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Understanding Civil Society Inclusion in AU and ECOWAS Non-Military Interventions

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Summary

This Working Paper examines civil society actors' inclusion in non-military interventions by the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Both organizations recognize inclusivity as a normative principle in their governance and peacebuilding frameworks, stressing that sustainable peace requires engaging societies, not only states. Nevertheless, the practice of civil society inclusion in interventions is marked by inconsistency and selectivity, and academic engagement with this issue remains limited.

While policy documents and existing research highlight the value of inclusion for legitimacy, ownership, and durability of peace, there is little systematic knowledge of how AU and ECOWAS interveners implement inclusivity in practice. It remains unclear who is included, how, on what basis, and with what consequences. In particular, the everyday decisions of practitioners, the informal practices guiding their engagement, and the experiences and perspectives of included as well as excluded actors are rarely examined.

This Working Paper therefore identifies a pressing research gap. It proposes for shifting the focus to the field-level practices of inclusion and exclusion of civil society actors. By analyzing how AU and ECOWAS interveners navigate political constraints, time pressures, and local contexts, and by capturing the experiences of both included and excluded civil society actors, research can advance a more grounded understanding of interventions. Such insights are essential to bridge the gap between policy aspiration and operational reality, and to strengthen the legitimacy and effectiveness of African regional peacebuilding. Building on a practice lens, the Working Paper proposes a research agenda that treats inclusion not as a static design feature but as a set of routinized, situationally adapted activities through which AU and ECOWAS implementers identify, approach, select, hear, and integrate civil society actors across intervention phases.

Table of contents

1. Introduction	5
2. Conceptualizing Civil Society Inclusion in Regional Interventions	6
3. Civil Society Inclusion in AU and ECOWAS Policy Frameworks	9
4. What We Know about Civil Society Inclusion: A Literature Review	11
5. Addressing the Research Gaps	14
6. Conclusion	16
7. References	17
Imprint	22

Abbreviations

APSA	African Peace and Security Architecture
AU	African Union
CEWS	Continental Early Warning System
CSCPF	Continental Structural Conflict Prevention Framework
CSO	civil society organization
ECOSOCC	Economic, Social and Cultural Council
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ECPF	ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework
FemWise	Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation
IGAD	Inter-Governmental Authority on Development
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	non-governmental organization
PCRD	Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development
PSC	Peace and Security Council
REC	Regional Economic Community
SADC	Southern African Development Community
WACSOF	West African Civil Society Forum
WANEP	West Africa Network of Peacebuilding

1. Introduction

The African Union (AU) and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) are primary actors in conflict prevention, mediation, and peacemaking on the African continent. Therein, the inclusion of civil society in African conflict intervention is both a normative imperative, codified in policy frameworks, and a pragmatic approach that is said to enhance policy outcomes. Academic research has shown that engagement with civil society contributes to foster a more inclusive, responsive, and lasting peace by bridging the gap between state authority and society (Cubitt 2013).

Yet, despite widespread acknowledgment of its value (Nilsson 2012; Cuhadar and Druckman 2023), the practice of civil society inclusion in African regional interventions remains poorly understood. A striking gap persists between the theoretical and policy narratives, which consistently advocate for inclusivity, and the realities of implementation, where decisions about who is included, how they are engaged, and to what effect are often ad hoc and do not follow standard procedures. Such often very short, non-mandated interventions carried out by non-elite interveners are typically non-military intervention practices that have not yet been systematically examined in the literature, but nonetheless constitute an important part of the intervention practice of African regional organizations (Witt et al. 2025, 9–10).

Inclusion has become a cornerstone of contemporary peacebuilding and conflict management, both as a normative principle and as a practical necessity (Donais and McCandless 2017). At the normative level, international and regional organizations increasingly commit to that in their frameworks. The AU and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have both committed themselves to governance frameworks that place societies – not just states – at the heart, which also guide intervention practice. A thorough review of the guidelines they provide concerning the involvement of civil society is discussed later in this Working Paper. In sum, AU's and ECOWAS' commitments echo broader international policy debates, such as the UN Secretary-General's report "Peacebuilding in the Aftermath of Conflict" (United Nations 2012), which stresses that peace cannot be sustainable if whole segments of society are excluded. Therefore, "inclusivity needs to be applied throughout peacebuilding, from analysis, design and planning to implementation and monitoring" (ibid., 12).

From a practical standpoint, inclusion matters because it affects the legitimacy, effectiveness, and durability of interventions. Studies show that peace agreements are more likely to endure when civil society is part of the process (Nilsson 2012), and that interventions seen as inclusive generate broader ownership and compliance (Kew and Wanis-St. John 2008). Paffenholz and Spurk (2006, 13) recommend the involvement of civil society actors in the following functions: "protection of citizens, monitoring for accountability, advocacy and public communication, socialization, building community, intermediation and facilitation between citizens and state, and service delivery." In contexts where state institutions are weak or contested, these functions are central to building trust and bridging the gap between institutions and communities.

