

# AU-REC Relations: The Practices of Inter-Regionalism Between ECOWAS and the African Union

Jens Herpolsheimer

## ABSTRACTS

Despite the universally acknowledged importance of AU-REC relations in the implementation of regional cooperation in Africa, to date, surprisingly little is known about how these relations work in everyday practice. Therefore, this article addresses this gap, drawing on the example of AU-ECOWAS relations. Focusing on the fields of governance, peace and security, it analyzes how AU-REC relations are imagined, made and re-made in everyday practice by different actors at multiple inter-related sites. It argues that beyond solving specific “technical” problems of regional conflict management and economic integration, AU-REC relations are political, and therefore subject to continuous, open-ended negotiation and contestation. In this way, the article contributes empirically and theoretically to academic debates on inter-regionalism and inter-organizational relations, reflecting on African agency and “everyday” practices of inter-regionalism in the Global South, and beginning to unpack the complexity of relations between overlapping regionalisms and regional organizations.

Die Bedeutung von Beziehungen zwischen Afrikanischer Union (AU) und regionalen Wirtschaftsgemeinschaften (RECs) für regionale Zusammenarbeit in Afrika ist allseits anerkannt und kann kaum überbetont werden. Dennoch ist bisher kaum bekannt, wie diese Beziehungen im Alltag funktionieren. Daher beschäftigt sich dieser Artikel mit den Beziehungen zwischen AU und der Westafrikanischen Wirtschaftsgemeinschaft (ECOWAS) in den Bereichen Governance, Frieden und Sicherheit, um die Frage zu beantworten, wie verschiedene Akteure AU-REC-Beziehungen imaginieren, herstellen und/oder neugestalten, durch verschiedene Praktiken und an verschiedenen miteinander verknüpften Orten (sites). Dabei wird argumentiert, dass diese Beziehungen nicht nur Teil von „technischen“ Problemlösungsversuchen sind, sondern auch Teil politischer Aushandlungsprozesse. Auf diese Weise trägt der Artikel empirisch und theoretisch zu wissenschaftlichen Debatten über Inter-Regionalismus und Inter-organisationelle Beziehun-

gen bei, in dem afrikanische Agency und Alltagspraktiken eines Inter-Regionalismus im Globalen Süden sowie die Komplexität von Beziehungen zwischen überlappenden Regionalismen und regionalen Organisationen untersucht werden.

## 1. Introduction

Looking at ongoing debates among practitioners, policy makers, and scholars, it immediately becomes clear that the importance of relations between the African Union (AU) and the eight regional economic communities (RECs) it officially recognizes cannot be overstated.<sup>1</sup> Initially emerging in the context of continental economic integration efforts, RECs have been increasingly identified as essential “building blocks” for a prosperous, strong, and unified Africa, based on a very broad socio-economic and political agenda developed under the aegis of the AU. This agenda also identifies peace and security as indispensable prerequisite for everything else.<sup>2</sup> Ever since, the issue of AU-REC relations has been ubiquitous in discourses on regional integration in Africa. On the one hand, the need for strong RECs and close coordination and cooperation between them and the AU is widely acknowledged. On the other hand, how that cooperation should be organized in practice has remained hotly contested (see section 2).

Against this backdrop, it is remarkable that, despite considerable research on the issue to date, very little is known and understood about how AU-REC relations actually work in “everyday” practice.<sup>3</sup> Who are the different actors involved? Where and how do they operate and engage each other? It is these questions that this article addresses, aiming to highlight some observations that have not been appreciated adequately in existing research, and to begin closing the gaps regarding the multiple inter-related sites, actors, and practices of inter-regional and inter-organizational relations between the AU and the RECs. In that context, the example of relations between the AU and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) warrants special attention due to the strong agency of ECOWAS as an organization in responding to regional conflicts and developing policies, comprising both state and non-state actors, and due to the key role that the block of West African states continues to play within the AU.

Therefore, this article starts by reviewing the existing scholarship on AU-REC relations and analyzes how AU-REC relations more generally, and AU-ECOWAS relations spe-

1 The eight RECs formally recognized by the AU are the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), the East African Community (EAC), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

2 D. Nagar/F. Nganje, *The African Union and Its Relations with Sub-Regional Economic Communities*, in: T. Karbo/T. Murithi (eds.), *The African Union: Autocracy, Diplomacy and Peacebuilding in Africa*, London/New York 2018, pp. 205–232, at 207–208.

3 By “everyday” practices, I mean practices that actors perform on a more continuous basis during their work (even if not literally “every day”). I use the quotation marks, here and across the article, to sensitize for the discursive and often contested character of many terms and concepts.

cifically have been imagined by the involved actors. Following that, it investigates the specific “everyday” practices that AU and ECOWAS actors have employed at different sites. The concluding section summarizes the main findings and outlines the way forward for future research.

Methodologically, this article applies an interpretative approach, that emphasizes agency as well as individual and collective practices and processes of sense- and meaning-making.<sup>4</sup> It is based on extensive archival and interview research at the AU and ECOWAS commissions, in Addis Ababa and Abuja respectively, conducted on multiple occasions between September 2016 and November 2022. Conceptually and theoretically, I respond to calls to see international organizations (IOs), here specifically regional organizations (ROs) not only as “self-directed actors”,<sup>5</sup> but also to study their “inner life”,<sup>6</sup> opening the black boxes of decision-making and identifying agency beyond “high politics”, looking at the different actors “within” I/ROs and analyze their “everyday” practices.<sup>7</sup> However, while research in these directions has developed quickly, so far, it has overwhelmingly focused on the UN and Western I/ROs.<sup>8</sup> The same applies to research on inter-organizational relations and inter-regionalism.<sup>9</sup>

To that literature, this article contributes empirically and theoretically, adding to the burgeoning research on inter-regionalism and inter-organizational relations between regional organizations in and of the Global South,<sup>10</sup> and advancing the understanding of the complexity of inter-regional relations more generally<sup>11</sup> – involving multiple inter-related sites actors and practices – and of overlapping ROs specifically. Here, AU-REC relations offer a particularly relevant case to study because of the inherently inter-regional character of the AU itself – inter-regional relations are a constitutive element of politics “inside” the AU. At the same time, AU actors also shape and participate in inter-regional relations

4 P. Schwartz-Shea/D. Yanow, *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes*, New York 2012.

5 J. E. Oestreich (ed.), *International Organizations as Self-Directed Actors: A Framework for Analysis*, London 2012.

6 K. P.W. Döring et al. (eds.), *Researching the Inner Life of the African Peace and Security Architecture: APSA Inside-Out*, Leiden/Boston 2021 (with a French translation to be published in 2023).

7 See J. E. Oestreich, Introduction, in: Oestreich (ed.), *International Organizations as Self-Directed Actors*, pp. 1–25. See also contributions in B. Reinalda (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of International Organizations*, London 2013.

