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7 Understanding Complex, Collective Actors at African Regional Organizations: AU and ECOWAS Intervention in The Gambia

1 Introduction

Since the 1990s, African regional organizations (ROs) have become important actors in processes of re-spatialization intertwined with violent conflicts across Africa. Most notably, this has culminated in the establishment of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), around which different actors have sought to reorder space in response to conflict in Africa.[1] Put simply, APSA is a set of regulations, norms, and practices for fostering, maintaining, and establishing peace and security throughout the continent. APSA is based on the agency and interrelations among such complex, collective actors as the African Union (AU), the United Nations (UN), as well as other ROs. The responses to conflict by these organizations have mainly been studied by scholars based in more or less conventional approaches in the academic field of International Relations (IR). This has had implications for the conceptualization of these organizations, which are considered either as monolithic, unitary actors or as actors lacking agency, in the sense that they are seen as mere tools for nation-states' interests. However, as we are going to show in this chapter, both conceptualizations fail to understand adequately what is going on within and around ROs. Therefore, this chapter sets out to address this by unpacking the actorness of African ROs.[2] In doing so, it aims to better understand

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1 We have discussed the specific role of African regional organizations in such processes of re-spatialization elsewhere, e.g., see K. P.W. Döring and J. Herpolsheimer, "'New Regionalisms' and Violent Conflicts in Africa: The Politics of the AU and ECOWAS in Mali and Guinea-Bissau" (SFB 1199, Working Paper Series 5), Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2016; K. P. W. Döring and J. Herpolsheimer, "The Spaces of Intervention for Mali and Guinea-Bissau", *South African Journal of International Affairs* 25 (2018) 1, pp. 61–82; 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", *African Security* 11 (2018) 1, pp. 32–58.
2 This chapter is based on several research stays by both authors at the headquarters of the AU and ECOWAS between 2016 and 2018.

the actors that play prominent roles in contemporary space-making concerning African peace and security issues.[3]

For instance, in January 2017, the AU and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) received a lot of international attention and praise for their swift, decisive diplomatic and eventually military interventions in the post-election crisis in The Gambia. These interventions recognized and helped to install President-elect Adama Barrow, removing Yahya Jammeh, the incumbent and 22-year-long-ruling president of The Gambia. Thinking about a "new African model of coercion",[4] journalists and scholars discussed the events as a significant change in West Africa specifically as well as the continent in general, as "a beacon for African democracy",[5] as a sign that ECOWAS is moving "from a dictators' club to upholder of democracy",[6] and as a "turning point for AU peace efforts".[7] In that way, interventions by the two African ROs were hailed as a success story, not only signalling their apparent commitment to democratic norms but also showcasing the improving coordination and cooperation among the AU, ECOWAS, and the UN, as envisioned in the framework of APSA.[8]

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3 In this chapter, we do not deal with the question of *how* actors at African ROs have engaged in space-making. We have done that in detail elsewhere, e.g., see K. P. W. Döring, "Making Room for War: The Spatialization of African Security Politics and the Quest for African-led Military Deployment", PhD thesis, Leipzig University, 2019; J. Herpolsheimer, *Spatializing Practices of Regional Organizations During Conflict Intervention*: *The Politics of ECOWAS and the African Union*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2021.

4 P. D. Williams, "A New African Model of Coercion? Assessing the ECOWAS Mission in the Gambia", *International Peace Institute. Global Observatory*, https://theglobalobservatory.org/2017/03/ecowas-gambia-barrow-jammeh-african-union/ (accessed 28 June 2019); see also S. Solomon, L. Keyen, and M. Lalo, "Can ECOWAS Tactics in Gambia Serve as Model?", *Voice of America*, https://www.voanews.com/africa/can-ecowas-tactics-gambia-serve-model (accessed 28 June 2019).

5 C. Harjes, "The Gambia: A Beacon for African Democracy?", *Deutsche Welle*, https://www.dw.com/en/the-gambia-a-beacon-for-african-democracy/a-37251267 (accessed 28 June 2019).

6 BBC, "West Africa – from Dictators' Club to Upholder of Democracy", *BBC News*, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-38757055 (accessed 28 June 2019); see also M. Basedau, "Schlechte Zeiten für sfrikanische Autokraten", *Zeit Online*, https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2017-01/gambia-intervention-machtwechsel-praesident (accessed 28 June 2019).