This makes inclusion particularly important for African regional organizations. AU and ECOWAS interventions often unfold in highly fragmented societies where exclusion, marginalization, and mistrust of elites are widely anchored in societies. In such contexts, engaging civil society is not an optional extra but a way to expand the legitimacy and reach of regional responses. Without it, interventions risk being perceived as externally imposed, overly state-centric, or disconnected from the realities on the ground (Pouligny 2006; Hellmüller 2018).

At the same time, inclusion is not without challenges. It can be selective, privileging certain well-connected non-governmental organizations (NGOs) while sidelining grassroots actors, women's associations, or informal networks (Hirblinger and Landau 2020). Tokenistic participation risks reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than transforming them (Datzberger 2015).

These dilemmas only sharpen the need to study how inclusion is understood and practiced in African regional interventions. Against this backdrop, it is noteworthy that, despite the existence of scientific evidence of why civil society inclusion matters, thoroughly delineated rationales, and directives from African regional frameworks, there has been a lacuna in the production of academic knowledge concerning how regional actors include (and exclude) civil society actors in practice. To address this lacuna, there is a need for a conceptual approach that can capture inclusion as part of intervention practices and systematically reconstruct them, a task this Working Paper seeks to advance.

In reconstructing the debates around the concepts of inclusivity and civil society, this Working Paper thus shows how different interpretations determine interventions and their outcomes *a priori*. In this respect, research into the question of *how* civil society actors are included in interventions positions itself ahead of studies that evaluate their effectiveness.

This Working Paper underscores the pertinence of this lacuna, synthesizes the extant literature, and shows how scientific inquiry can facilitate a more profound comprehension of civil society inclusion in interventions. The findings and gaps identified in the extant literature are further augmented by insights derived from interviews with AU and ECOWAS officials involved in interventions as part of their professional duties. The author of this Working Paper conducted the interviews with AU officials at their headquarters in Addis Ababa in October and November 2022, and with ECOWAS officials at their headquarters in Abuja in October and November 2024.

The paper begins by exploring how “inclusivity” and “civil society” are understood in intervention practices, then reconstructs these concepts through the lens of AU and ECOWAS frameworks, examines civil society inclusion in African regional interventions based on the literature, outlines ways to address the identified research gap, and concludes with final reflections.

2. Conceptualizing Civil Society Inclusion in Regional Interventions

When AU or ECOWAS intervention implementers are faced with the task of including civil society in their intervention practices, they are confronted with two concepts that are both vague and contested. In including (or excluding) stakeholders in the interventions, interveners inherently translate their interpretation of inclusivity and civil society into concrete action. Their interpretation of these concepts thus shapes their specific practices.

Inclusivity

Theoretical and empirical contributions confirm that the evolution of inclusion as a central concept in peacebuilding is closely tied to its interpretative flexibility (e.g. Lanz 2011; Hirblinger and Landau 2021). Generally, with inclusivity, peace is built through “a dynamic, co-constituted, emergent and necessarily adaptive process that includes multiple knowledges and actors” (Danielsson 2020, 1087). Hirblinger and Landau (2020) examine how different framings of inclusion – whether through fixed (closed) categories, broad (open) formulations, or contextually oriented (relational) approaches – influence which actors participate, how power relations are negotiated, and ultimately, how peace processes are

designed and executed. Their work demonstrates that the way inclusion is interpreted in mediation and peacebuilding practice, ranging from tokenistic engagement to transformative interactions, directly conditions outcomes. The inclusivity agenda is also changing the understanding of civil society actors: once considered objects to be consulted, scholars now recognize them as subjects in peacebuilding processes (Hellmüller 2020, 409–414; Shepherd 2015, 904).

Inclusivity, according to Donais and McCandless (2017, 293),

“refer[s] to the carving out of space within which a broad cross-section of the conflict-affected community, from community-based organisations to ordinary citizens to potential spoilers, can exercise meaningful voice and agency in the design and implementation of peace processes.”