8 For some exceptions regarding the African Union, see the book review section edited by K. P. W. Döring and J. Herpolsheimer, in: U. Engel (ed.), *Yearbook on the African Union*, Leiden/Boston 2021, Vol. 1, pp. 235–251 and 2022, Vol. 2, pp. 235–251.

9 See, for instance, U. Franke, *Inter-Organizational Relations: Five Theoretical Approaches*, in: *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (2017), <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-99> (accessed 28 February 2023); E. Lopez Lucia/F. Mattheis, *The Unintended Consequences of Interregionalism: New Concepts for Understanding the Entanglements of Regionalisms*, in: E. Lopez Lucia/F. Mattheis (eds.), *The Unintended Consequences of Interregionalism: Effects on Regional Actors, Societies and Structures*, Abingdon/New York 2021, pp. 1–23.

10 See, for instance, F. Mattheis/A. Litsegård (eds.), *Interregionalism Across the Atlantic Space*, Cham 2018; U. Engel, *An Emerging Inter-Regional Peace and Security Partnership: The African Union and the European Union*, in: S. Aris/A. Snetkov/A. Wenger (eds.), *Inter-Organisational Relations in International Security: Cooperation and Competition*, London 2018; M. Brosig, *Cooperative Peacekeeping in Africa: Exploring Regime Complexity*, London 2015.

11 See P. de Lombaerde/F. Söderbaum/J. U. Wunderlich, *Interregionalism*, in: K. E. Jorgensen et al. (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of European Foreign Policy*, London 2015, pp. 750–761.

with other organizations, including those that are supposed to function as “building blocks” for continental agendas, but may also contest them.

## 2. The State of Research on AU-REC Relations

The topic of “AU-REC relations” has received considerable attention in partly overlapping academic and policy debates. Nevertheless, so far, it has not become a research field comparable for example with the research field of “Africa-EU relations”, resulting in a lack of detailed and systematic knowledge about AU-REC relations, which is surprising given their widely accepted and often emphasized importance for regional governance, peace and security in Africa.<sup>12</sup>

Summarizing existing research briefly, two sets of contributions can be distinguished. First, an increasing number of works study specific instances of conflict management and/or peace support operations (PSOs) in Africa, reflecting on interactions and relations between specific RECs and the AU in these particular examples.<sup>13</sup> These accounts vary, but include some that are very detailed allowing for empirical and theoretical analysis of AU-REC relations in the context of such interventions. Second, several academic publications have addressed AU-REC relations more generally, by discussing the underlying rationale for cooperation, legal frameworks, guiding principles, as well as assessing dynamics and/or the “success” of cooperation.<sup>14</sup> Various policy briefs or papers do the same,<sup>15</sup> some of them by staff of the AU and RECs themselves. These publications, once

12 See M. Brosig, *The African Peace and Security Architecture and Its Partners*, in: *African Security Review* 23 (2014) 3, pp. 225–242. For a regular monitoring, see U. Engel, *The State of the Union*, in: U. Engel (ed.), *Yearbook on the African Yearbook*. Vol. 1 (2020), Leiden/Boston 2021, pp. 23–40, at 32–33; U. Engel, *The State of the Union*, in: U. Engel (ed.), *Yearbook on the African Yearbook*. Vol. 2 (2021), Leiden/Boston 2022, pp. 19–45, at 31–32.

13 See, for instance, Brosig, *Cooperative Peacekeeping in Africa*; B. Coe/K. Nash, *Peace Process Protagonism: The Role of Regional Organisations in Africa in Conflict Management*, in: *Global Change, Peace & Security* 32 (2020) 2, pp. 1–21; K. P. W. Döring/J. Herpolsheimer, *The Spaces of Intervention for Mali and Guinea-Bissau*, in: *South African Journal of International Affairs* 25 (2018) 1, pp. 61–82; M. Welz, *Multi-Actor Peace Operations and Inter-Organizational Relations: Insights from the Central African Republic*, in: *International Peacekeeping* 23 (2016) 4, pp. 1–24; A. Witt, *Undoing Coups: The African Union and Post-Coup Intervention in Madagascar*, London 2020.

14 See, for instance, J. Akokpari/S. Ancas, *The African Union and Regional Economic Communities: A Partnership for Peace and Security?*, in: T. Murithi (ed.), *Handbook of Africa's International Relations*, London/New York 2013, pp. 73–81. See also N. C. Ani, *Politics of Intervention Within the African Peace and Security Architecture: The Fluid Roles Between the African Union and Sub-Regional Organizations*, in: *Africa Amani Journal* 8 (2021) 1, pp. 1–25; S. Desmidt, *Conflict Management and Prevention Under the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) Of the African Union*, in: *Africa Journal of Management* 5 (2019) 1, pp. 79–97; Nagar/Nganje, *The African Union and its Relations with Sub-Regional Economic Communities*; M. Ndiaye, *The Relationship Between the AU and the RECs/RMs in Relation to Peace and Security in Africa: Subsidiarity and Inevitable Common Destiny*, in: C. de Coning/L. Gelot/J. Karlsrud (eds.), *The Future of African Peace Operations: From the Janjaweed to Boko Haram*, London 2016, pp. 52–64.

15 N. C. Ani, *Reforming the African Peace and Security Architecture: Options for Effective Clarity of Roles Between the African Union and Sub-Regional Organizations*, Addis Ababa: Institute for Peace and Security Studies (= IPSS Policy Brief 15-02), 2021; S. Desmidt/V. Hauck, *Conflict Management Under the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)*, Maastricht: ECDPM (= Discussion paper, 211), 2017; F. Djilo, *Unscrambling Subsidiarity in the African Union: From Competition to Collaboration*, Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies (= ISS Africa report, 37), 2021; A. Gnanguénon, *A Cooperation of Variable Geometry: The African Union and Regional Economic Communities*, Berlin 2019; ISS, *Defining AU-REC Relations Is Still a Work in Progress*, in: ISS PSC Insights, 1 August 2022;

more, almost exclusively focus on peace and security, and specifically on conflict management and PSOs.<sup>16</sup>

Based on these contributions, *we know* that, on the one hand, AU-REC relations are governed by the principles of “subsidiarity”, “comparative advantage” and “complementarity”. On the other hand, however, existing research has also established that these principles remain under-defined, are subject to ongoing debates about different interpretations, and in some cases have been used as discursive political tools to contest relations. As a consequence, the track record of AU-REC coordination and cooperation in conflict management has been mixed, often involving tensions or competition. Much of the ongoing debate, and recurring recommendations, have therefore centred on the need to define AU-REC relations more clearly, and to reduce the number and overlaps of African regional organizations (ROs) and RECs – more or less explicitly carrying a normative assessment of what AU-REC relations and the regional organization of African peace and security should look like.

What *we do not know* enough about yet is how AU-REC relations work more generally, beyond situations of active conflict interventions, in the context and as part of everyday practices and sense-making of actors at the AU and the RECs, and at different sites. It is this gap that this article begins to address, analyzing relations between the AU and ECOWAS.