7 C. Mutangadura, "Will The Gambia Be a Turning Point for AU Peace Efforts? After Struggling to Achieve Results, the African Union Is Taking a Different Approach to Post-Conflict Reconstruction in the Gambia", *Institute for Security Studies*, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/will-the-gambia-be-a-turning-point-for-au-peace-efforts (accessed 28 June 2019).

8 C. Hartmann, "ECOWAS and the Restoration of Democracy in The Gambia", *Africa Spectrum* 52 (2017) 1, pp. 85–99.

However, while the unqualified "success story"[9] of the response to the post-election crisis in The Gambia still awaits more detailed scholarly research and analysis,[10] it is interesting to observe the differences in the way various authors (both journalists and scholars) speak about the actorness and agency of African ROs in the case of The Gambia as well as in others. On the one hand, ROs are treated as monolithic, unitary actors (e.g., "the AU" or "ECOWAS" says or does). On the other hand, specific states (in particular their heads of state) are seen as pursuing their interests in the "guise" of African ROs – in the case of The Gambia, the role of Senegal was discussed from such a perspective.[11] However, our research suggests that both extreme viewpoints ignore the variety of actors (both state and non-state) involved in conflict intervention in Africa.[12] Much of the literature on interventions conducted by African ROs is still primarily interested in assessing the outcomes and/or impacts on conflict situations.[13] Consequently, a considerable empirical gap remains in the knowledge about and the understanding of African ROs, their actorness, and their agency. This raises the question of how to conceptualize complex, "collective" actors.

To address this question, in this chapter we begin to unpack the complex, collective actors within and around African ROs, focusing on the peace and security

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9 Here, and in the following, we use quotation marks to refer to manners of speaking, to perceptions, or to narratives common among practitioners and observers in the field of peace and security in Africa. We highlight them in this way as we do not merely want to reproduce these ideas and understandings of certain issues, yet seek to maintain to some degree the world of sense-making and meaning of those actors, which we describe in the way that we have encountered it during our research. At the same time, the confines of this chapter do not allow for a more thorough discussion of these ideas and discourses.

10 Interviews at ECOWAS and AU headquarters indicate friction among the involved actors.

11 See B. Bâ and V. Foucher, "Une agencéité forte: l'état sénégalais face à la crise gambienne de 2016–2017", *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue canadienne des études africaines* 56 (2022) 6, pp. 1–20.

12 Specifically on The Gambia, see Hartmann, "ECOWAS and the Restoration of Democracy in The Gambia"; B. Odigie, "In Defense of Democracy: Lessons from ECOWAS' Management of the Gambia's 2016 Post-Election Impasse", *ACCORD*, https://www.accord.org.za/publication/in-defense-of-democracy/ (accessed 28 June 2019); Döring, "Making Room for War"; A. Witt, *Undoing Coups*: *The African Union and Post-Coup Intervention in Madagascar*, London: Zed Books, 2020; Herpolsheimer, *Spatializing Practices of Regional Organizations*.

13 See, e.g., N. Mugisha, "The Way Forward in Somalia", *The RUSI Journal* 156 (2011) 3, pp. 26–33; E. Abatan and Y. Spies, "African Solutions to African Problems? The AU, R2P and Côte d'Ivoire", *South African Journal of International Affairs* 23 (2016) 1, pp. 21–38; I. A. Badmus, "The African Mission in Burundi (AMIB): A Study of the African Union's Peacekeeping Success and 'Triangular Area of Tension in African Peacekeeping'", *India Quarterly* 73 (2017) 1; K. P. Apuuli, "The African Union's Mediation Mandate and the Libyan Conflict (2011)", *African Security* 10 (2017) 3–4.