Their definition delineates the specific focus of this Working Paper by highlighting the area of inquiry it addresses: how interveners from African regional organizations enact the “carving out of space.” The advantage of this understanding is that inclusion is framed as a dynamic practice rather than a static concept, emphasizing how it is continually enacted, negotiated, and contested through human agency. Notably, this understanding pertains to vertical inclusivity, specifically concerning the state-society relationship. Conversely, horizontal (or “inter-elite”) inclusivity is governed by the idea of “inclusive enough”, which simply equates to the “participation of key stakeholders who have the capacity to implement and/or spoil peace and who represent important constituencies” (Dudouet and Lundström 2016, 9). This relates to a track-thinking in which Track I actors—official representations—are considered the key stakeholders. Track II encompasses informal, non-official dialogue processes involving influential actors—including civil society representatives—who can generate ideas and foster understanding that inform Track I efforts. Track III operates at the grassroots level, where local civil society organizations and community groups work to build trust, address social grievances, and sustain peace from below. Within this framework, civil society thus spans Tracks II and III, linking elite dialogue with community-level engagement. While the track logic continues to shape AU and ECOWAS mediation efforts, both institutions emphasize the need for mediators to integrate and coordinate activities across multiple tracks (ACCORD and African Union 2014; ECOWAS Commission 2020). At the global level, it is in particular the normative framework of the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States (IDPS 2011) that encourages international actors to interpret their role solely as facilitators of such. This role embodies what Does (2013) understands by inclusivity in more functional terms: “aligning engagements in multiple, overlapping processes at various levels by multiple actors at the same time” (ibid. 2013, 2). This understanding highlights a tension between theory and practice. The author refers here to long-term processes, whereas in real-world practice, when ad-hoc action is needed immediately, “a common refrain is that more inclusive processes tend to be messy and time-consuming, with their outcomes difficult to predict or control” (Donais and McCandless 2017, 295). Exclusivity, then, commonly arises when dialogue is structured predominantly around formally constituted and well-organized civil society organizations, a pattern often reinforced when the demand for rapid action is combined with inclusion efforts. It thus risks marginalizing other groups whose participation is constrained by patriarchal and patronage-based social structures, limited educational opportunities, and deep-seated ethnic and religious divisions, thereby reducing their visibility, awareness, and access to peacebuilding initiatives (United Nations 2012, 12f.). In other words, “[i]nclusive peacemaking is easier prescribed than done” (Hirblinger and Landau 2020, 313).

Civil Society

The different ways “civil society” is understood – in theory and in practice – and the tensions the concept is subject to are illustrated by what Cox summarizes as follows:

“In a ‘bottom-up’ sense, civil society is the realm in which those who are disadvantaged by globalization of the world economy can mount their protests and seek alternatives. [...] In a ‘top-down’ sense, however, states and corporate interests influence the development of this current version of civil society towards making it an agency for stabilizing the social and political status quo” (Cox 1999, 10–11).

The bottom-up understanding is grounded in the belief that transformation arises from the self-organization of communities that directly experience the disadvantages of globalization. Such groups are often composed of peasants, workers, women’s associations, and informal networks that mobilize to undermine entrenched power structures and to assert alternative socio-economic visions. This line of thinking—mostly referring to the democratic transitions of the early 1990s—is particularly evident in Monga’s view of a lifelong struggle against state authority in African societies, in which civil society refers to “birthplaces where the ambitions of social groups have created the means of generating additional freedom and justice” (Monga 1995, 363). Bratton (1994) argues that while civil societies have been emerging in some African countries, they differ from Western models due to distinct socioeconomic and cultural contexts, and should not be assumed to automatically promote democratic change. The bottom-up perspective sees civil society as inherently contested and pluralistic, emphasizing internal struggles over issues of class, gender, ethnicity, and other social cleavages that are typically obscured by externally imposed models of democratization.

The top-down narrative tends to assume that civil society automatically promotes liberal values such as individual rights, pluralism, and market-oriented reforms (Hyden 1997). A precondition for civil society is, according to Shils (1991), civility, that “considers others as fellow-citizens of equal dignity in their rights and obligations.” The concept thus encompasses the notion of resolving conflicts without violence. In this understanding, particularly anchored in donor strategies, the wave of democratization in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s sparked an “NGOization” within African civil societies (Choudry and Kapoor 2013). In the African context, civil society is often equated with NGOs, as already problematized by Kasfir (1998) in the late 1990s. Yet, as Daniel and Neubert (2019, 180) note, many of these organizations are not politicized actors but providers of social services that compensate for absent state functions.

“Consequently, civil society actors have become a means to an end, in that they are bound to fulfil certain functions and in auditable ways, in order to meet ‘effectiveness’ benchmarks, be that service delivery, humanitarian assistance or democratization—rather than an end in itself” (Datzberger and Nguyen 2018, 8).

What is more, the optimistic representation tends to conflate NGOs with civil society as a whole, thereby neglecting diverse realities, especially in non-Western contexts where civil society may be fragmented, undemocratic, or even counterproductive to genuine social mobilization (Mercer 2002; Scholte 2002).

Allen (1997), underpinned by Mamdani (1995), concludes that, “in addition to grant-seeking NGOs and academics, it is the proponents of the ‘liberal project’ who need civil society” (Allen 1997, 337). Elsewhere, Datzberger also describes this as the “depoliticisation of civil society” (Datzberger 2015) – a notion that is contrary to the bottom-up understanding introduced by Cox. In this way, civil society can be captured to “stabilise the existing order”

(Hearn 2001, 52). In her argument, Hearn refers to the policies of Western powers toward African civil society actors.

