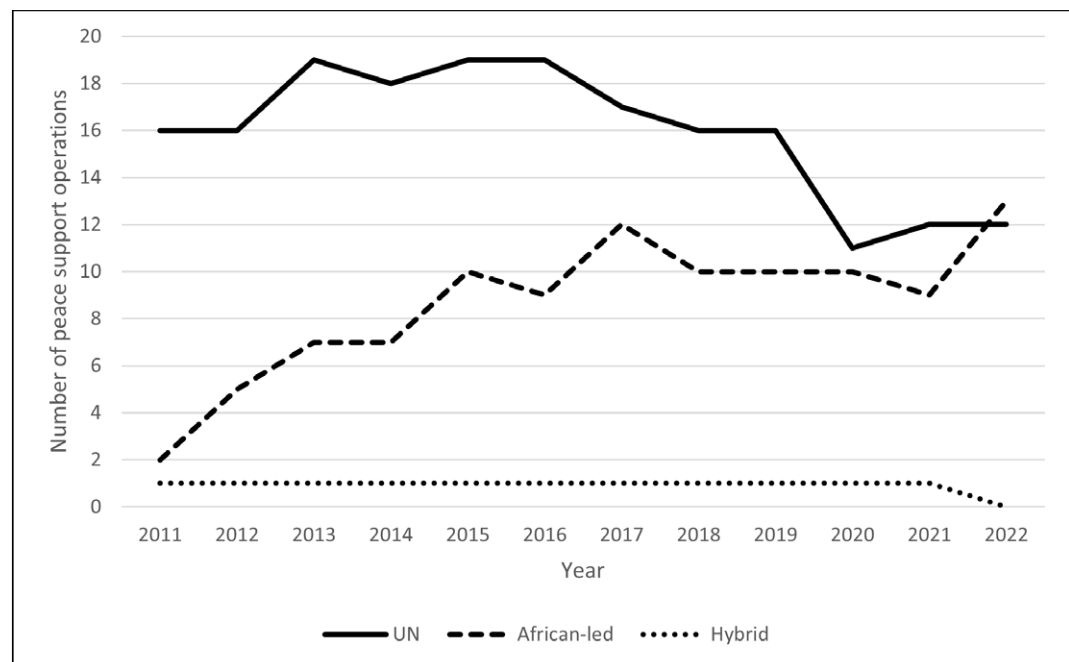


Figure 1: African- and UN-led peace support operations in Africa 2011–2022 (based on SIPRI Multilateral Peace Support Operations Database, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/pko>)

<sup>1</sup> The SIPRI Multilateral Peace Support Operations Database includes operations that are “conducted under the authority of the UN and operations conducted by regional organizations or by ad hoc coalitions of states sanctioned by the UN or authorized by a UN Security Council resolution, with the stated intention of: (a) serving as an instrument to facilitate the implementation of peace agreements already in place; (b) supporting a peace process; or (c) assisting conflict prevention and/or peacebuilding efforts.” See <https://www.sipri.org/databases/pko/methods> (last access 3 January 2025).

Whereas this figure is proof of increasingly intensive intervention activity on the side of African regional actors,<sup>2</sup> it only partially displays the actual scope and magnitude of African intervention practices. In this sense, it is important to equally engage with what the data does not show. By focusing on the “operation” as the unit of analysis, the dataset excludes those intervention activities by African regional organizations that rest on more sporadically deployed (military, police, or civilian) personnel, such as preventive diplomacy, mediation, and negotiations in response to unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs); missions by the Panel of the Wise and its subsidiary organizations; field visits by the AU PSC; or activities by African special envoys. It also does not capture the more mundane aspects relating to African-led interventions such as early warning and analysis or the work by liaison offices of AU and RECs in conflict-affected countries. Such intervention instruments and practices are regularly employed by African regional organizations, as several other data collection projects have shown (Herpolsheimer and Warnck, 2020; Henneberg, 2022), but they often take place outside of what may be labeled as an “operation,” referring to a particular official and authorized form of intervention. These more sporadic, small-scale, and less formalized practices are also specifically characteristic of non-military engagements in conflict situations. As a result, the dataset, as well as figure 1 above, excessively visualizes African military interventions and widely neglects the diverse forms of African non-military intervention practices. As we will argue in this paper, this imbalance in the representation of African intervention activities in visualizations reflects the predominant scholarly focus on African military intervention practices as opposed to non-military ones.