### 3. Imagining and Contesting AU-REC Relations

Historically, the emergence of AU-REC relations can be traced back to the 2nd Extraordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in Lagos in 1980 (which adopted the *Lagos Plan of Action*) and the *Abuja Treaty* of 1991 (which entered into force in 1994). On both occasions, African leaders reiterated a division of Africa into five regions (i.e., North, West, Central, East and Southern), and called for the strengthening of existing RECs, and the creation of new ones where necessary, to gradually work towards establishing the African Economic Community (AEC).<sup>17</sup> More specifically, the 1998 Protocol on Relations between the AEC and the RECs defines RECs as corporate legal entities, established by their respec-

K. Striebinger, *Coordination Between the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities*, Stockholm 2016.

16 A. S. Bah, *The African Union, Regional Economic Communities and Regional Mechanisms and United Nations: Leveraging the Triangular Partnership to Silence the Guns in Africa*, in: ACCORD Conflict & Resilience Monitor Special Edition, 14 December 2020; R. Momodu, *New AU-REC Relationship Needed for Integration*, in: ECDPM Great Insights 5 (2016) 4, pp. 21–23; R. Momodu, *African Integration: Resetting the AU-REC Relationship – Policy Options Beyond the Kagame Reform*, New York: African Peacebuilding Network, Social Science Research Council (= APN Briefing Note, 14), 2017.

17 OAU, *Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community*, Abuja, 3 June 1991, §1[d] 28; OAU Assembly, *Final Act of Lagos*. Adopted at the 2nd Extraordinary Session of the OAU Assembly of Heads of State and Government, Lagos, April 1980, §II[B]a. The decision to divide Africa into these five regions was already taken by the OAU Council of Ministers in 1976. See OAU Council, *Resolution on the Division of Africa into Five Regions*.

tive treaties, whose objective is to promote economic integration as a step towards the establishment of the AEC.<sup>18</sup> The Protocol aimed to strengthen RECs, promote closer coordination, harmonization, and cooperation among them, and to provide an institutional framework for these objectives.<sup>19</sup>

The RECs were expected to reflect these objectives in their foundational treaties, which for those predating the AEC Treaty meant to adapt their treaties.<sup>20</sup> Initially, it was the OAU Secretariat that was in charge of coordinating these efforts. Since the transformation of the OAU into the African Union, it has been the AU Commission, covering an expanding mandate no longer limited to economics, and trying to assume primacy for the AU, according a subordinate position to the RECs.<sup>21</sup> While the *Constitutive Act of the African Union* (2000) only very briefly refers to the need to coordinate and harmonize policies “for the gradual attainment of the objectives of the Union”,<sup>22</sup> the *Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the AU Peace and Security Council* (PSC) also stresses the role of the PSC in ensuring “consistency” of REC efforts with AU principles and objectives.<sup>23</sup> In 2006, the AU Assembly decided to limit the number of formally recognized RECs to eight, and in 2008 took further steps to (re)define the AU’s relations with the RECs. First, the executive heads of the AU and the RECs signed the *Protocol on Relations Between the AU and the RECs*, a slightly revised and updated version of the 1998 Protocol on AEC-REC relations.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, the AU Commissioner for Peace and Security and the executive heads of the RECs and Regional Mechanisms (RMs) signed a *Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Area of Peace and Security Between the AU, the RECs and the Coordinating Mechanisms of the Regional Standby Brigades of Eastern Africa and Northern Africa* (subsequently referred to as 2008 MoU). The main objective of the 2008 MoU is to advance the operationalization and functioning of APSA by enhancing AU-REC relations.<sup>25</sup> To that end it seeks to define these relationships more clearly, introducing the guiding principles “subsidiarity”, “complementarity”, and “comparative advantage”, all while asserting the primacy of the AU.<sup>26</sup>

Adopted at the 26th Ordinary Session of the OAU Council of Ministers, held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on 23 February – 1 March 1976 CM/Res.464 (XXVI).

18 OAU Secretariat et al., Protocol on Relations Between the African Economic Community and the Regional Economic Communities, Addis Ababa, 25 February 1998, §1.

19 Ibid., §3.

20 Ani, Politics of Intervention within the African Peace and Security Architecture, p. 7.

21 Nagar/Nganje, The African Union and its Relations with Sub-Regional Economic Communities, pp. 205–208.

22 OAU, Constitutive Act of the African Union, Lomé: Organization of African Unity, 11 July 2000, §3(1).

23 African Union, Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union, Durban: African Union, 9 July 2002, §16.

24 For example, RECs are now defined as “regional grouping[s] of African states organized into a legal entity by treaty, with economic and social integration as main objective”. AU Commission et al., Protocol on Relations Between the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities, Addis Ababa, 27 January 2008, §1.

25 AU Commission et al., Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Area of Peace and Security Between the African Union, the Regional Economic Communities and the Coordinating Mechanisms of the Regional Standby Brigades of Eastern Africa and Northern Africa, [Addis Ababa, 2008], §§3, 5.

26 Ibid., §4(iv), 20.

As will become clear, inter-regionalism in the form of AU-REC relations is institutionally built into the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and continental AU politics in general. In this, the RECs and RMs are imagined as “building blocks”,<sup>27</sup> and are part and parcel of an APSA “geography”,<sup>28</sup> that is a particular imagined spatial organization of African peace and security with the AU PSC at the top and security mechanisms of RECs/RMs below.<sup>29</sup> From this, it also becomes clear that the framework documents mentioned above – while being important reference points and influencing how different actors frame their arguments and actions – are the result of *negotiations and politics more generally* (reflecting changing needs, interests, and agendas of different actors). These do not end once these texts have been adopted. Therefore, it is important to study specific instances of AU-REC relations and the sense-making of the different actors involved more systematically and in more detail. The example of AU-ECOWAS relations helps to show why.

In general, studying AU-ECOWAS relations closely supports existing findings. Referring to one or several of the framework documents mentioned above, interview partners at ECOWAS and the AU largely agree on the guiding principles of their relationship, and the general role of ECOWAS as one of the “building blocks” of the AU. All actors involved are clear about the need to work together, most importantly for effective conflict management (e.g., to mobilize resources and avoid spoilers), but also to consolidate the APSA, and effectively present the continent on the global stage (e.g., at the UN Security Council). Moreover, due to the overlap in membership and the strong role of Nigeria in continental affairs, ECOWAS and the West African group of states cannot be ignored in the context of the AU.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, despite this shared understanding in principle, what this cooperation should look like in practice remains very much contested, affecting inter-regional relations.<sup>31</sup>

However, paying more detailed attention to the actual actors involved and their views provides some additional insights. Among staff of both ECOWAS and the AU, it is widely shared perception that ECOWAS is one of the most advanced RECs.<sup>32</sup> The reasons given for this perception most prominently include the resources available through the ECOWAS community levy and the organization’s high-level engagement in regional conflicts. However, they also include respect for ECOWAS’ working culture, its high

27 This is the term frequently used by ECOWAS and AU staff, as well as in much of the literature, although that term is not used in any of the framework documents mentioned above.