Against this backdrop, the question arises as to how those intervening on behalf of African regional organizations perceive civil society. At this point, the reference is deliberately made to those implementing interventions, rather than to the regional organization as a “disembodied, homogeneous ‘international’” since how these implementing individual actors “translate, interpret and reinterpret their mandates” is deeply contingent on personal positioning and contextual circumstances (Wallis 2020, 481; see also Pouligny 2006). At the same time, legal and policy frameworks established by regional organizations provide directives and guidance for the actors carrying out interventions. The next section will examine how civil society inclusion is anchored in these frameworks.

3. Civil Society Inclusion in AU and ECOWAS Policy Frameworks

AU and ECOWAS implementers can build on a broad array of frameworks of their respective regional organization, which promote inclusivity and people-centred governance. The visions of the AU and ECOWAS already emphasize broad inclusivity by placing a people-centred approach at the core of their agendas – “Agenda 2063. The Africa we want” (African Union 2015), and “ECOWAS of the Peoples: Peace and Prosperity for All” (ECOWAS Commission 2022). The slogan alone, according to an ECOWAS official responsible for planning and implementing interventions, guides practice: “you cannot promote ECOWAS of the people and meet only Track I people.”¹ For the AU, this principle is already reflected in the Constitutive Act of the African Union that demands “the participation of the African peoples in the activities of the Union” (Organisation of African Unity 2000, §4(c)). Specifically relating to civil societies’ roles in conflict management and resolution, the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union “encourage[s] non-governmental organizations, community based organizations, and other civil society organizations, particularly women’s organizations, to participate actively in the efforts aimed at promoting peace, security and stability in Africa” (African Union 2002, §20). This only applies to participation in activities of the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) and requires an invitation (African Union 2002, §8(10c), 2014b, §22)). It does not apply to interactions during interventions in the target country. However, the operationalization of these formal formats proved to be challenging in the early years of the AU, prompting civil society actors to advocate for improvements. The outcome of a multi-day meeting between AU officials and civil society representatives in Zambia in 2008 was the so-called Livingstone Formula, which sets out procedures for the inclusion of civil society in AU peace and security activities in a more transparent and accessible manner (African Union 2008). Specifically, it delineates functions for civil society organizations (CSOs) in the activities of the AU. These include providing technical support to field and fact-finding missions (early warning and conflict prevention), assisting and advising mediation during negotiations (peacemaking), assisting in the implementation of peace agreements (peacekeeping), complementing post-conflict confidence-building and support reconciliation processes, providing technical support to enable local populations to resume normal activities, the provision of trainings and workshop to conflict parties, national bodies and communities, as well as backstopping mediation efforts, monitoring and evaluating of the implementation of PSC decisions, awareness raising (ibid., 2-4). The 2014 Maseru Conclusions reaffirmed the commitment to collaboration between the AU and CSOs, as already

1 Interview with ECOWAS official, Abuja, 7 November 2024

set out in the Livingstone Formula (African Union 2014a). Further guidance on the inclusion of civil society actors is provided by non-legally binding policies—such as the PCRD policy (African Union 2024) and the Continental Structural Conflict Prevention Framework (CSCPF) (African Union 2018)—as well as by the Mediation Support Handbook (ACCORD and African Union 2014).

In comparison, the ECOWAS Revised Treaty remains vague regarding engagement with civil society. One key provision is the “recognition, promotion and protection of human and peoples’ rights in accordance with the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights” (ECOWAS Commission 1993/2010, §4g). However, their protocols state concrete terms for certain activities. The Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance only demands member states to “use the services of civil society organisations involved in electoral matters to educate and enlighten the public on the need for peaceful elections” (ECOWAS 2001, §8). Its Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace-Keeping and Security (ECOWAS 1999) refers to civil society in the domains of humanitarian assistance (*ibid.*, §§32(2d), 40), and small arms and light weapons prevention (*ibid.*, §51(4)).

It is on the basis of the relevant provisions of this Protocol on early warning that, in 2004, the ECOWAS Commission, through its early warning system, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the West Africa Network of Peacebuilding (WANEP) to be the civil society arm of this system (Ajibewa and Shittu 2021, 59). Most comprehensively, the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF), while non-binding, calls for civil society to play an increasingly central role alongside Member States in the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. The framework positions ECOWAS primarily as a facilitator of innovative conflict transformation efforts involving both Member States and civil society (ECOWAS 2008, Sec. II, 4). It then outlines manifold aspects of civil society engagement such as awareness raising (*ibid.*, §§28c, 69I-n, 98f-I, 103a), data collection (*ibid.*, §45d-f), trainings (*ibid.*, §49j), mediation, conciliation and facilitation to resolve local disputes (*ibid.*, §49I), humanitarian assistance (*ibid.*, §94j), monitoring human rights (*ibid.*, §57o, p), advocacy and communication (*ibid.*, §103e), and cross-border activities (*ibid.*, §69d). Benchmarks, including the inclusion of civil actors, are listed to measure their success (*ibid.*, §74m-q). This provides intervention implementers with precise guidelines covering a wide range of areas. Like its AU counterpart, the ECOWAS Dialogue and Mediation Handbook also provides recommendations on the depth and breadth of civil society actor inclusion in this field (ECOWAS Commission 2020).

