



Regional Organisations and Africa's Development Challenges

Executive Summary

Agenda 2063, Africa's master plan for development, calls for improved capacities of institutions and organisations at continental, regional, and national levels alongside the restructuring and review of their mandates. Achieving the aspirations and goals of Agenda 2063 requires cooperation, coordination, and harmonisation of the rich diversity of regional organisations (ROs) on the continent.

This study covers all pan-African (continental) and regional (sub-continental) intergovernmental organisations with an African membership constituency, ranging from the African Union (AU) and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to all task-specific ROs, such as the Inter-African Coffee Organization. It also includes the specialised and technical agencies (STAs) of the AU and the RECs as these operate in a similar fashion to the more autonomous task-specific ROs. Multiple, crisscrossing memberships and mandates form a complex web of inter-organisational overlaps.

From this analysis follow several policy recommendations that outline how Africa's ROs can meet the continent's development needs. They underline that ROs need to get realistic about their focus and priorities, that institutional capacities need to be strengthened, the role of member states and donors, but also the need to manage inter-organisational overlaps and that dysfunctional organisations ought to be dismantled or drastically reformed.

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This policy brief draws on Fredrik Söderbaum and Sören Stapel's (2022) 'Agenda 2063 and the role of Africa's overlapping regional organisations', ECDPM Discussion Paper No. 317, available online at <https://ecdpm.org/publications/agenda-2063-role-africa-overlapping-regional-organisations/>

Introduction

This policy brief draws policy implications from a discussion paper that explores the role of regional organisations (ROs) in tackling Africa's development challenges with a particular focus on Agenda 2063, the continent's master plan for development.

Despite a massive literature and policy discussion on the African Union (AU) and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), few specialists and policymakers are able to penetrate the complex institutional landscape of the remaining pan-African and sub-regional organisations on the continent. Although many ROs have been established to promote Africa's development since the end of colonialism, there is a paucity of knowledge both in policy and research about the extent to which organisations other than the AU and the RECs contribute to Africa's development.

The policy brief maps all ROs in Africa and explores how they can help address the current and future development challenges facing the continent. To this end, we take Agenda 2063 as our starting point because it provides an ambitious, inclusive and forward-looking approach to Africa's transformation.

We map all the ROs on the continent and explore how their mandates correspond to Agenda 2063 priorities as well as to the mandates of other organisations. Based on this

analysis, the briefing note concludes with a detailed set of policy recommendations.

Mapping Regional Organisations in Africa

There has been a steady increase in regional *intergovernmental* organisations in Africa since the end of colonialism. A range of ROs were created in the early period after independence in the 1960s and 1970s. Whereas some of these ROs have since been dissolved, many are still in existence, albeit with a different name, membership or mandate. While rather few ROs were established in the 1980s, the number more than doubled between 1990 and 2020, resulting in an aggregated total of 156 ROs currently in existence (see figure 1).

In the broad pool of ROs in Africa, we can distinguish:

- 19 general-purpose ROs
- 80 autonomous task-specific ROs
- 57 specialised and technical agencies (STAs) of higher-level ROs.

General-purpose ROs cover two or more policy fields and they are generally understood as umbrella governance apparatuses. While the AU and the RECs are the most well-known cases, other examples include the Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries (CEPGL) and the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC). Many general-purpose ROs, especially those with a long history, have expanded their

mandates over time. More recent general-purpose ROs often have a more comprehensive policy portfolio already at the time of their establishment