The working paper aims at redirecting the scholarly attention in the study of African interventions from their forms and consequences to the manifold practices through which they are enacted. In so doing, we draw on and contribute to a burgeoning body of literature that places center stage individuals working in and with African regional institutions (Tieku et al., 2020; Herpolsheimer, 2021; Balogun, 2022) as well as a growing emphasis on studying the enactment of African regional policies “on the ground” (Witt, 2018; Witt and Khadiagala, 2018). The paper results from an ongoing collaborative network project that has allowed scholars to develop a shared conceptual vocabulary and to collectively study African non-military conflict intervention practices across different actors, institutions, and conflict situations.<sup>3</sup> The project makes three contributions to the existing literature. First, it develops a conceptually grounded analysis of African non-military interventions through the lens of practices. This lens offers a more fine-grained conceptual vocabulary for studying the enactment of these interventions, which also requires ground-up empirical research to reconstruct such practices. Second, the project introduces a wide range of new empirical evidence on selected hitherto underresearched actors central for practices of African non-military intervention – such as African special envoys or the Panel of the Wise – and on the various intersections between African interveners and other actors constitutive of these interventions – such as civil society organizations (CSOs), national infrastructures for peace (NI4P), and international donors. Third, we offer a more general epistemological and methodological discussion on what it means to study African non-military conflict intervention practices, ranging from questions of access and research ethics to more broader questions on how to (better) visualize African non-military intervention practices. Most

2 The data of the SIPRI Multilateral Peace Support Operations Database includes interventions of the AU and RECs as well as those by ad hoc coalitions (see generally Brosig and Karlsrud, 2024). In figure 1, African-led interventions are summarized as comprising all three types. From the 13 African-led interventions in 2022, 10 were deployed by the AU or an African REC/RM, while 3 were deployed by ad hoc coalitions or other subregional bodies such as the G5 Sahel or the Lake Chad Basin Commission, in the latter cases authorized by the AU.

3 The African Non-Military Conflict Intervention Practices (ANCIP) is funded by the German Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF, 2022–2026). For more information, see <https://www.ancip-project.de>.

of the empirical, epistemological, and methodological insights have been brought together in a book that is going to be published later this year.<sup>4</sup>

The main objective of this paper is to establish a conceptual foundation for the study of African non-military conflict intervention practices and to explain our understanding of their “constitutive elements.” We start by situating our research within the burgeoning literature on African interventions and the role of African regional organizations in the field of conflict management and peacebuilding. We then proceed by discussing what we understand by “non-military conflict interventions,” what it means to study “practices,” and also what is “African” in African non-military conflict intervention practices. The paper concludes by outlining some potential avenues for further research.

## 2. State of the Art

The internationalized character of state formation on the African continent has produced a long series of interventions before and since the postcolonial state system evolved in the second half of the twentieth century. The Organisation of African Unity (OAU), established on 25 May 1963, had a clear mandate to end the remaining colonial rule on the continent, to defend the sovereignty of the newly independent African states, and to solve conflicts between them. The key success of this first phase of continental efforts for peace and security consisted of the adoption of key norms that became quite effective in shaping African state practices and preventing large-scale interstate conflicts – foremost, the principle that the state system, with its borders defined by colonizers, should not be questioned, however artificial such borders might have been considered at the time (OAU, 1963, Art III(3)). The OAU was arguably much less successful in preventing and stopping intrastate violent conflicts, in part due to a lack of strategies and capacities for intervening in such contexts (van Walraven, 1999). As a result, intervention in intrastate conflicts was mostly left to non-African actors, such as the two global powers, the United States and the Soviet Union; to former colonizers, such as France or the United Kingdom; or to the UN, through peacekeeping or diplomatic missions (see generally Kisangani and Pickering, 2021).

Many things started to change in the early 1990s. At the continental level, among African politicians and bureaucrats, a new thinking emerged about the role that continental and regional actors and institutions should assume in preventing, mitigating, and ending violent conflict. In West Africa, ECOWAS initiated a military intervention in Liberia to end a civil war, which had started to involve several neighboring states and to threaten regional stability. Other ECOWAS military interventions followed during the 1990s in Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau. Meanwhile, in the south of the African continent, South Africa pushed the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to intervene militarily in Lesotho and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

With the transformation of the OAU into the AU in 2002, a legal framework was established that aimed at integrating existing initiatives at the continental and regional levels and set the foundation for a comprehensive African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) for preventing and addressing violent conflict and insecurity on the continent. This newly established structure includes innovative normative changes, such as the introduction of wide-ranging intervention rights under the notion of “non-indifference,” as well as major institutional reforms, such as the creation of the PSC at the AU level (Williams, 2007).