Regarding civil society actors’ role in mediation processes, Aeby (2021, 3) finds that ECOWAS guidelines present NGOs as “intermediaries” linking the organization with communities and as “facilitators” in multitrack dialogues, while AU guidelines highlight the role of NGO as “experts” in technical teams, supporting mediators through training and knowledge-sharing. While both AU and ECOWAS frameworks speak of civil society organizations (CSOs) when referring to civil society actors, the ECPF’s understanding also includes “eminent persons, traditional rulers, religious leaders, community groups, women’s organizations, other civil society organizations” (ECOWAS 2008, §49I), as well as intellectuals (*ibid.*, §98f-i), research institutions (*ibid.*, §103e). Despite a commonly closed framing of civil society, that most prominently features formalized CSOs, in some interviews with AU and ECOWAS officials in charge of planning and implementing non-military interventions, the necessity to understand civil society beyond formal associations in (West) African contexts was emphasized several times.²

2 Interview with AU officials, Addis Ababa, 17 November 2022, and 18 November 2022. Interview with ECOWAS official, Abuja, 1 November 2024.

4. What We Know about Civil Society Inclusion: A Literature Review

African regional organizations play a central role in promoting peace and security on the continent, and civil society actors have been incremental in introducing human security concerns into the predominantly state-centric frameworks of the 1990s, particularly within ECOWAS (Olonisakin 2009; Ismail 2015; Ajibewa and Shittu 2021) but also the AU (Djinnit and Wane 2020, 16). A significant corpus of research has emerged in recent years, focusing on diverse aspects of the institutionalization and implementation of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) (Döring et al. 2021; Engel 2021), not least AU's and RECs' non-military conflict interventions (Witt et al. 2025). Hence, research on the inclusion of civil society in African regional conflict interventions can build on bodies of work from different strands.

Firstly, a substantial corpus of literature addressing mediation and negotiation processes—which are important non-military intervention practices—provides extensive evidence regarding the significance of civil society inclusion. Studies on the effectiveness of peace agreements demonstrate that the inclusion of civil society actors in peace processes is associated with a greater probability of achieving durable peace (Cuhadar and Druckman 2023, 13–14). Here, it is insignificant whether civil society actors have a seat at the negotiation table or played a passive role through which they could influence the mediation process (Kew and Wanis-St. John 2008). Generally, ownership (Donais and McCandless 2017), legitimacy (Belloni 2001; Nilsson 2012), and the perception of good governance (Paffenholz 2014) are factors that are achieved through inclusive processes.

Detailed accounts derived from mediation literature focusing on African regional organizations, however, demonstrate the contested nature of civil society inclusion in that regard. Pring's nuanced examination of the mediation efforts of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in South Sudan elucidates the complexity of civil society representation, challenging the idealistic notion of its homogeneity, independence, and unified purpose, as "divisions and challenges were extended and reflected in the mediation process, enabling varying forms of support and resistance and ultimately hindering their envisioned constructive role" (ibid. 2022, 11; similar, on the civil society hearing in the pre-Algiers Accord Process, see Boutellis and Zahar 2017, 20). This becomes even more striking when civil society is considered a party to the conflict, so that it "could not behave as an impartial body", and thus not fulfill any monitoring, advocacy, or facilitation role. Saidou (2018, 53) shows, referring to the Burkinabè popular uprising and ECOWAS' 2014 mediation, how pressure from political elites or civil society groups—even more so when the latter are politically instrumentalized—undermines mediators' ability to craft sustainable peace accords. Drawing on the missed integration of Burundian civil society in the Arusha Accords, McClintock and Nahimana (2008, 87) conclude that "[m]anaging the tension between inclusion and exclusion has thus become the more urgent work of mediators and other peacemakers."

IGAD's inclusive mediation mandate in South Sudan, however, should not be taken for granted as standard practice for all RECs, as Nathan (2017, 159) demonstrates by comparing it to the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) intra-elite approach with mediator Thabo Mbeki in Zimbabwe in 2007. In fact, "Track One mediators' [...] engagement of civil society is still far from routine" (Paffenholz 2015, 118), and generally, mediators find it difficult to translate inclusivity as a norm into practice (Hirblinger and Landau 2020, 313). Yet, as demonstrated by Bell and Kitagawa (2025), when mediators ensure inclusion in the process leading to a peace agreement, it increases the likelihood that formal commitments to inclusion will be incorporated into the agreement, thereby effectuating outcome inclusivity (Dudouet and Lundström 2016, 2). Thus, how mediators engage with civil society

influences the processes of Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development (PCRD), which, in turn, are accompanied by dedicated units of the regional organizations and, on occasion, their liaison officers. A prevailing theme in this strand of literature is the articulation of the necessity for civil society inclusion, accompanied by a discernible exposition of internal and external tensions with(in) civil society, particularly in African contexts.