efforts of the AU and ECOWAS. Within these organizations, we observe different actors (e.g. individuals, groups, or official organs) and different forms of agency (i.e. how they act based on their respective capacities). Moreover, the chapter reflects upon possible ways to understand and conceptualize African ROs as complex, collective actors – their actorness (i.e. quality of being an actor) – pondering the question if and when it is justified to speak of something as an "AU" or "ECOWAS action". To this end, this chapter starts with a brief overview of academic contributions in the fields of international studies and IR, aiming to improve the understanding of the actorness of international and regional organizations, particularly the largely neglected African ROs. Subsequently, it turns to the analysis of common (re)presentations of AU and ECOWAS actorness before beginning to unpack them. Finally, again drawing on the example of interventions in The Gambia (beginning in 2017), the chapter considers how different actors interlink to form regional actorness. Overall, it argues for the need to recognize and study complex, collective actors and makes the point that it does make sense to speak of such interventions in a way that attributes actorness to "the AU" and "ECOWAS" as a whole.[14]

2 Actorness of ROs in International Studies and International Relations

International organizations (IOs), and as a subset ROs, have originally been studied mainly by scholars of international studies and IR. Therefore, literature on IOs and ROs has also reflected the more general state-centrism pervasive in traditional IR theorization, understanding IOs and ROs above all as tools for states to pursue specific objectives associated with their "national interests", without qualifying how exactly that is constituted (especially but not exclusively in the realist strand). Consequently, the inner workings of these organizations have been of little interest as they are believed to "do what states want them to", without agency and, therefore, actorness of their own. Moreover, literature on new or comparative regionalism(s) – although prominently introducing "regions" as actors, with an expressed interest in overcoming state-centric approaches in IR – has also largely applied state-centric and/or unitary actor perspectives.[15] While the role of

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14 Similar observations apply to other ROs like, inter alia, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), or the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS).

15 E.g., T. A. Börzel and T. Risse (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

state and non-state actors in the construction and operation of regionalisms has been acknowledged, who they are exactly has often been ignored.[16]

Within IR literature, this dominant view has increasingly been challenged since the 1990s.[17] On the one hand, principal-agent approaches have analysed processes of the delegation of tasks, competences, and so on, ranging from member states to an organization's staff.[18] On the other hand, and of more interest here, sociological institutionalism (influenced by organizational sociology and public administration or management studies) has studied the inner workings of IOs. This recent research has conceptualized IOs (or their secretariats) as bureaucracies with authority and agency of their own.[19] Whereas most research has continued to treat these bureaucracies (ROs or their secretariats) as monolithic, unitary actors,[20] several studies have also identified and analysed (although not exhaustively studied) the roles of different actors within them, including secretary-generals, special representatives, multilateral diplomats, and staff members (more generally).[21] Similarly, using anthropological approaches, a few scholars have also started to research the agency of

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16 One notable exception in that regard has been the region-building approach, first proposed by Iver B. Neumann. See I. B. Neumann, "A Region-Building Approach", in: *Theories of New Regionalism*, ed. by F. Söderbaum and T. M. Shaw, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. However, contributions along this line have still provided only limited insight into who the actual region-builders are. E.g., see L. Kühnhardt, *Region Building, vol. 1*: *The Global Proliferation of Regional Integration*, New York: Berghahn, 2010; L. Kühnhardt, *Region Building, vol. 2*: *Regional Integration in the World: Documents*, New York: Berghahn, 2010; D. H. Levine and D. Nagar (eds.), *Region-Building in Africa*: *Political and Economic Challenges*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

17 However, some of the issues mentioned in the following have been contested at least since the 1960s. E.g., see E. B. Haas, *Beyond the Nation-State*: *Functionalism and International Organization*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964; R. W. Cox, "The Executive Head: An Essay on Leadership in International Organization", *International Organization* 23 (1969) 2, pp. 205–230; R. W. Cox and H. K. Jacobson, *The Anatomy of Influence*: *Decision Making in International Organization*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973.

18 E.g., D. G. Hawkins et al. (eds.), *Delegation and Agency in International Organizations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

19 Most prominently represented by the works of Michael N. Barnett and Martha Finnemore. See M. N. Barnett and M. Finnemore, "The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations", *International Organization* 53 (1999) 4, pp. 699–732; M. N. Barnett and M. Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004. See also F. Biermann and B. Siebenhüner (eds.), *Managers of Global Change: The Influence of International Environmental Bureaucracies*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009.

20 E. R. Graham, "International Organizations as Collective Agents: Fragmentation and the Limits of Principal Control at the World Health Organization", *European Journal of International Relations* 20 (2014) 2.