28 K. P. W. Döring, The Changing ASF Geography: From the Intervention Experience in Mali to the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises and the Nouakchott Process, in: African Security 11 (2018) 1, pp. 32–58.

29 See K. P. W. Döring/J. Herpolsheimer, Studying APSA Through a Spatial Lens, in: Döring et al. (eds.), Researching the Inner Life of the African Peace and Security Architecture, pp. 117–137, at 127.

30 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 14 September 2016a.

31 E.g., Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja, 30 September 2021a; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 21 September 2016; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 5 November 2022.

32 This perception is supported by African Union and UNECA, Africa Regional Integration Index 2019, Addis Ababa: African Union and UN Economic Commission for Africa, 2020.



level of organization, and well-developed principles and practices.<sup>33</sup> As an organization, ECOWAS is also seen as being close to situations in the West African region, acting fast and frequently being “on the ground”, which has allowed ECOWAS to enhance its impact both at political and “technical” levels (see also section 4).<sup>34</sup> In addition, AU staff describes ECOWAS as a REC that is relatively open and accessible on a technical level.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, however, West Africa has been a particularly troubled region with a lot of challenges emanating from a high rate of coups d’état and political instability. This has also led to recurring tensions between actors at ECOWAS and the AU, in their responses to specific conflict situations (e.g., Côte d’Ivoire in 2010/11, Mali in 2012/13, Guinea-Bissau in 2012/13), and ongoing debates about the organization of AU-REC relations and African peace and security more generally (centring on the concept of “subsidiarity”).

It is possible to identify at least two sides in these debates. Very roughly, a group of pragmatists confronts a group of policy-builders, interested in developing a more systematic approach.<sup>36</sup> Whereas, efforts to increase consistency in the responses to conflict situations across the continent can be associated more with the AU, ECOWAS has more often adopted pragmatic approaches that, while not ignoring normative frameworks, have interpreted them more flexibly.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, representatives of both groups can be found also within the AU Commission and among ECOWAS staff. A related, and hotly contested question has been who should decide how best to respond to specific conflict situations. Here again, very roughly, an “AU perspective” contrasts with an “ECOWAS perspective”. According to the former, AU actors should be allowed to “come and go”, and let ECOWAS take the lead (or not) as they see fit.<sup>38</sup> According to the latter, anything happening in West Africa (i.e., ECOWAS’ region), ECOWAS should be handling, supported or at least endorsed by the AU, who should “take over” only if a situation was beyond the capacity of ECOWAS.<sup>39</sup> The key argument advanced to support this view has been that of ECOWAS’ “proximity” (and, inversely, the AU’s “distance”) to conflicts in West Africa, associating it with superior knowledge and a better understanding of the respective situation.<sup>40</sup> Once more, while AU and ECOWAS actors generally align with

33 E.g., Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 28 October 2022; see also Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 1 November 2022a; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 16 November 2022a.

34 E.g., Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 1 November 2022a.

35 E.g., Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 30 October 2022.

36 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 14 September 2016a; Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja, 30 September 2021a.

37 This relative flexibility has often triggered criticism, both “inside” ECOWAS, and from “outside” observers (e.g., AU actors, civil society, scholars).

38 E.g., Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 3 November 2022; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 15 November 2022; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 21 September 2016.

39 E.g., Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja 30 September 2021a; Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja, 14 February 2017; see also Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 1 November 2022a; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 14 September 2016b.

40 E.g., Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 16 September 2016b; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 28 September 2018a.



these two perspectives respectively, it is important to be aware that proponents of both can be found in both organizations.

Two related observations are important, further complicating AU-ECOWAS relations (as well as AU-REC relations more generally). First, as identified in existing scholarship, the relationship between the political decision-making organs of RECs and the AU on peace and security is not (well) defined (see section 2). In the example of ECOWAS and the AU, this is further complicated by the fact that the ECOWAS Mediation and Security Council (MSC) frequently, and much more often than the AU PSC, deals with active conflicts at the level of heads of state and government, whereas the PSC most frequently meets at the level of ambassadors (called permanent representatives). Therefore, their decisions are taken at different levels, making it even more problematic when the AU PSC does not align itself with decisions taken by the ECOWAS MSC (see section 4), *de facto* defying some heads of AU member states.<sup>41</sup>

Second, AU-REC relations, obviously have not unfolded in isolation from other (“external”) actors. External funding, specifically funding coming from the European Union (EU), has also affected AU-REC relations, causing tensions by triggering competition between the organizations and by supporting a specific order between them, inconsistently.<sup>42</sup> As I have pointed out elsewhere,<sup>43</sup> EU actors on the one hand have sought to support a hierarchical understanding of APSA, with the AU as the “continental” organization at the top and the RECs as “sub-regional” organizations somewhat below that.<sup>44</sup> For this reason, some EU-funds have been accessible for ECOWAS only through the AU in Addis Ababa. For example, funds from the APSA Support Programs, much like funds from the African Peace Facility, go to RECs through the AU, which has a say in programming and needs to endorse REC requests.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, EU support has also gone directly to the RECs (see below), thereby effectively undermining (or at least not supporting) a hierarchical organization of APSA.

To overcome the lack of clarity in AU-REC relations, actors at ECOWAS and the AU have reignited debates on a potential revision of the 2008 MoU. These have been ongoing for several years, but so far have not been conclusive. This, once more reflects division also among staff of RECs and the AU. Those arguing against a revision, on the one hand, fear that a revised MoU might even fall behind the existing one. On the other hand, they argue that the existing MoU needs to be reinforced (or brought to life) in practice, by

41 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 24 September 2018; Interview, ECOWAS officer, Addis Ababa, 26 September 2016; Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja, 28 February 2017.

42 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 3 November 2022; Interview, EU officer, Addis Ababa, 3 November 2022a; Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja, 16 February 2017.

43 See J. Herpolsheimer, *Spatializing Practices of Regional Organizations During Conflict Intervention: The Politics of ECOWAS and the African Union*, Abingdon/New York 2021, pp. 191–193.

44 See also Döring/Herpolsheimer, *Studying APSA Through a Spatial Lens*; and Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 8 November 2022; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 16 November 2022b; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 12 November 2022.