Secondly, from an organizational perspective, rather than an emphasis on specific processes, studies show the diversity of structures that civil society inclusion offers in the APSA. His elaboration on civil society actors' interfaces with AU, ECOWAS and SADC mediation structures, Aeby (2021) finds that CSO inclusion in mediation processes is often inconsistent, shaped by mediators' discretion, reliance on trusted partners, and CSOs' limited capacity, especially in authoritarian or conflict-affected contexts. Since APSA mediations depend on state approval, governments resistant to external involvement frequently block CSO engagement, while NGOs assisting regional organizations risk being perceived as co-opted when government interests dominate. Civil society actors are usually engaged by mediation teams, liaison offices, the Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation (FemWise), and NGO networks, which act as intermediaries in mediations, serving as the interface between society and regional organizations (Aeby 2021, 5–6).

Whereas informal practices of inclusion in interventions are shaped by the varying interpretations and routines of those who apply them, institutionalized interface structures set explicit criteria for inclusion and exclusion. Through MoUs, WANEP is not only an integral player for the production of knowledge in the ECOWAS early warning system, but also in the AU's Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) (Engel 2018; Eze 2021; Aeby 2024). The reconstruction of organizational structures that emphasize the interfaces between regional organizations and WANEP members demonstrates the integration of local actors' work into regional decision-making bodies (Aeby 2024). However, these reconstructions do not address how civil society actors become part of the network, i.e. how the inclusion therein works.

Other institutional interfaces are designed to involve civil society organizations only in policy-level exchanges on structural issues, rather than consulting them during ad hoc implementation of interventions. This refers to the members of platforms of the African Union Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) and the ECOWAS West African Civil Society Forum (WACSOF). Further, ECOSOCC's strict criteria to become a member organization a priori excludes not fully professionalized CSOs (Kamatsiko 2017, 65), whereas WACSOF became dysfunctional due to leadership issues.³ Mbaya (2023) develops a conceptual approach to typologizing interfaces between AU bodies and civil society actors. She identifies (a) institutional spaces defined by statutes and organs; (b) invited spaces in which CSOs are invited to participate in AU organs; (c) created spaces that CSOs themselves create in order to establish connections; and (d) joint spaces that are created jointly by CSOs and AU organs (ibid. 2023, 13–14). She implicitly refers to inclusion practices here, but only those at headquarters level—not in the implementation of interventions in the country. A recurring pattern in her analyses and other think tank pieces is the tendency to equate civil society with CSOs, a framing closely resembles that of regional organizations' policy documents. This reduction risks flattening the complexity of civil society and obscuring the nuanced dynamics present in specific contexts.

Generally, this strand of literature shows which structures regional organizations rely on to (not) provide for the inclusion of civil society actors, and which actors therein convey policy into practice—but not how they do so.

3 Interview with ECOWAS official, Abuja, 1 November 2024.

Thirdly, studies address the disconnects between international interventions and their agendas and those of “local” actors. International organizations often construct idealized roles for civil society. In African contexts, these roles are typically framed around service provision and reconciliation (van Leeuwen 2009, 185–86). In practice, these generally liberal ideas clash with the “local” ideas of the partners there, creating a space that requires adaptations from both sides (Verkoren and van Leeuwen 2013). While the inclusion of civil society actors provides external interveners with a basis for legitimizing their actions, there is a risk that the basic formula of supporting local civil society will depoliticize civil society and thus deprive it of its transformative element as Datzberger (2015) shows using the case of Sierra Leone. A notable absence in the extant literature on disconnection is any discussion of the phenomenon of disconnections between “local/international” or “insider/outsider” categories regarding regional interveners. The existing body of literature on disconnection is, instead, pre-dominantly based on the practices of UN entities and international NGOs (see also Torrent 2019; Hellmüller 2018). In contrast to those, “African third parties have a high degree of legitimacy as a result of a common African commitment to the norm of African solutions to African challenges,” Duursma (2020, 297) argues. However, by adopting a “from below” approach to examining local perceptions of African regional interventions, Witt et al. (2024) reveal that AU and ECOWAS interventions are widely contested among populations in the target countries. Thus, African interveners do not per se own legitimacy because of their “African-ness”. Their findings further instigate an examination of African approaches to the inclusion of civil society actors from the perspective of civil society. Including the perspectives of civil society actors promises to complement the dominant narratives from regional organizations, thereby revealing frictions between local and international actors and their approaches. A more thorough examination is necessary to determine how this negotiation process affects the inclusion of civil society actors in African regional organizations. The gap in the literature also raises the question of the extent to which AU and ECOWAS interveners employ practices that correspond to the liberal top-down approaches for which international interveners have been criticized, or whether they deviate from these approaches in ways that are supported by the recipients.