21 See, e.g., C. B. Smith, *Politics and Process at the United Nations: The Global Dance*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2006; as well as the different contributions in J. E. Oestreich (ed.), *International*

IO and RO staff both at their headquarters[22] and within their deployment through local delegations or missions.[23]

As much as this research has advanced the understanding of IOs and ROs, several problems nevertheless remain. First, empirical research still mostly concentrates on the UN (and some of its specialized agencies) as well as Western organizations (especially the EU and NATO). So far, African IOs and ROs have received hardly any attention.[24] Second, the question emerges of how to conceptualize the actorness of IOs and ROs: how do different actors and forms of agency (e.g., regarding power, authority, capacity, access to resources and knowledge) interrelate, constituting one or several collective actors, or none? In our own research, this means that we still struggle to conceptualize and adequately express the actorness of our research subjects, the AU and ECOWAS.[25]

Therefore, and in order to make a meaningful contribution within the limits of this chapter, our aim is to draw attention to this lacuna and start unpacking complex, collective actors like the AU and ECOWAS. Consequently, we focus on identifying the various groups of actors within and around ROs to understand better *who* makes regional space.

Organizations as Self-directed Actors: A Framework for Analysis, London: Routledge, 2012, and B. Reinalda (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of International Organization*, London: Routledge, 2013.

22 E.g., M. Sapignoli and R. Niezen (eds.), *Palaces of Hope*: *The Anthropology of Global Organizations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

23 E.g., S. Autesserre, *Peaceland*: *Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

24 A few notable exceptions regarding the AU, for example, include T. K. Tieku, *Governing Africa: 3D Analysis of the AU's Performance*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, and U. Engel, "The Changing Role of the AU Commission in Inter-African Relations: The Case of APSA and AGA", in: *Africa in World Politics: Engaging a Changing Global Order*, ed. by J. W. Harbeson and D. Rothchild, New York: Westview Press, 2013, pp. 186–206.

25 Of course, a considerable amount of literature deals with the emergence and functioning of collective actors. E.g., see M. Beckenkamp, *The Herd Moves? Emergence and Self-Organization in Collective Actors* (MPI Collective Goods Preprint No. 2006/14), Bonn: Max Planck Institute for Research on Collective Goods, 2006; K. Ludwig, *From Individual to Plural Agency*: *Collective Action*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. However, we nevertheless maintain that the problem we are facing is not very well covered, let alone understood. It seems that we find several and often competing collective actors within a single RO, which sometimes operate and act differently on different levels, leading to tension or even contradictions (e.g., between local offices, special envoys, commission staffs, and political organs). This probably comes close to what Erin R. Graham describes as fragmentation (Graham, "International Organizations as Collective Agents"). Nevertheless, the challenge remains to understand and explain how different actors and dynamics interrelate.

3 Representations of AU and ECOWAS Actorness in the Literature

Treating ROs as monolithic, often anthropomorphized actors is a common feature in the literature on African ROs and their role in peace and security on the continent – if not discarding the actorness of African ROs altogether and depicting them as mere "clubs of dictators".[26] For example, authors often write about the AU as if it had the qualities of a person. In particular, in the policy-related and think tank literature on the AU phrases like "the AU hesitated",[27] "the AU decided",[28] or "the AU wanted"[29] are common. The same applies to ECOWAS.[30]

Working to overcome such portrayals, a few scholars have highlighted the role of individuals within the AU, including the various bureaucrats, desk officers, or prominent high-level diplomats that shape the organization and drive its policies.[31] For example, Thomas Kwasi Tieku wrote about the role of the Tanzanian

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26 E.g., see T. Gwaambuka, "Is the African Union a Dictators' Talking Club?", *The African Exponent*, 5 July 2016, https://www.africanexponent.com/post/7488-is-the-african-union-a-dictators-talking-club (accessed 6 July 2018); V. Fritzon, "The African Union: Real Power or Just a Dictators' Club?", *The Perspective*, 20 November 2015, http://www.theperspective.se/?p=1491 (accessed 6 July 2018); BBC, "West Africa – from dictators' club to upholder of democracy".