45 Interview, EU officer, Abuja, 24 February 2017; Interview, EU officer, Abuja, 4 October 2021.

implementing what has already been agreed on, and in case of a problem revert to the organizations' legal departments for interpretation.<sup>46</sup>

What becomes apparent from the above considerations is that clearly defining the role of the AU and the RECs, and positioning them strategically, in continental governance (most importantly regarding peace and security) and/or programme implementation, continues to be work in progress, and an ongoing debate even within the AU.<sup>47</sup> As a consequence, the relationship between AU and the RECs remains work in progress as well, and differs significantly between RECs<sup>48</sup> – requiring creativity and flexibility.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, a lack of clear definitions may cause problems but, at the same time, also may be required to make these relations work.<sup>50</sup> Since RECs are not sub-ordinate organs of the AU, the question arises how rigid their relations, their roles and division of labour, actually can and should be defined, without compromising them entirely. Interestingly, despite these recurring tensions in ongoing debates, in actual practice things may turn out quite differently, as the next section analyzes in more detail.

#### 4. AU-REC Relations in Practice: The Example of ECOWAS

As is clear from the above considerations, structured, regular, and even institutionalized cooperation between the two African ROs is a relatively new phenomenon, despite occasional cooperation in the past. While on paper relations saw increased formalization in 2008 (i.e., AU-REC Protocol, MoU, see above), in practice, it took much longer and, in fact, continues to be work in progress. The lack of coordination and cooperation between the AU and the RECs has been observed in APSA assessment reports recurrently.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, it took until 2019 for the establishment of more regular coordination, especially (but not exclusively) by turning the AU mid-year summit into an AU-REC summit.<sup>52</sup> In the following, this section reflects on established and emerging practices of AU-ECOWAS relations at different sites and by different actors. It distinguishes between interaction “in the field”, at and between the headquarters of the two organizations, and within AU decision-making organs. Whereas the first two focus on relations conducted by and between different actors of the two organizations (e.g., commission staff, heads of mission, representatives, and organizational organs), the latter reflects on inter-regional

46 Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja 30 September 2021a.

47 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 21 September 2016; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 28 September 2018b.

48 See also Akokpari/Ancas, *The African Union and Regional Economic Communities*, p. 73.

49 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 21 September 2016; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 24 September 2018; Interview, ECOWAS official, Addis Ababa, 24 September 2018.

50 See also Ndiaye, *The relationship between the AU and the RECs/RMs in relation to peace and security in Africa*, p. 52; and Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 21 September 2016.

51 See L. M. Fisher et al., *African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA): 2010 Assessment Study*, Addis Ababa 2010; L. Nathan et al., *African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA): 2014 Assessment Study*, Addis Ababa 2015.

52 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 1 November 2022b.

relations conducted by member states “inside” the political organs of the AU, specifically in the AU Peace and Security Council.

#### 4.1 “In the field” / “On the ground”

The site that, so far, has received most attention when it comes to AU-REC relations is “the field”, mostly specific conflict sites that have triggered responses by the AU and the RECs.<sup>53</sup> While the efforts of conflict interventions and AU-REC interactions in that context have been well researched (though not exhaustively), it is important to recognize that AU actors and REC actors have also engaged each other “on the ground” in other contexts during implementation of different (joint) programmes and other missions, such as for example electoral assistance or observation missions, and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. While not free of tensions, in many cases these have been less characterized by competition, but by cooperation, and in this way have contributed to good relations between actors at the AU and the RECs on a “technical” level (as opposed to the more conflictive political level). The example of AU-ECOWAS relations supports this observation. To stay with the example of electoral assistance, meetings between the heads of electoral observation missions have become an established practice, allowing to share information, compare notes, and in some cases even prepare and make joint statements.<sup>54</sup> This has also involved learning between staff of the two organizations. A good example in this respect is the adoption of long-term observation missions, first introduced by the AU and since 2013 also an established practice at ECOWAS, aiming to complement short-term missions, expand the support to national electoral bodies, and bridge gaps between subsequent rounds of voting.<sup>55</sup>

It may also have been these exchanges, along with changing practices at other sites and/or levels (e.g., information sharing and joint assessments, joint monitoring and follow-up mechanisms, see also below), that have led to more cooperative responses to conflict situations more recently. Actors at ECOWAS and the AU agree that, while not 100 per cent successful, coordination and cooperation has been “satisfying” in response to the recent coups d’état in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, considering that crises constitute defining moments for AU-REC relations,<sup>57</sup> at least in the case of ECOWAS and the AU, relations have improved in more recent times. The practices of joint assessments, joint missions, and sometimes also joint declarations have contributed to bringing the

53 Cooperative or competitive relations between the AU and the RECs in the context of conflict interventions have also played out at additional sites other than the conflict site itself. Beyond Addis Ababa and the headquarters of the RECs (see below), these include for example the UN Security Council in New York or meeting venues of international contact groups, established to facilitate coordination among different intervening actors, see Herpolsheimer, *Spatializing Practices of Regional Organizations during Conflict Intervention*.

54 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 30 October 2022; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 7 November 2022.

55 Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja, 03 March 2017; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 14 September 2016d; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 14 September 2016c.

56 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 3 November 2022; Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja, 23 October 2018.

57 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 28 September 2018.

two organizations closer together.<sup>58</sup> These involve different actors at different levels (e.g., commission staff and member state representatives, “technical” and political), and allow them to see, talk and move together – building mutual trust and understanding. More cooperative engagement in the field has also resulted from efforts by AU actors (supported also by external partners, see section 3) to identify the most suitable role of the AU in continental affairs more generally (i.e., beyond conflict intervention in a narrow sense). While this search clearly is not completed, for the time being, AU actors seem to settle on a primarily coordinating role, setting policy, bringing different actors together (i.e., facilitating).<sup>59</sup> If this is the final word, and if it can or should be (see section 3), yet remains to be seen.

#### 4.2 At organizational headquarters

So far, the sites least studied when it comes to AU-REC relations have been the headquarters of the AU and the RECs, as well as interaction between staff and organs of these organizations, particularly regarding their “everyday” practices (i.e., beyond intermittent exchanges on specific conflict situations). The following presents a more systematic, but non-conclusive analysis, focusing on the fields of governance, peace and security – while acknowledging that AU-REC engagement is very broad, involving a wide array of topics.<sup>60</sup> The overall objectives, as also stated in the framework documents (see above), are information sharing, coordination and harmonization (e.g., of policies, positions, and action), and joint programmes and activities. To these ends, several key practices have emerged, including the creation of liaison offices and thematic focal points, mutual visits and joint meetings. In addition to these more formal practices, informal contacts and personal relationships play a critical role, with significant differences between inter-regional engagement at the political and at the “technical” level (e.g., commission staff working on the implementation of policies and programmes vs. political organs/member state representatives).

A key practice in AU-REC relations (anchored in the 2008 MoU, Art. 18) has been the creation of permanent *liaison offices* of RECs at the AU Commission, since 2008, and from 2013 liaison offices of the AU at the REC secretariats or commissions (although pursued less consistently). Initially, in 2008, this practice emerged with an exclusive focus on peace and security, made possible by EU funding. Over time, the mandate of these offices at the AU Commission expanded, although their capacity (i.e., staff and resources) did not. Here, it was the ECOWAS Commission that played a lead role, providing additional funds to its liaison office to enable it pursuing a broader mandate;

58 E.g., Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja, 5 October 2021.

59 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 3 November 2022; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 4 November 2022; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 15 November 2022.