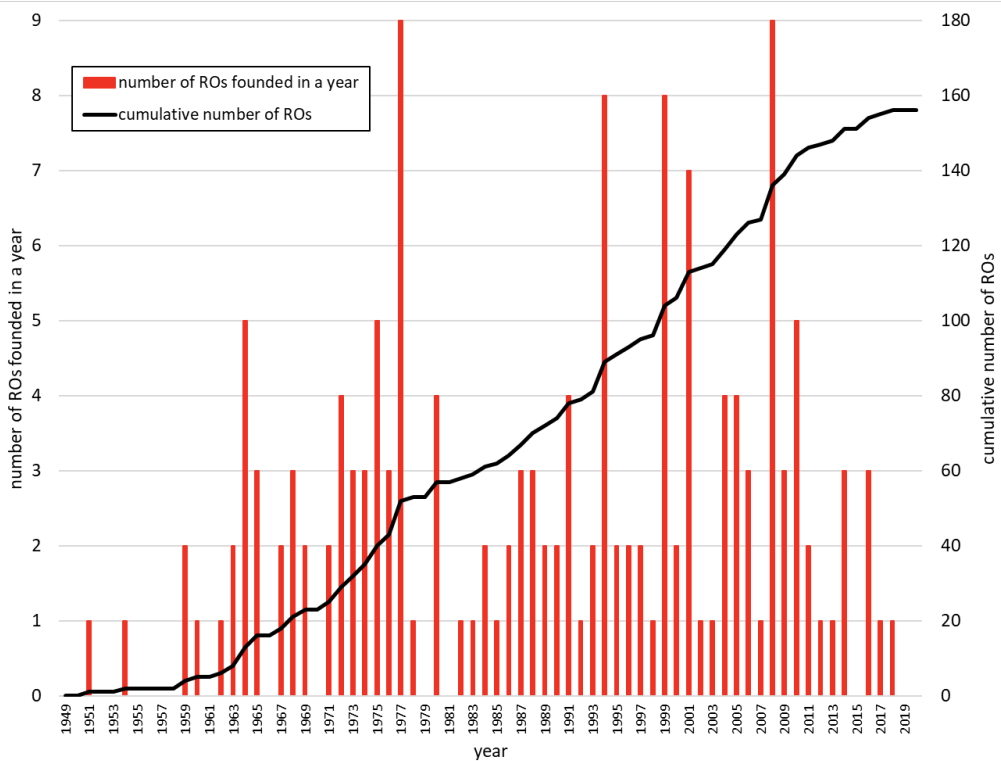


Figure 1: Number of African Regional Organisations, 1945-2020

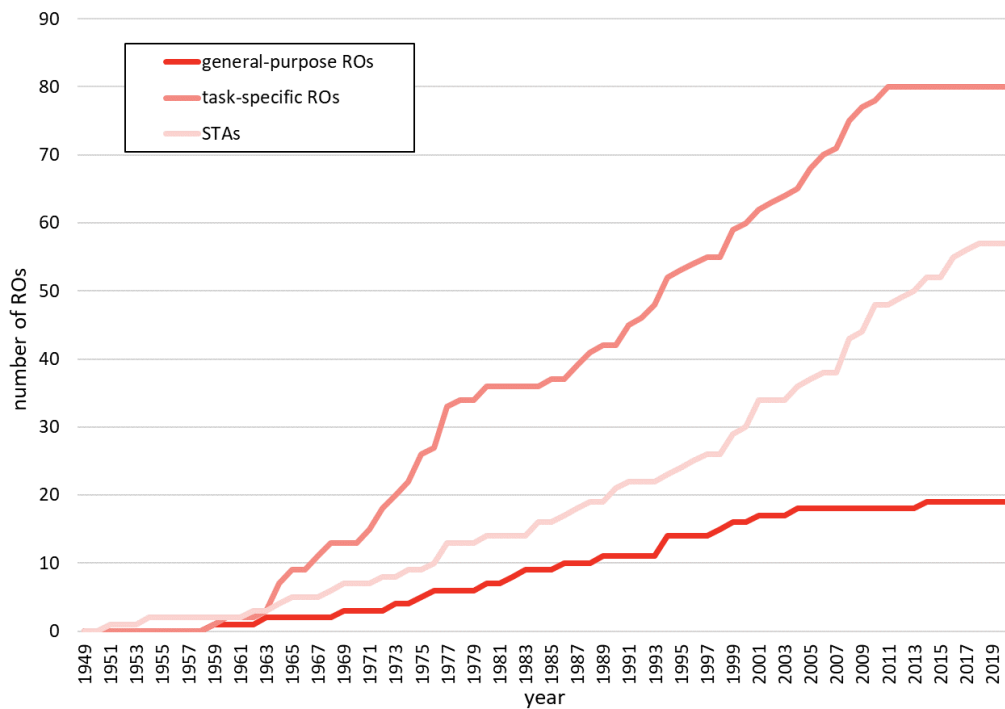


Figure 2: Number of African Regional Organisations, 1945-2020

Source: Authors

Task-specific (or single-purpose) ROs are specialised in a particular policy field, such as trade or transport, or on a particular task, such as river management. Typical examples include the African Groundnut Council and the African Telecommunications Union. Their number has grown strongly since the 1990s. While there is a rich policy discussion on the AU and the RECs, little is known about how these organisations contribute to Africa's development.

Even lesser known are STAs. Formally speaking, these organisations are part of the institutional structure of higher-level ROs. The vast majority of STAs have also been set up since the 1990s, and their numbers continue to grow. In practice, the STAs are often difficult to distinguish from autonomous task-specific ROs because both operate in a similar fashion. For example, while the Lake Chad Basin Commission is an autonomous task-specific RO, the Lake Victoria Basin Commission is a specialised agency of the EAC. However, two differences deserve recognition. First, STAs often benefit from the political leverage of their parent organisations, which sometimes gives them a competitive edge over task-specific ROs. Second, the official link to the parent organisation may provide them with better funding opportunities, with funding being a major problem for many ROs in Africa.

Policy Mandates and Overlaps

In order to identify the relative significance and relevance of African ROs for Africa's development priorities, we have classified their primary and secondary policy mandates in relation to Agenda 2063. As seen in Figure 3, the 156 ROs are unevenly spread across the 21 policy fields at the heart of Agenda 2063. Some policy fields include only a few ROs (such as gender and social protection) whereas other policy fields involve more than 30 ROs (such as agriculture, business and commerce). In between these extremes, about half of the policy fields include between 10 and 30 ROs. While this classification shows the wide range of ROs in different policy fields, it also underlines inter-organisational overlaps.