27 Specifically, "the AU hesitated over Burkina Faso" refers to the decisions being made by the respective AU organs on the course of action to take in response to the unconstitutional change of government in Burkina Faso at the time (P. Fabricius, "The AU Shuffles Towards Democracy, Looking over Its Shoulder", *This is Africa*, https://thisisafrica.me/african-union-shuffles-towards-democracy-looking-shoulder/ [accessed 6 July 2018]). Another example is "the AU hesitated over crises in Ivory Coast and in Lybia [sic]" (IDW, "African Union Elects New Chairperson", *International Democracy Watch*, http://www.internationaldemocracywatch.org/index.php/home/512-african-union-elects-new-chairperson [accessed 6 July 2018]).

28 Specifically, "the AU decided to accelerate its efforts to help negotiate a peace deal in Libya" (Institute for Security Studies, "Where is the AU in Libya's peace process?", *ISS Peace and Security Council Report* [2017], https://issafrica.org/pscreport/on-the-agenda/where-is-the-au-in-libyas-peace-process).

29 Specifically, "the AU wanted to devote more time to discussing African conflicts" (S. Gruzd, "African Peer Review: Removing Itself from a Rut?", *South African Institute of International Affairs*, http://www.saiia.org.za/opinion-analysis/african-peer-review-removing-itself-from-a-rut).

30 See, e.g., J. Haacke and P. D. Williams, "Conclusions: Security Culture and Transnational Challenges – ECOWAS in Comparative Perspective", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 26 (2008) 2, pp. 213–222; A. Iwilade and J. U. Agbo, "ECOWAS and the Regulation of Regional Peace and Security in West Africa", *Democracy and Security* 8 (2012) 4, pp. 358–373; Hartmann, "ECOWAS and the Restoration of Democracy in The Gambia"; O. O. Akanji, "Sub-Regional Security Challenge: ECOWAS and the War on Terrorism in West Africa", *Insight on Africa* 11 (2019) 1, pp. 94–112.

31 E.g., see U. Engel, "Headquarters of International Organizations as Portals of Globalization: The African Union Commission and Its Peace and Security Policies", *Comparativ* 27 (2017) 3/4,

diplomat and former prime minister Salim Ahmed Salim, who served as secretary-general of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) from 1989 to 2001, before and during the OAU's transformation into the AU.[32] Tieku describes these actors as "Africrats" and analyses their role in driving African regionalisms by shaping their bureaucracies.[33] Later, he further extended his analysis to describe three key groups of actors at the AU, namely states, Africrats, and "outinsiders".[34] Similar studies do not exist yet about ECOWAS.[35]

Still, speaking about ROs as monolithic, unitary actors is so omnipresent in political and academic debates that it is hard to get out of this habit. However, falling back into this not only is due to the persistence of this tendency but also may have other reasons. Often it is difficult to know who exactly made a decision, and it is only possible to state with certainty that something has been an official position of the RO in question. Furthermore, scholars may not have been able to access the appropriate sources to trace the exact origin of an organization's statement or decision, since many organizations do not keep the appropriate written records or do not make them available. Moreover, staff members may not be willing or able to share this insight. Nevertheless, a thorough and careful reconstruction of events and debates allows one to narrow down and specify agency at least to some degree, which in turn facilitates the unpacking of the black boxes of unitary actors.

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pp. 151–170; L. Gelot, "Civilian Protection in Africa: How the Protection of Civilians Is Being Militarized by African Policymakers and Diplomats", *Contemporary Security Policy* 38 (2017) 1, pp. 161–173; Tieku, *Governing Africa*; H. Hardt, "From States to Secretariats: Delegation in the African Union Peace and Security Council", *African Security* 9 (2016) 3, pp. 161–187; Witt, *Undoing Coups.*

32 T. K. Tieku, "The Evolution of the African Union Commission and Africrats: Drivers of African Regionalisms", in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Regionalisms* (The International Political Economy of New Regionalisms Series), ed. by T. M. Shaw, J. A. Grant, and S. Cornelissen, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011; on Salim, see also U. Engel, "Salim, Salim Ahmed", in *IO BIO, Biographical Dictionary of Secretaries-General of International Organizations*, ed. by B. Reinalda, K. J. Kille, and J. Eisenberg (2019), www.ru.nl/fm/iobio (accessed 1 July 2019).