60 Interview, ECOWAS officer, Addis Ababa, 2 November 2022; see also AU Assembly, Report on the Division of Labour Between the Member States, AU Commission and the RECs. AU/RECs Mid-Year Coordination Meeting (virtual), 27 September 2021, MYCM/AU/3 (III).

and the ECOWAS office in Addis Ababa played a lead role in supporting liaison offices of other RECs.<sup>61</sup>

The ECOWAS liaison office at the AU has been instrumental, not only in facilitating relations between the two organizations (e.g., channelling information, participating in meetings), but also in enabling coordination among ECOWAS member state representatives in Addis Ababa, to adopt and pursue common positions at the AU.<sup>62</sup> The importance of that office and its work have also been acknowledged by AU staff.<sup>63</sup> The AU liaison office at the ECOWAS Commission in Abuja, however, turned out to be short-lived and less influential. In 2014, the AU established a liaison office in Abuja.<sup>64</sup> However, since 2016, when then AU representative to ECOWAS, Abdou Abarry (from Niger), was re-assigned to become the Special Representative of the AUC Chairperson to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the position has remained vacant and is no longer listed among the AU's representational offices.<sup>65</sup>

A practice complementing liaison offices (and in the case of the AU filling in for them, along with visits and joint meetings, see below) has been the appointment of *thematic focal points*, both for AU-REC relations more generally, and for different policy fields and programmes. These are people supposed to work as first point of contact for any communication between RECs and the AU on a specific portfolio. This may involve sharing information, coordinating activities or planning activities jointly, and facilitating access to other relevant persons of interest within their organization (e.g., resource persons or higher levels of leadership). In addition, at the AU Commission (AUC), specifically at the Department for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), one officer is in charge of coordinating AU-REC relations more generally.<sup>66</sup> However, the effectiveness of these focal points has sometimes been undermined due to inadequate communication, which is often delayed, and sometimes goes around focal points or liaison officers.<sup>67</sup>

*Mutual visits* have been another key practice (also anchored in the AU-REC Protocol and MoU on Peace and Security). On invitation, chief executives or staff delegations of ECOWAS and the AU may attend statutory meetings or specific events organized by the other organization, allowing them to observe (parts of) the proceedings or in

61 H. Y. Bappah/J. Herpolsheimer, The Globalization Project of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and "External" Liaison Offices, manuscript prepared for submission (forthcoming).

62 Interview, ECOWAS officer, Addis Ababa, 28 September 2018; Interview, ECOWAS officer, Addis Ababa, 26 September 2016; Interview, ECOWAS officer, Addis Ababa, 2 November 2022. For more detailed analysis of the work of ECOWAS liaison offices see also Bappah/Herpolsheimer, The Globalization Project of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and "External" Liaison Offices.

63 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 5 November 2022; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 12 November 2022.

64 See Interview, ECOWAS officer, Addis Ababa, 26 September 2016.

65 Interview, ECOWAS officer, Addis Ababa, 26 September 2016. In fact, the AU liaison office to SADC is currently the only one listed in the AU Handbook. See AU Commission and New Zealand Crown, African Union Handbook 2022, Addis Ababa, Wellington: AU Commission and New Zealand MFAT, 2022.

66 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 16 September 2016a; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 12 November 2022.

67 Interview, ECOWAS officer, Addis Ababa, 2 November 2022; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 12 November 2022.

some cases also make statements.<sup>68</sup> A good example in this respect is the participation of REC delegates in the AU Peace and Security Council. While it may also be the liaison officers of the RECs representing their organization in the AU PSC, it is often staff delegations doing it. In the case of ECOWAS, these frequently include the ECOWAS Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, the Director of Political Affairs, the Director of Peacekeeping and Regional Security and/or the ECOWAS representative in the concerned country where conflict takes place. Upon invitation by the AU PSC, organizational representatives of the concerned RECs may take the floor and make a statement. Following that, however, they are required to leave the session, and are thus, not allowed to follow the debate. As regional member states cannot always be trusted to represent and fight for regional interests and positions (instead of national ones), led very vocally by ECOWAS liaison officers, REC representatives have called for more active participation and organizational representation in the AU PSC (as opposed to member states).<sup>69</sup> As a result of this struggle, the practice has begun to change, slowly, AU PSC members (mostly member state ambassadors, foreign ministers; rarely heads of state) are allowing for more direct involvement of the RECs, at least in some instances. For example, involving the staff of the ECOWAS Commission in the preparation of specific PSC sessions, allowing them to stay on for the deliberations, and involve them in the drafting of the communiqué.<sup>70</sup>

Closely related to mutual visits is the practice of *joint meetings*, which has increased considerably over the last four years, at different levels. Based on a decision by the AU Assembly in 2017, since July 2019 the mid-year AU summit has been transformed into the annual *Mid-Year Coordination Meeting* between the AU and the RECs (MYCM), bringing together the Bureau of the AU Assembly (comprising five heads of member states, or their representatives, on a rotational basis) and the chairpersons of the RECs (i.e., the head of state or representative of the member state holding the temporary chair). In addition, the chief executives of the RECs participate, along with selected staff of the AU Commission. The objective of the MYCM is to assess, guide and review AU-REC cooperation, working towards a clear “division of labour” (in line with the principle of “subsidiarity”). By the end of 2022, four MYCMs had taken place (two virtually due to the Covid-19 pandemic), testifying to the increased commitment and importance accorded to AU-REC relations. So far, these meetings have focused primarily (although not exclusively) on the revision of the 2008 Protocol (adopted in 2021),<sup>71</sup> and discussing a clearer “division of labour”, based on reporting and a range of preparatory meetings.<sup>72</sup>

68 Herpolsheimer, *Spatializing Practices of Regional Organizations during Conflict Intervention*, p. 175.

69 Bappah/Herpolsheimer, *The Globalization Project of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and “External” Liaison Offices*.

70 Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja 30 September 2021a; see also Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja, 23 October 2018; Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja, 29 October 2018.

71 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 12 November 2022.