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4 An additional component of the network project is the creation of a new database covering African non-military conflict intervention practices of the AU, ECOWAS, and IGAD, allowing for their reconstruction of non-military conflict intervention practices on a large scale across time and space.

Thus, since APSA emerged, the AU, the RECs, and the Regional Mechanisms for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution (RMs) have been granted wide-ranging mandates to intervene in their member states. These mandates, though varying between the AU and the different African RECs/RMs, generally allow for the full circle of peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding activities – including not only aspects of postconflict reconstruction, transitional justice, and structural conflict prevention but also the promotion of political norms on democratic governance and constitutionalism. Although what remains a matter of debate is the extent to which these institutional and normative changes actually account for a shift from “non-interference” to “non-indifference” (Sturman, 2008; Murithi, 2012), they indeed had a profound impact on intervention activities on the African continent.

As APSA (both as an institutional and normative structure) and their various African intervention practices have quickly evolved and expanded, as outlined above, scholarly attention toward them, too, has grown rapidly. A first strand of APSA literature mainly focused on the institutional and legal developments at the continental and subregional levels, studying formal institutional aspects as well as the relationship between African intervening organizations and other international organizations (IOs) such as the UN or the European Union (EU). Another strand of literature focused more on analyzing APSA implementation, often based on single case studies. Within both strands over the last 20 years, the military activities of the AU and the RECs/RMs attracted considerable academic and political interest – underlining the strategic turns that the AU has taken not only together with the RECs/RMs but also in their relationship with the UN or EU (Boutellis and Williams, 2013; Badmus, 2015; Brosig, 2015; de Coning, 2017; Coleman and Tiekou, 2018), as well as the uncertainties about the sustainability and political economy of such operations (Warner, 2015; de Coning et al., 2016; Omeje, 2018; Onditi, 2018; Geis and Moe, 2020). More recent research has begun to focus also on understanding African military interventions “from below,” investigating the actual practices of intervention and how they unfold on the ground (Witt, 2018; Witt and Khadiagala, 2018).

Datasets of African peace and security dynamics have also focused mostly on tracing violent conflict dynamics – such as the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), the Heidelberg Conflict Barometer (HIIC), or the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) – with little emphasis on the different intervention practices employed in response to them (Herpolsheimer and Warnck, 2020, 5), although more recent datasets do try to cover both military and non-military interventions (Duursma and Gamez, 2021 on the African Peace Processes dataset; Henneberg, 2022 on the Regional Organisations Security Activity Dataset for Africa).

The strong scholar interest in various aspects of African military interventions has overshadowed that in non-military intervention practices, despite the latter clearly representing the quantitatively more important form of intervention through African regional organizations. We find some case studies (Aeby, 2017; Wilén and Williams, 2018; Witt, 2020) but little systematic analysis of key regional institutions or practices (Gomes Porto and Ngandu, 2015; Aeby and Pring, 2023). Non-military interventions might occur in quite different empirical contexts, ranging from UCGs (such as coups d'état) to disputed elections or other types of political and humanitarian crises (Engel, 2012; Hartmann, 2017; Witt, 2020).

Extant research shows that non-military interventions are typically underresourced and might not be sufficiently integrated with the other APSA pillars (Nathan, 2017; Khadiagala, 2018; Desmidt, 2019; Herpolsheimer, 2021; IPSS, 2022). They are often as contested and ambiguous in their outcomes as their military counterparts (Witt, 2020; Witt et al., 2024). However, a more comprehensive assessment of the various non-military intervention practices has been hampered by a lack of detailed evidence-based analysis, particularly with

regard to the many mostly informal practices and to the complex interfaces between the AU/RECs, their international partners (AU PSC, 2024), and national and local actors (Butedi, 2018; Saidou, 2018; Witt et al., 2024). In a nutshell, there exists a huge gap in our conceptual and empirical understanding of African non-military conflict intervention practices.