33 Tieku, "The Evolution of the African Union Commission and Africrats".

34 Tieku, *Governing Africa*; see also T. K. Tieku, "Ruling from the Shadows: The Nature and Functions of Informal International Rules in World Politics", *International Studies Review* 21 (2019) 2, pp. 225–243.

35 For a few notable exceptions, see S. Gänzle, J. Trondal, and N. S. Kühn, "'Not so Different After All': Governance and Behavioral Dynamics in the Commission of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)", *Journal of International Organization Studies* 9 (2018) 1, pp. 81–98; Herpolsheimer, *Spatializing Practices of Regional Organizations*; and, to some extent, O. Ismail, *Toward a Community of Practice: ECOWAS and Peace and Security Policy Communities in West Africa* (APN Working Papers 3), African Peacebuilding Network, 2015.

In addition, within the AU for example, it is a common practice to refer to and treat its decision-making organs as unitary actors. The AU Assembly or the AU Peace and Security Council exemplify this. Decisions taken by the member states' representatives within meetings of these organs are made public through decisions or communiqués that read "Assembly decides" or "Council decided". This is more than a mere speech convention, as within the AU Peace and Security Council, for example, the practice is to take decisions in accordance with the principle of consensus, tensions among council members notwithstanding.[36] In the form of a speech act,[37] from the moment a particular communiqué is released, the decision becomes the official position on the concerned subject matter, thus transcending the previous individual positions in the decision-making process of the council. Nevertheless, it is important to remember and remain sensitive to the fact that these organs are in themselves complex, collective actors.

The performative effect of officially "speaking with one voice" is all the more noticeable as most meetings of the AU Peace and Security Council are closed sessions and as there is no transparent documentation of the varying positions of member states (as voiced through their representatives). It is only the publication series PSC Report, released by the Addis Ababa office of the Institute for Security Studies,[38] that provides regular insights into current topics concerning the AU Peace and Security Council and occasionally hints at tensions or specific member states' positions. This is, however, not as detailed as the coverage provided for the UN Security Council, for example, through publication of the Security Council Report.[39]

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36 Herpolsheimer, *Spatializing Practices of Regional Organizations*, pp. 71–73.
37 See, e.g., Q. Skinner, "Conventions and the Understanding of Speech Acts", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 20 (1970) 79, pp. 118–138; J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and M. Sbisà, 2nd edn [repr.], Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.
38 The Institute for Security Studies is a think tank in form of a non-profit organization with offices in Addis Ababa, Dakar, Nairobi, and Pretoria. Its work is funded by a variety of donors, among them the European Commission, the governments of, inter alia, Australia, Canada, Denmark, and Ireland, as well as United States Agency for International Development and the German political foundation Hans Seidel Foundation. Several other partners fund specific projects, among them the Carnegie Foundation (Institute for Security Studies, "Development Partners", https://issafrica.org/about-us/how-we-work#partners [accessed 1 July 2019]).
39 The *Security Council Report* provides insights into discussions and the positions by different representatives in the UN Security Council, particularly regarding upcoming decisions on specific resolutions. The *Security Council Report* is an independent not-for-profit organization registered in the United States and funded by the Carnegie Corporation as well as several national governments (Security Council Report, "Legal", https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/legal [accessed 1 July 2019]; Security Council Report, "About Security Council Report", https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/about-security-council-report [accessed 1 July 2019]). In addition to its series *What's*

4 Unpacking Complex, Collective Actors at the AU and ECOWAS

Taking into account these considerations, the question emerges of how to avoid an overgeneralized language that presents the AU or ECOWAS as monolithic blocs that "act", "decide", "state", and so on. We suggest that a prerequisite for such an undertaking is a good understanding of the dispersed actors working within such organizations. In the case of the AU and ECOWAS, this means being aware of the different levels on which varying individuals and groups influence and take decisions. Moreover, it means paying attention to the different dimensions of interaction among a variety of actors that shape attitudes and opinions. In the following, we provide a non-exhaustive overview of some important (groups of) actors across the AU and ECOWAS.