72 See, for instance, AU Assembly, “Niamey Declaration of the First Mid-Year Coordination Meeting Between the AU and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) on the Pursuit of the African Integration Agenda”. 1st Mid-Year Coordination Meeting Between the AU, the RECs and the RMs, Niamey, Niger, 8 July 2019, MYCM/Decl/1(I); AU

Prior to the first MYCM, the AUC Chairperson and counterparts at the RECs had held a *Chief Executives Meeting*, in April 2019, and the first *Annual Consultative Meeting between the AU PSC and the RECs/RMs* took place in May 2019.<sup>73</sup> Meetings between the AUC Chairperson and REC counterparts had already taken place annually between 2008 and 2010 but seem to have been discontinued afterwards. In 2015, the AU PSC had already organized a retreat on enhancing relations with RECs and RMs.<sup>74</sup> In addition, AU and REC representatives have also participated in other (more or less regular) coordination meetings involving other actors, such as for example (chief) executives of the African Development Bank (AfDB), the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), and the EU.<sup>75</sup> As mentioned above, EU actors in particular have been instrumental in supporting and influencing AU-REC relations (see section 3).<sup>76</sup>

In addition to these increasingly institutionalized meetings at the higher, more political levels, *joint planning meetings* and *desk-to-desk meetings* have increased interaction between ECOWAS and AU staff also at the “technical” level among programme officers. AU-REC relations have long suffered from a lack of coordination, partly resulting from incompatible work plans.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, another more recent practice are *joint planning meetings* at the beginning of each year, sharing information about budgets and planned activities, coordinating and planning joint activities.<sup>78</sup> By now, most units in the ECOWAS and AU PAPS departments hold annual planning meetings.<sup>79</sup> However, further steps still need to be taken. Both organizations suffer from centralized decision-making

Assembly, “Report on the Division of Labour Between the Member States, AU Commission and the RECs”. For further analysis on the MYCMs, e.g., see ISS PSC Report [Pretoria], 1 August 2019.

73 See AU PSC, “Joint Communiqué (Inaugural Meeting [I] PSC/REC/RMs)”, 1st Joint Consultative Meeting Between the AU PSC and the RECs/RMs, Addis Ababa, 24 May 2019; AU PSC, “Joint Communiqué”, 2nd Annual Consultative Meeting Between the AU PSC and the REC/RMs, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 26 August 2021, PSC/RECs/RMs/2. (2021). For some additional information about the PSC-REC meetings, see <https://amaniafrica-et.org/category/thematic-insights/engagements-with-au-and-other-international-bodies/psc-meetings-with-recs-rms-engagements-with-au-and-other-international-bodies/> (accessed 28 February 2023).

74 Interview, ECOWAS officer, Addis Ababa, 26 September 2016; see also AU PSC, “Conclusions (PSC/Retreat/8)”, Retreat of the PSC on Enhancement of Cooperation Between the AU PSC and the RECs and RMs, Abuja, 14–16 September 2015.

75 See, for instance, AU Commission et al., “Conclusions”, Consultative Meeting Between the AU, RECs, RMs, and the EU on the EU Support to the Operationalization of APSA, Akosombo, 10–11 December 2009; AU Commission AU Commission, “Concept Note”, AU-RECs-UNECA-AfDB-NEPAD-ACBF Joint Coordination Meeting, Lusaka, 10–12 March 2016. The regular meeting between chief executives of O/AU, RECs, UNECA and AfDB had already been proposed in the 1998 Protocol, referring to it as the Committee on Coordination. In addition, the 1998 Protocol also provided for a Committee of Secretariat Officials, bringing together senior officials of the same organizations (§§6–10). However, it seems like these meetings only began after the adoption of the 2008 Protocol, including the same provisions (also §§6–10).

76 These different meetings also go back to provisions in the 1998 Protocol on Relations between RECs and the AEC, which subsequently were also taken in the 2008 Protocol, and the 2008 MoU.

77 E.g., Interview, ECOWAS officer, Addis Ababa, 20 September 2016; Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja, 14 February 2017.

78 During the Covid-19 pandemic, most of these exchanges moved to virtual platforms. In 2021, the restructuring of the AU Commission, and specifically the merger of the departments of Political Affairs and Peace and Security under the new Commissioner have delayed these meetings (Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja 30 September 2021a).

79 Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja 30 September 2021.



(almost everything requiring approval from highest levels), which causes delays in implementing activities, sometimes leading to last-minute efforts or many postponements.<sup>80</sup> Since late 2022, *desk-to-desk meetings* are supposed to complement joint planning exercises, providing opportunities for the leadership and staff of RECs and the AU to sit and talk together, getting to know and understand each other better as organizations, but also on a personal basis (enabling personal relationships, and informal exchanges, see below).<sup>81</sup> The first meeting of this nature between ECOWAS and AU staff took place in October 2022. Participants primarily discussed the relationship between the African Standby Force and the ECOWAS Standby Force, but also exchanged views on various other topics (e.g., unconstitutional changes of government, elections, good governance).<sup>82</sup>

What is important to recognize is that despite all these efforts aiming to formalize AU-REC relations, in practice, *informal contacts and personal relationships* between actors at RECs and the AU have been and continue to be of the essence in actually performing AU-REC relations, on an everyday basis. Most interview partners have stressed the crucial importance of personal communication (most importantly through calls, WhatsApp messages, and virtual Zoom meetings), as sending emails and in some cases even official letters often does not trigger adequate responses. If anything comes back at all, it often takes too much time.<sup>83</sup> As a consequence, these exchanges are little systematic, depending on personal relationships, specific needs and situations, and varying a lot between different portfolios (e.g., most developed in early warning and conflict prevention). This affects both “technical” and political levels of exchanges (see below). Leadership (often also referred to as management) plays a critical role, with potential repercussions throughout the organizations, for example if tensions arise.<sup>84</sup> Changing more frequently than regular staff, the influence of specific personalities and their inter-personal relationships may also change more often.

Relations are often steadier (for better or worse) among programme officers, although staff mobility is a common feature, also between RECs and the AU.<sup>85</sup> In some cases, this mobility is the very basis for good inter-personal relations (i.e., people know their former colleagues and the organization well). To give a few examples, programme staff of ECOWAS and the AU maintain very close relations, for example, on electoral assistance missions as well as on post conflict reconstruction and development (PCRD) policy and processes.<sup>86</sup> In contrast, units working on governance and human rights, for exam-

80 Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja 30 September 2021a.

81 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 5 November 2022; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 3 November 2022.

82 See AU Commission and ECOWAS Commission, “Desk-to-Desk Consultations Between ECOWAS and AU PAPS Held in Abuja”, Joint Press Release, Abuja, 31 October 2022; see also Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 5 November 2022; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 16 November 2022a.

83 E.g., Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 7 November 2022.

84 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 3 November 2022; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 5 November 2022.

85 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 12 November 2022.