### 3. What Are Non-Military Conflict Interventions?

In International Relations (IR) scholarship, interventions have long been understood within the framework of the international state system, assuming that “the intervening actors are sovereign states, and that the targets of intervention are sovereign states” (Reus-Smit, 2013, 1058). However, as Christian Reus-Smit (2013, 1058) notes, even historically interventions in fact “took place in very different configurations of political authority from today’s universal system of sovereign states” and therefore also need to be conceptually freed from what he calls the “sovereign frame” (see also Quinton-Brown, 2020). While this is important historically, it is also necessary for the understanding of contemporary political reconfigurations, where international and regional organizations have become important sources and agents of intervention – with interventions being more the norm than the exception of international politics (Lawson and Tardelli, 2013, 1252). This is particularly true for the African continent.

In this paper, interventions are understood broadly as transterritorial deployments with the aim of affecting order in a particular social and political context (see Latham, 2001, 75). Such deployments can be more or less temporary, and their aim of affecting order can be pursued through a great variety of means and instruments – ranging from coercive ones, such as the threat or use of military force, to less coercive ones, such as monitoring, capacity-building, or humanitarian assistance (Howard, 2019). Interventions are therefore specific transterritorial deployments that are prepared and sustained by a whole range of socially meaningful patterns of action – that is to say, practices, as we will elaborate in more detail in the next section. Such interventions open up a political space of transterritorial interaction in which power is sustained, negotiated, or reconfigured at different sites.

Empirically, interventions led by the AU or the RECs/RMs have so far been deployed in response to a broad spectrum of situations, ranging from violent conflicts (e.g., in Somalia, in the Ethiopian region of Tigray, and in the Central African Republic [CAR]) to coups d’état and UCGs (e.g., Guinea, Mali, and Niger), contested elections (e.g., Kenya and The Gambia), gross human rights violations (e.g., Sudan), and state-building and reconciliation in the aftermath of (violent) conflicts (e.g., the CAR and Madagascar) (see overviews in Aboagye, 2016; Aning and Edu-Afful, 2016; Adetula et al., 2020).

In line with this broad spectrum of situations, African interventions have utilized a similarly diverse array of instruments, ranging from peace enforcement to the issuing of sanctions, mediation, human rights monitoring, and security sector reform, to name but a few. Available typologies of interventions, including those provided by the intervening organizations themselves, tend to categorize interventions based on the instruments employed – for example, peacekeeping, mediation, or post-conflict reconstruction. Not least, this is also reflected in the institutional structures of the intervening organizations, which usually house peacekeeping somewhere different from mediation and post-conflict reconstruction.

This paper employs a broad distinction between military and non-military interventions, focusing specifically on the hitherto neglected latter form. The distinction can be made both at the level of instruments and at the level of deployed personnel. While at first sight it seems to be straightforward to distinguish between military and non-military interventions



at the instrument level, in practice, this distinction is oftentimes problematic, especially in multidimensional peace support operations (PSOs) that regularly carry out non-military activities, such as quick impact projects or human rights monitoring (see for instance Williams, 2018, chap. 6). We therefore investigate the distinction at the personnel level, understanding non-military interventions as those predominantly involving civilian personnel. In contrast, while military interventions might also involve civilian and police personnel, they nevertheless predominantly draw on military personnel. This approach thus also allows for an empirical examination rather than predetermination of the character of the instruments – and ultimately the practices – employed in each intervention. As a rule of thumb, non-military interventions mainly comprise non-military practices, which are all practices that do not draw on the potential or actual use of force. Military interventions, in turn, often incorporate both military and non-military practices, such as support for local dialogues or quick impact projects. Additionally, they may also engage in early warning and conflict analyses derived from non-military practices. Nevertheless, the focus of our project is on non-military practices in non-military interventions.

The understanding of interventions as transterritorial deployments put forward here thus places center stage the agents of intervention and their interactions both within the specific intervention locale and across multiple sites. This includes exchanges between the intervention locale and entities such as the headquarters of the deploying organization or of international partners financing, consulting, or otherwise supporting the intervention (Witt, 2018, 2020; Herpolsheimer, 2021). Interventions thus open up a field of negotiation and contestation about how and for what end an intervention ought to take place. This perspective is in line with a growing body of literature on the sociology of interventions, which is interested in exploring the knowledge and practices of intervention based on a bottom-up analysis of their enactment across specific yet interconnected sites (Bliesemann de Guevara, 2012; Autesserre, 2014; Daho et al., 2019). As argued by Lise Philipsen (2020, 152-153), understanding interventions through bottom-up interactions allows scholars to gain “a deeper understanding of how interventions work as daily assertions and appropriations of power” and to understand “implementers as embodying the paradoxes and dilemmas of intervention, but also as capable of making sense of and reacting to them.” Apart from focusing on the various agents of intervention, such a perspective therefore requires a conceptual and methodological orientation toward understanding practices as constituent elements through which interventions unfold their ordering character. The following section will therefore discuss what we understand about practices and how one might explore practices empirically.