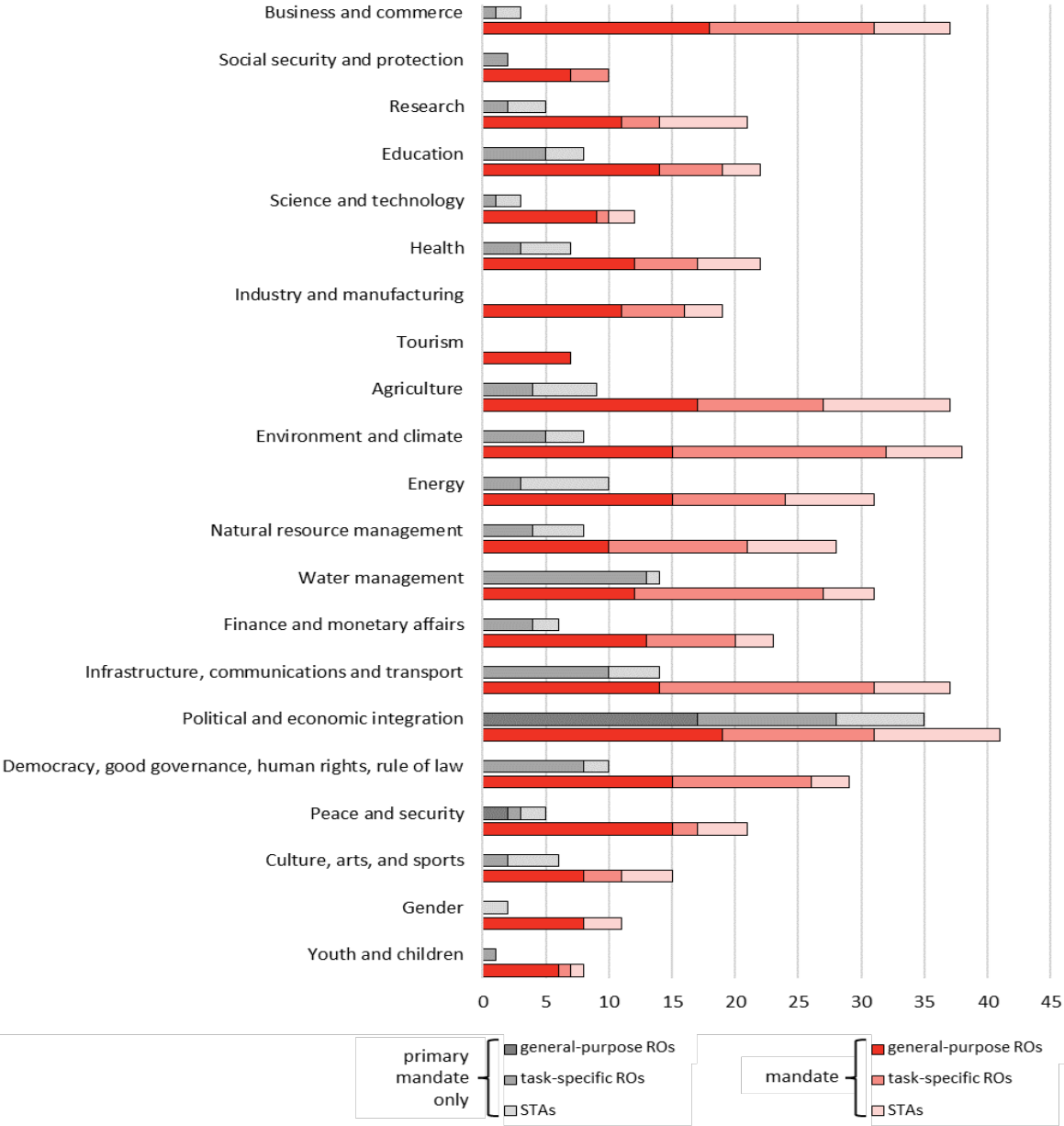
Inter-organisational overlaps have intensified during the last two decades due to the increasing number of ROs, the accession of new member states as well as the broadened policy mandates of general-purpose ROs. Although both membership and policy overlaps may offer learning opportunities and spur cooperation, crisscrossing ROs and overlaps often tend to increase costs, lead to lowest common denominator logics, and entail conflicting and mutually exclusive rules, norms and policies. Therefore, overlapping regionalism clearly risks impacting negatively on Agenda 2063.

Based on the configuration of overlaps in mandate and membership, there are three main

types of overlap: (i) no overlap, (ii) harmonious overlap, and (iii) competitive overlap. No overlap exists when ROs do different things in different geographic contexts. Few policy fields

are characterized by little or no overlap, because very few ROs operate in these policy fields. Once the number of ROs grows within a policy field, overlaps tend to increase.

Figure 3: Number of Regional Organisations per Policy Field in Agenda 2063



Note: The number presents information of the primary policy mandate of ROs (grey bar) and the aggregated mandate of ROs (green bar). For a full list of ROs in all policy fields, see Söderbaum and Stapel 2022.

Harmonious overlap exists when ROs operate within the same policy field but when they do neither overlap in terms of membership nor policy mandates. We find harmonious overlap to dominate in seven policy fields, such as research, industry and manufacturing, and agriculture.

Competitive overlaps occur when ROs pursue similar objectives and tasks and when there is extensive membership overlap. This type of overlap prevails in ten policy fields, most notably in peace and security, political and economic integration as well as democracy, good governance, human rights and rule of law, but also in education, health, and environment and climate change. Once competitive overlaps have emerged within a policy field, they are difficult to reduce and control. While there are different ways to manage competitive overlaps, coordination is nearly always weak and underdeveloped.

Recommendations

Agenda 2063 is one of the most ambitious plans for Africa's development so far, outlining a Pan-African vision for "an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens, representing a dynamic force in the international arena".

The 156 ROs in Africa are unevenly spread over different policy fields that lie at the heart of Agenda 2063. A few policy fields include only a

small number of ROs (such as gender and youth and children), whereas several other policy fields involve more than 30 ROs (such as political and economic integration, agriculture, business and commerce). In between these poles, there is a large group, with about half the policy fields of Agenda 2063, which include between 10 and 30 ROs (such as health, research, etc.).