Taken together, the three strands of literature underscore both the normative consensus and the practical contestation surrounding civil society inclusion in African regional interventions. Across mediation studies, organizational analyses, and debates on international–local disconnects, a recurring theme is that inclusion in interventions is limited. The literature thus made important steps in mapping the roles that civil society actors can fulfil during interventions, as well as showing the political tensions surrounding the decisions of who to include. Mediation scholars have reconstructed in great detail the overall process and its context, including the sensitive issues surrounding the inclusion of civil society actors. Conversely, organizational studies have examined the formal interfaces designed to facilitate inclusion. While knowledge about processes and infrastructures is readily available, the actual practice of inclusion is a field about which hardly any systematic research has been conducted to date: how do AU and ECOWAS interveners practice the inclusion (and exclusion) of civil society actors, what is their rationale, and what patterns of inclusion and exclusion can be observed? Future research thus needs to examine civil society inclusion not only as a normative ideal or structural arrangement but also as a dynamic and contested practice shaped by the interactions of representatives of regional organizations, states, and civil society.

The subsequent section will address the avenues that research must undertake to address this research gap empirically, as well as the approaches that are useful in this regard.

5. Addressing the Research Gaps

As mentioned in preceding sections of this Working Paper, the issue of civil society inclusion is a sensitive matter in the context of African regional interventions. This is further accentuated by the observation of research participants—particularly AU officials—who find themselves in a predicament, situated between civil society actors that are demanding adherence to and the promotion of the liberal values to which the organizations are dedicated, and state actors who they criticize for their own failure to comply with these very values.⁴ At the same time, the states that are the constituent actors of the regional organization and their representatives are its decision-makers. The practices of the actors involved must be understood within these general areas of tension. The following discussion will explore how researchers in this field can develop approaches to close the research gaps outlined above.

Heathershaw (2009) shows that intervention implementers do not necessarily do what their headquarters prescribe—qua norm and, or qua mandate—, rather they weigh up their action in interventions between the normative demands and formal requirements of the mandate on the one hand and technical, pragmatic solutions on the other (Witt 2020, 40). Consequently, it can be deduced that the promotion of inclusivity is not a uniform process. Conversely, the formal requirements that pertain to civil society representatives participating in headquarters policy platforms are not applied to the inclusion of civil society actors for intervention implementers in the field.⁵ Furthermore, interventions take place under great time pressure, and decisions must be made ad hoc. In the case of AU personnel, according to research participants, those intervening primarily rely on their own networks to reach civil society actors⁶—support from other departments would pose bureaucratic hurdles and is therefore not an option due to time constraints.⁷

These arguments indicate that an exclusive reliance on formal institutional processes provides an incomplete basis for understanding the practice through which civil society actors are included—or excluded—within African regional interventions. However, the way in which inclusion is achieved must take these framework conditions into account—the analysis of actual implementation, on the other hand, requires approaches that capture and assess also informal practices. These are “unofficial routinized activities or actions that shape day-to-day work of actors in a social setting” (Tieku and Yakohene 2024, 2, Fn. 1). Building on this practice lens, I propose a research agenda that treats inclusion not as a static design feature but as a set of routinized, situationally adapted activities through which AU and ECOWAS implementers identify, approach, select, hear, and integrate civil society actors across intervention phases. These should therefore be identified within all intervention practices, from preventive diplomacy to PCRD.

By focusing on practices, scholars are able to transcend traditional dichotomies like agency/structure and ideational/material, offering a more integrated understanding of conflict interventions (Cornut 2015; Wille 2018). The question of how actors in regional organizations realize their inclusion practices and the notions that underlie them has been a relatively unexplored area of research, particularly regarding the relevance of non-military interventions by regional organizations, as outlined above. Referring to Reckwitz (2002, 250) helps to understand the constitution of practice(s): “a practice represents a pattern which can be filled out by a multitude of single and often unique actions reproducing the

4 Interviews with AU officials, Addis Ababa, 8 November 2022, 16 November 2024, and 17 November 2022.

5 Interview with AU official, Addis Ababa, 8 November 2022.

6 Interview with AU official, Addis Ababa, 27 October 2022.

7 Interview with AU official, Addis Ababa, 15 November 2022.

practice.” It starts with the smallest possible framework, the individual, who functions as the carrier of a practice (ibid.). A focus on the micro-practices of implementers allows for the theorization of inclusion at the macro level, tracing how everyday actions constitute the broader practice (Andersen and Neumann 2012; Bueger 2022; Bueger and Gadinger 2018). These perspectives are largely grounded in the widely cited definition of intervention practices put forward by Adler and Pouliot (2011, 4): “practices are 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.” It follows that practices are inherently relational in nature, or as Law (2012, 157) puts it, “detectable and somewhat ordered sets of material-semiotic relations”. In this respect, the practice lens provides a useful approach for the study of intervention in the understanding of “transboundary formations [that] link global, regional, national, and local forces through structures, networks, and discourses” (Latham et al. 2009, 5), wherein this array of diverse actors “play a role in creating, transforming, and destroying forms of order and authority” (ibid.). In this understanding, interventions are spaces of negotiation between a wide range of actors, including civil society actors, and not purely an act of homogenized international organizations (Curtis 2012, 3; Witt 2020, 42). In the praxiographic understanding, “[p]ractices form together a distinct activity system and are geared at achieving a specific effect” (Bueger 2016, 410). In our case, the “object of activity” (ibid.), that is intended to achieve effects, is the practice of including civil society actors. Rather than existing independently, inclusion forms an essential component of every intervention practice, from preventive diplomacy to PCRD, embedded in the tasks and objectives of each.