#### **4. Why Practices?**

Our aim is to explore African non-military intervention practices – that is to say, the things that people and institutions “do” and give meaning to in this policy field. As pointed out above, such a focus on practices is an enabling tool to break down predefined “instruments” and generally observed activities, for instance “preventive diplomacy,” into concrete strands, sets, or clusters of action that are interrelated and charged with social meaning. Such strands, sets, or clusters of action are carried out by specific individuals and are therefore observable.

Emmanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot define practices as “socially meaningful patterns of action which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world” (Adler and Pouliot, 2011, 6). By now, practice theory has become a firmly established sub-field of IR theory. The “practice turn” can be located around the turn of the millennium

(see Turner, 1994; Schatzki et al., 2001; Stern, 2003; Rouse, 2006), coming from very different ends (e.g., on a culturalist perspective, see Reckwitz, 2002; on emotions, see Matern, 2011). Practice theory cuts across several disciplines; beyond IR, today's debates are mainly situated in the field of education and teacher training. Fruitful contributions to the IR debate initially centered around discussions regarding the relevance of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) for the development of IR theory (mainly reflecting on Bourdieu 1977, 1990; see, for instance, Bigo, 2011; Leander, 2011; Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014). In the mid-2010s, the field experienced consolidation and saturation (as, among others, evidenced by Bueger and Gadinger, 2018 [2014]).

Practice theory clearly is poststructural in nature and has already been heralded as the “new constructivism” (McCourt, 2017). However, the epistemological status of practice theory has also been challenged, and the question has been raised of whether “in practice” practice theory is more of a methodological approach rather than a set of metatheoretical postulates (Schmidt, 2017). Correctly, Christian Bueger (2014) refers to this school of thought as “praxiography,” with implications for both empirical access points and data collection (see also Jonas and Littig, 2017 on “praxeology”).

Furthermore, the study of practices has been extended to examining “communities of practice” (CoPs) (Wenger, 1998), defined as “groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise” (Wenger and Snyder, 2000, 139; see also Adler, 2008; Pouliot, 2008; Bicchi, 2011; Bueger, 2013; Olsson, 2015; Kustermans, 2016). The discussion about CoPs, especially in IR, has mainly focused on actors anchored in IOs (for recent contributions, see Bicchi, 2021 on “committed” CoPs; Hofius, 2022 on the EU; Salazar, 2023 on ASEAN; Balogun, 2022 on ECOWAS; and Deleglise, 2024 on the AU). Against this background, it is useful to consider certain actors in and around the AU and the RECs as networks that develop practices on specific issues, for example preventive diplomacy or conflict prevention. Often, these CoPs go beyond IO-embedded actors and also include representatives of donor organizations, academics, or consultants. They often act “inside-out” (Döring et al., 2021) and have been characterized as “outsiders” (Tieku, 2021, 110). In this literature, there is a clear preference for practice theory, sometimes with a focus on informal practices in and around IOs (see Tieku, 2021; Tieku and Yakohene, 2024).

Applying a practice lens to the study of African conflict interventions brings added value in at least three ways. First, it helps open the black box of institutions and collective agency. Instead of generically looking at the agency of “the African Union” or any of “the RECs/RMs,” we are following the practices of specific actors and their entanglements with other similar and related actors – chairpersons, special envoys, departmental units, subsidiary bodies, groups of ministers, permanent representatives, and so on (Döring and Herpolsheimer, 2021a, 13-16). Interventions are thus not imagined as being carried out by “the African Union” but by the practices of specific actors at different sites.

These practices are relational and often place specific – that is to say, they happen at the headquarters of IOs (Abuja, Addis Ababa, Arusha, Gaborone, Lusaka, New York, etc.). However, they can also take the form of networks of exchanges (conferences, meetings, fact finding missions, etc.) or even spaces of interaction (e.g., virtual exchanges between experts across regions or continents). In this respect, spatial analysis often serves as a powerful methodological tool to map different practices and examine the relationships between actors on the ground (Döring and Herpolsheimer, 2018, 2021b; Engel, 2020; Herpolsheimer, 2021; Döring, 2023).