The following policy recommendations about how ROs can contribute to Africa's development challenges are derived from our research.

Recommendation 1: Get realistic

A significant number of ROs have over-ambitious goals and policy mandates, which often results in a lack of focus and prioritisation between different goals and activities. The mismatch between ends and means is widespread across sectors and types of ROs and has been increasing due to over-expanded portfolios of primary and secondary mandates. In order to optimise performance, open-ended wish lists need to be turned into realistic work programmes with clear priorities.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen capacities

Too often there is a misfit between ambitions and organisational capacities. Weak organisations are unable to mediate and coordinate diverging national interests and

foster cooperation for the common good, which often results in discord or that one or several member states “hijack” the organisation for self-serving interests. Strengthened organisations require material resources but institutional reform must go beyond the issue of funding itself and needs to focus on all the necessary institutional, epistemic and political capacities that make ROs perform better. There is also a need for developing better performance-based monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Finally, making ROs fit for purpose cannot be separated from domestic institutional capacities.

Recommendation 3: Ensure national buy-in and political leadership

Many ROs remain detached from national development strategies and concrete development needs of their member states, which makes them both unsustainable and less relevant for tackling Africa’s development challenges. Oftentimes ROs lack the necessary political support from their member governments. A reciprocal process is therefore required whereby RO secretariats build stronger links to member states while member states simultaneously invest political capital (and financial resources) to make ROs work.

Recommendation 4: Dismantle dysfunctional organisations

Several ROs in Africa are dysfunctional and fail to deliver. Radical reform or dismantlement

happens only rarely, which has resulted in the growth of an increasing number of underperforming ROs; or what has been referred to as “zombie” organisations. Although the number of new ROs has been reduced during the last decade, many general-purpose ROs have created a steady stream of new STAs, some of which are weak or ineffective. There is a need for a new paradigm in Africa whereby dysfunctional ROs are identified and either reformed or even dismantled.

Recommendation 5: Create new organisations

Despite an excessive number of organisations and an inflation of policy scopes in Africa, a few policy fields still lack collaborative frameworks and functioning ROs and STAs. New, integrated ROs and STAs may also be motivated in the case of detrimental overlap between competing ROs. There needs to be a diagnosis of what would be the added value and contribution of new ROs and STAs compared to alternative strategies. Merely creating new organisations will add little value unless member states are willing to cooperate and invest in new organisations.

Recommendation 6: Diagnose and manage inter-organisational overlaps

Overlaps between ROs have become a defining feature of the institutional landscape of many policy fields. These overlaps occur through a

complex web of multiple and crisscrossing ROs, policy scope expansion, the accession of member states and the creation of new ROs. Although overlaps are not always harmful, they often result in inter-organizational competition, fragmentation, and underperforming ROs. Relevant actors need to improve their capacities to diagnose as well as manage inter-organisational overlaps, but also to prevent member states to use overlaps strategically.

Recommendation 7: Open up to non-state actors

Many ROs in Africa remain rather “closed” entities with limited access for non-state actors (NGOs, businesses, citizens, academia, etc.). When non-state actors are invited, they are often either co-opted or involved merely as experts, consultants or service providers at lower levels. Involving non-state actors brings a range of benefits: (i) they can anchor ROs in the actual needs of their citizens, (ii) they contribute unique input and competencies at various stages of the policy cycle, and (iii) they keep member states in check through monitoring and increased transparency, accountability and legitimacy, which will increase the performance of ROs. Notwithstanding, opening up to non-

state actors needs to be done in a strategic fashion, where and when it is most productive.

Recommendation 8: Take charge of donor funding

Many ROs are extremely dependent on donors and foreign funding, which sometimes impacts negatively on their performance and disturbs the incentive structures for African actors. However, without external funding, many ROs would have to drastically reduce their work programmes and some organisations would have to be dismantled. There is a need for a radical rethinking of the relationships with donors where African member states take charge of donor relationships in a manner that contributes to RO performance and Africa’s development challenges. For instance, earmarked project funding, donor-driven programmes and trust funds that circumvent and bypass ROs should be reduced in favour of more autonomy and discretion for African-driven programmes.

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