86 E.g., Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 30 October 2022; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 5 November 2022.

ple, reported less frequent interaction.<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, overall, working relations between ECOWAS and the AU have been much more continuous and cooperative at the “technical” level than they have been at the political level.<sup>88</sup> However, this may be beginning to change (see above).<sup>89</sup> It is also at the level of programme officers that mutual learning has occurred most frequently between ECOWAS and the AU, resulting in similar policy debates, processes of policy development, and practices (e.g., on fighting drug trafficking, election observation, early warning).<sup>90</sup>

As becomes clear from the initiatives enacted since 2019, efforts to formalize these exchanges are ongoing, in particular driven by the AU reform process and the new AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, Bankole Adeoye (from Nigeria).<sup>91</sup> Working more through formal communication and institutionalized meetings would produce official records, and make relations less dependent on specific (changing) interpersonal relationships. Another example in this respect, is the new knowledge exchange platform connecting RECs and the AU, I-RECKE. Although, early warning has already been one of the more formalized fields of interaction (while still involving a lot of informal contacts),<sup>92</sup> I-RECKE is supposed to enhance mutual sharing of knowledge and learning on best practices.<sup>93</sup>

#### 4.3 “Inside” AU organs

While the preceding analysis has focused on actual inter-organizational relations, inter-regional dynamics have also played out inside the AU and its political organs, affecting inter-regional relations also at the inter-organizational level. Again, the AU PSC provides a good example of this phenomenon. While RECs as such are not represented on the PSC (as mentioned above), the composition of the Council follows the logic of regional representation, according to fixed (although not uncontested) quota for AU member states hailing from East, Southern, Central, West, and North Africa.<sup>94</sup> It is these member states (s)lected from their respective regions that are supposed to present and defend regional positions and interests in the PSC, and take decisions. However, this is not

87 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 1 November 2022a.

88 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 14 September 2016d; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 22 September 2016; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 25 September 2018; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 28 September 2018c; Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja, 28 February 2017.

89 This working relationship may be even more intense “in the field” (e.g., Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 14 September 2016d; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 25 September 2018), in some cases even at the political level differing from relations among headquarters or political organs, see Herpolsheimer, *Spatializing Practices of Regional Organizations during Conflict Intervention*, pp. 131–132.

90 Interview, ECOWAS officer, Addis Ababa, 20 September 2016; Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja, 27 February 2017; Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja 30 September 2021b; Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja, 03 March 2017.

91 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 30 October 2022; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 5 November 2022.

92 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 22 September 2016.

93 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 12 November 2022. See African Union, *Launch of the I-RECKE Platform*. Report presented at the 4th Mid-Year Coordination Meeting between the African Union, the Regional Economic Communities and the Regional Mechanisms, held in Lusaka, Zambia, on 17 July 2022. MYCM/AU/8 (IV).

94 Herpolsheimer, *Spatializing Practices of Regional Organizations during Conflict Intervention*, pp. 71–73.

automatically the case, as they always also have particularistic, national interests, which may or may not align (closely) with regional ones.<sup>95</sup>

Another practice in the AU PSC has been influenced by the informal rule that PSC member states from the region affected by a specific conflict situation take the lead on decision-making on the respective agenda item. While this rule is normally followed, it is also not uncontested, and has occasionally led to inter-regional disputes, in some cases also affecting AU-REC relations. An example in this respect has been the position adopted by the AU PSC on the conflict in Guinea-Bissau in 2012/13, diverging from the ECOWAS position to engage in dialogue with the transition government in the country (which had emerged from the coup) and subsequently refusing to lift sanctions before the elections in 2014. In the PSC, the Angolan representative had opposed the position pushed for by representatives of Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, and Gambia. This led to an impasse that eventually had to be resolved through the AU Legal Counsel's office, and which effectively meant that the West African position was opposed, breaking with the informal rule, and seriously affecting the relationship between ECOWAS and the AU for some time to come.<sup>96</sup>

Although, more recently, PSC members have tended to endorse ECOWAS decisions, a debate remains active whether the AU PSC should automatically endorse REC actions and decisions, or not. Likewise, the regional quota for seats on the PSC are currently also being renegotiated.<sup>97</sup> What is important to take away from this brief example is that more research is required on such inter-regional dynamics "inside" the AU, for example, also covering the workings of the AU Assembly and the Executive Council.

## 5. Conclusions

In this article, I have analyzed everyday practices of inter-regionalism between ECOWAS and the African Union, focusing on the fields of governance, peace, and security, as an example of AU-REC relations. Based on this analysis, I have argued that AU-REC relations need to be understood as part of national, regional, and inter-regional politics of different actors, which therefore are subject to continuous negotiation and contestation. Actors at ECOWAS and the AU do not follow rules and principles (as laid out in formal framework documents) in any mechanistic way. Instead, they continuously (re)imagine and perform AU-ECOWAS relations not only to solve specific problems of conflict management, but also according to specific (changing) needs, interests, and agendas. Debates among practitioners (often taking pragmatic approaches) and policy makers (more interested in consistency) in these organizations are ongoing. They suggest that, while more clarity regarding the concrete meaning of "subsidiarity" and the specific "division

95 Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 14 September 2016a; Interview, ECOWAS officer, Abuja, 28 February 2017; Interview, AU officer, Addis Ababa, 28 September 2018a; Interview, ECOWAS officer, Addis Ababa, 26 September 2016.

96 See Herpolsheimer, *Spatializing Practices of Regional Organizations during Conflict Intervention*, pp. 190–191.

97 See ISS PSC Report [Pretoria], February 2022.

of labour” between RECs and the AU would be helpful, a certain degree of flexibility may also be required to make or keep these relations working – as available resources and capacities vary and circumstances keep changing.

A closer examination of the continuous practices of ECOWAS-AU inter-regionalism (as opposed to moments of conflict intervention only) allows to identify the different sites at which interregional relations take place. In addition to conflict sites, these also include organizational headquarters, conference venues, but also specific political organs of the organizations involved. It also allows discerning differences among actors and practices at different levels. Most importantly, inter-regional relations may differ quite significantly between political and “technical” levels, the former mostly associated with member state representatives, the latter with commission staffs. Relations may also differ between groups and individuals, as, despite efforts to increase formalization, informal contacts and personal relationships continue to be of critical importance in facilitating AU-REC relations, especially when it comes to mutual learning, policy development and consolidation.

Another important finding of this article relates to the question of how overlapping organizations – in fact the AU encompasses all RECs – engage in inter-regional and inter-organizational relations. Here, differences between the organizations as such (i.e., staff and organs) and their member states come to bear. AU organs convene and AU staff is seated in Addis Ababa, which is relatively “far away” from Abuja/West Africa, working based on their own rules, principles and procedures. In addition, comprising different constellations of member states, dynamics in political decision-making organs of RECs and the AU also differ. Moreover, (informal) rules and practices, supposed to manage regional representation and decision making remain subject to debate and are not always applied (see section 4). Therefore, it makes sense to think of ECOWAS and the AU as separate actors in inter-regional and inter-organizational relations. Nevertheless, both are also intimately inter-connected, as are (most) RECs more generally in the workings of the AU – making the AU an inherently inter-regional RO.

It is these characteristics that make “AU-REC relations” a promising research field that deserves much more detailed and systematic study with valuable insights not only about the “inner life” of APSA, African ROs, and African regionalism – highlighting African agency – but also for conceptual and theoretical debates on comparative regionalism, inter-regionalism, and inter-organizational relations more generally. Therefore, future research will have to investigate the relations between different RECs and the AU as closely as possible and how these relations are continuously being organized (i.e., practices) and made sense of by people (i.e., different actors) at multiple inter-related sites.