Second, a practice lens provides insights into the power relations that both structure and are reproduced by these practices (see Watson, 2017). This extends beyond the power

dynamics between the “Global North” and “Africa” (on the NATO intervention in Libya, see Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, 2014; on the EU’s anti-piracy policy, see Bueger, 2016; on the UNSC and children in armed conflict, see Bode, 2017) to include the power expressed in and through interactions that structure the social world, among which are the production of knowledge and the provision of certain interpretative frameworks to understand a conflict situation (see, for instance, Engel, 2018 on early warning). In this sense, a practice lens helps to make sense of the discrepancies between formal policy scripts and templates of action and how they unfold “in practice,” which often turn out to be two different worlds (Philipsen, 2020).

Third, especially a focus on CoPs helps to develop a sense of how practices are relational and mutually constitutive in the construction of policy fields. Policies and politics are often coproduced between actors that are neither clear-cut “African” nor “external” (see below). By probing the processes through which intersubjective meaning is produced within CoPs, insights can be generated on the interests and identities of the various stakeholders.

In combination, a practice-oriented perspective serves as an invitation to conduct a thorough, empirical, and inductive investigation of African non-military conflict interventions, based on a close reconstruction of the situated and socially meaningful patterns of action. Such an approach is methodologically demanding because it requires access to people and their lived experience, which are often rather closed off to outsiders. It is therefore not surprising that especially in the study of interventions, practice lenses are particularly often used by scholar-practitioners who have privileged access to the professional worlds they are studying (see for instance Autesserre, 2014; Hagemann, 2024).

## **5. What Is “African” in African Non-Military Conflict Intervention Practices?**

Typically, politics, the media, and academia alike take the “African” in African conflict interventions, whether military or non-military, for granted. Certainly, the AU exercises agency through claiming that these interventions are first and foremost African. Hence, they contribute to a particular form of identity production and meaning-making. A good example of this is the way that the AU mediation was portrayed in 2022 in the conflict around the Ethiopian region of Tigray (AU, 2025).

However, how “African” are African non-military conflict interventions (see Nathan, 2022)? And what does “African” signify in this regard? Beyond the seemingly straightforward identity categories, there are blurred boundaries and dynamic divisions of labor, for which the conceptual and epistemological debates need to account.

First, academic debates on African conflict interventions are firmly embedded in conceptual Eurocentrism – that is to say, universalizing or universalized concepts that historically are rooted and coined outside the African continent (Danso and Aning, 2022). This applies not only to the early ideological emphasis on a future “Pax Africana” (Mazrui, 1967) and the debate in the 1990s on “traditional” African conflict resolution practices (Zartman, 2000) but also to the more recent discussions around “African solutions to African problems” (for a critical reflection, see Dawit Yohannes and Fana Gebresenbet, 2021). When it comes to knowledge production on the continent, Ismail Rashid and Amy Niang (2021, 2) have observed that many of the peace studies programs, institutes, and departments that have emerged in various African countries since the 1990s “are merely reproductions of similar programs in other parts of the world, often ill-adapted and inappropriate for African contexts.”

Second, the divisions of labor in non-military conflict interventions in Africa make it difficult to uphold a binary argument of being African versus non-African. Many conflict situations

on the continent are addressed not only by the AU and/or the RECs/RMs but also by the UN and the EU (on the AU's strategic partnerships, see Engel, 2024b) – both of which maintain their own special envoys or representatives (which in the case of the UN are often Africans with experience in the AU and/or the RECs). A good example is the late former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan's mediation of the post-electoral conflict in Kenya (2007/2008). Annan was born in Ghana; his technical team was provided by the Human Rights Watch, an advocacy organization headquartered in New York; and his core mediation team included the former Mozambican government minister Graça Machel. Today, many UN and AU special envoys or representatives work closely together. Former AU diplomats are appointed as UN envoys (e.g., Said Djinnit for the Great Lakes region and West Africa, respectively, or the previous AUC director of peace and security, El-Ghassim Wane, for Mali).

What makes their work (and identity) UN specific or post-African? And what does this tell us about the claim that "African" mediators are more likely to conclude sustainable peace agreements on the continent (see Duursma, 2020)? African non-military conflict interventions are usually mediated in the space not only between African continental and regional organizations but also between the former and the AU's international partners.