One challenge lies in differentiating between various intervention practices, particularly when these practices are mandated as long-term missions, such as MISAHEL (African Union 2014b). Others, such as election observation missions, on the other hand, are relatively easy to define. It can be posited that this distinction may also present a challenge for civil society actors when they participate in research. At the same time, it can be assumed that many, especially grassroots organizations and less professionalized civil society organizations, especially those not directly working in the field of peace and security, will have little to no knowledge of ongoing interventions (cf. Birchanger et al. 2023, 28). The incorporation of excluded actors into research is of the utmost importance. The systematic analysis of their experiences with interventions, their motivations, approaches, fields of work, and social, financial, and other capital is instrumental in developing a more comprehensive understanding of how inclusion and exclusion materialize. The here underlying “from below” approach to study interventions (Witt 2018) equally involves those civil society actors who have access to the interventions, as well as those implementing the interventions for the regional organizations.

By incorporating both the implementers and recipients of interventions—regardless of their inclusion or exclusion—into the research agenda as research participants, the perspectives of these individuals serve to expand our comprehension of intervention practices. How is the interaction established, how is it not, and why not? The resolution of these inquiries necessitates a comprehensive examination of the diverse perspectives outlined, thereby addressing the existing lacunae in the extant literature. This approach enables the generation of original insights, cultivating a more comprehensive understanding than what can be derived exclusively from mandates and reports issued by regional organizations. Moreover, it illuminates the contested nature of interventions, emphasizing the inherent complexity and multidimensional character of the issues as they are encountered in practice. In doing so, it makes visible the challenges faced by all actors engaged in these interconnections, thereby providing explanations for the rationales behind particular decisions and actions.

6. Conclusion

This Working Paper has examined the conceptual and practical dimensions of civil society inclusion in African regional interventions, with a particular focus on the African Union and ECOWAS. It has shown that while inclusivity is codified in the normative and institutional frameworks of both organizations, its translation into practice is neither linear nor uniform. Rather, inclusion is shaped by contested understandings of “civil society” and “inclusivity,” the structural and political constraints of regional organizations, and the discretion of those implementing interventions in the field.

The literature reviewed demonstrates that civil society inclusion is widely regarded as normatively desirable and functionally beneficial for legitimacy, ownership, and sustainable peace. Yet, evidence also points to persistent ambiguities, uneven practices, and tensions between normative prescriptions and operational realities. Frameworks such as the AU Livingstone Formula, the AU CSCP, or the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework create formal entry points, but the actual engagement of civil society actors often remains ad hoc, shaped by time pressure, resource constraints, and interveners’ reliance on personal networks. This reinforces patterns of selective inclusion, privileging professionalized NGOs while marginalizing grassroots actors, women’s groups, and informal associations.

The Working Paper has also highlighted gaps in existing scholarship. Much is known about policy frameworks and institutional structures, but less about the everyday practices through which inclusion and exclusion are enacted. Future research must therefore shift from analyzing inclusion as a static design principle to studying it as a dynamic, contested practice. Such a practice-oriented lens requires closer attention to the discretion of field-level implementers, the informal routines that guide their actions, and the experiences of civil society actors who are both included and excluded. This also entails systematically incorporating perspectives “from below,” capturing the voices of grassroots organizations and actors who may not appear in formal frameworks but nevertheless shape intervention outcomes.

For policy and practice, the findings underline two key points. First, the effectiveness of AU and ECOWAS interventions depends not only on normative commitments to inclusion but on their operationalization in concrete, context-sensitive ways. Second, policymakers should be attentive to the unintended consequences of narrow or tokenistic inclusion, which risks reinforcing existing inequalities and undermining the very legitimacy such inclusion is meant to secure. Bridging the gap between policy frameworks and field practice requires sustained investment in building flexible, transparent, and contextually grounded mechanisms of engagement that recognize the diversity of civil society across African contexts.

By situating civil society inclusion as both a normative imperative and a contested practice, this paper sets out an agenda for further research that examines how interveners negotiate inclusion on the ground, how civil society actors perceive and respond to these efforts, and what patterns of inclusion and exclusion emerge over time. Advancing this agenda will contribute not only to scholarly debates on African peace and security but also to the refinement of regional practices that aspire to more inclusive and sustainable interventions.

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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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