Third, the political economy of African non-military intervention practices is highly dependent on international donors, despite the AU's efforts to increase funding from member states (see Omeje, 2018; Engel, 2023). Currently, the AU's partners contribute more than 61 percent of the budget (see Engel, 2020, 2024a). The dependency of the various RECs is not much different (Engel and Mattheis, 2020): It extends beyond financial support to include the creation of an environment for policy implementation and the transfer of technical knowledge. Three examples are illustrative in this regard. First, key AU documents on mediation support have been drafted by organizations such as the UN, the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD, Durban), the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI, Helsinki), the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD, Geneva), or the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA, Stockholm). Second, in general, most special envoys of the AUC chairperson enjoy neither a budget of their own nor extensive staffing. Logistically and financially, they are often supported by the UN's own Mediation Support Unit as well as organizations such as the HD or the CMI. Third, the Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation (FemWise-Africa), one of the substructures of the AU Panel of the Wise, is partnering, among others, with the UN Women (the UN's entity for gender equality and the empowerment of women), the Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS), the Nordic Women Mediators, the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network, and the Commonwealth Women Mediators Network. FemWise-Africa's logistics have been organized and financed mainly by ACCORD, the CMI, and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GIZ, Eschborn); their training has been provided by the UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR, Geneva). FemWise-Africa used to enjoy considerable attention and financial support from the AU's international partners.

And fourth, "African" suggests a sense of unity, common purpose, and jointness in policy implementation. However, this is increasingly not the case – if it has ever been. On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the AU PSC – the most important organ of the AU when it comes to conflict interventions – the then chairperson of the AU Commission (AUC), Mousa Faki Mahamat, rather undiplomatically criticized that many AU members states are in a state of denial when it comes to conflict on their own territory (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 25 May 2024). Core legal instruments of the AU, the chairperson highlighted, are ignored. In addition, he lambasted the "notorious lack of inter-African solidarity," the inconsistent application of the AU's policy on UCGs, the "distortion of the concept of subsidiarity" in relations between the AU and the RECs, and "the Council's lack of any means of coercion or of

imposing its decisions” (AUC Chairperson, 2024). The AUC chairperson’s statement on 25 May is certainly more critical of the AU and the PSC than most academics (which sheds an interesting light on the academic debate). In sum, the lack of adherence by member states to their own rules and commitments seriously undermines the “African” in the AU’s and the RECs’ non-military conflict intervention practices. What is more, the assumption of unity underlying African interventions can be questioned not only at the level of member states and key decision-makers in APSA but also from a societal perspective. Indeed, research on local perceptions of AU and ECOWAS interventions has shown that, on the ground, being “African” does not make interventions less politically contested (Witt et al., 2024).

There are thus many reasons to explore critically the meaning of “African” intervention practices. Our usage of the term refers to intervention practices that are related to the AU and the RECs as African regional organizations – fully acknowledging that their non-military conflict intervention practices are constituting African agency on the continent and beyond.

## **6. Avenues for Further Research**

As set out in the beginning, the main contribution of this working paper – and the broader research project from which it results – is to offer an analytical perspective on how to understand African non-military conflict interventions. In lieu of a conclusion, we want to identify some avenues for further research, which not only are derived from but also extend the agenda presented in this working paper.

First, non-military intervention practices are a promising field to better explore the relationship and interaction between the formal and the informal practices. As already noted by Thomas Tieku (2021), informal practices are not the opposite of but are often directly tied to formal practices and processes. We thus need more research to arrive at a more comprehensive and systematic inventory of non-military intervention practices that would shed light on these informal-formal interfaces. Second, the practice lens outlined above should also enable further research reconstructing the complexity of who is involved in African conflict interventions, deconstructing the assumed monolithic actorness of the regional organization, and questioning the assumptions about who acts for and interacts with these organizations. Third, and relatedly, studying intervention practices also provides an opportunity to explore the interconnectedness of different sites of human action beyond regional organizations’ headquarters, bringing to light how the latter are linked to (and sometimes disconnected from) national ministries or local civil societies. Fourth, the research agenda developed in this paper calls for a deeper understanding of the linkages between military and non-military practices, actors, and instruments, further deconstructing the conceptual binary between military and civilian that has crucially shaped both the institutional organization and the study of intervention practices.

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## The Competence Network “African Non-military Conflict Intervention Practices” (ANCIP)

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 seeks to (1) establish an online database of non-military interventions by the African Union (AU) and African 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. For more information: <https://ancip-project.de/>

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