Both organizations maintain a number of decision-making organs. These include, for example, the AU Assembly or the ECOWAS Authority (both constituting the supreme organs for decision-making). Below that are the AU Executive Council, the ECOWAS Council of Ministers (both composed of foreign ministers of the member states), and the AU Permanent Representatives Committee (composed of the member states' permanent representatives or ambassadors to the AU). The AU Peace and Security Council and the ECOWAS Mediation and Security Council (both meeting at ambassadorial, ministerial, and presidential levels) are the main decision-making bodies dealing with peace and security affairs. At the AU, there are the Pan-African Parliament; the AU Economic, Social and Cultural Council; the AU Court of Justice; and the AU Specialized Technical Committees, which are established according to a specific subject focus (e.g. agriculture, education, and security).[40] At ECOWAS, there are, among others, the ECOWAS Parliament, the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice, and the West African Health Organization.

These are only a few of the organs that are formalized frameworks for the representatives of member states to meet on different levels and to discuss different matters. They are interlinked on a horizontal and vertical level so that decisions taken in one forum (i.e., by one group) will then be referred to another forum. With regard to peace and security, for example, the AU Specialized Technical Committee concerned with security matters may take a decision that will then be referred to the AU Peace and Security Council, which may then pass it on to the AU Assembly. At ECOWAS, decisions taken, for example, by the Committee of

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in Blue, the *Security Council Report* publishes forecasts and reports concerning the current issues discussed in the UN Security Council and documenting its decisions.

40 African Union Commission, "AU in a Nutshell", https://au.int/en/au-nutshell.

Chiefs of Defense Staff are conveyed as recommendations to the ECOWAS Mediation and Security Council.

The AU and ECOWAS commissions are vital for understanding the inner workings of these two ROs. In themselves, they are not unified actors, but rather places where various actors encounter each other. This can be fruitfully analysed through the lens of "portals of globalization".[41] Yet, in addition to being merely a place, the AU Commission, for example, has been discussed as a (complex, collective) actor.[42] In this regard, some scholars have particularly highlighted the role of the AU Peace and Security Council's secretariat in shaping decision-making processes.[43] In order to further disentangle actors within the AU and ECOWAS commissions, the role of bureaucratic and political positions has to be taken note of.[44] The staff of the commissions, mostly referred to as officers (e.g. senior officer, country officer, programme officer, policy officer, etc.), works in departments, which are substructured into divisions and units at the AU. At the ECOWAS Commission, substructures comprise directorates and divisions. Staffs engage on various levels in policy development within the organization and support the above-mentioned decision-making organs by preparing reports and other text-based material or by implementing decisions. The individuals that work within the AU and ECOWAS commissions, based in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) and Abuja (Nigeria) respectively, are either directly recruited and employed by the commissions or seconded by member states or third parties, such as "donor/partner" institutions. In contrast to these bureaucratic and rather technical appointments, the high-level positions in the commission also have a political dimension. This is the

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41 Engel, "Headquarters of International Organizations as Portals of Globalization".

42 Engel, "The Changing Role of the AU Commission in Inter-African Relations".

43 E.g., Hardt, "From States to Secretariats"; N. Wilén and P. D. Williams, "The African Union and Coercive Diplomacy: The Case of Burundi", *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 56 (2018) 4, pp. 673–696.

44 See Tieku, "The Evolution of the African Union Commission and Africrats".

case not only for the chairperson of the AU Commission and the president of the ECOWAS Commission[45] but also for the various commissioners.[46]

In addition, the AU and ECOWAS have several liaison offices, headed by a special or permanent representative – formally appointed by the chairperson of the AU Commission or the ECOWAS Mediation and Security Council in consultation with the commission president. These offices are located either in conflict areas or at the headquarters of other ROs or IOs (e.g., the Southern African Development Community [SADC], the EU, and the UN). They are important in establishing visibility and official representation of ROs in a given context, when otherwise headquarters would seem to be too far away or removed from the situation in a country. A special or permanent representative and their staff become important embodiments of an organization in those places. In such a way, liaison offices extend the spatial "reach" of an organization, allowing it to make its "presence felt" from afar.[47] In a similar vein, though with a slightly different dynamic, the AU and ECOWAS research institutes have an important role in making the organizations – being otherwise often abstract and removed – tangible, as well as in bringing some resources to the locations in which they are based, for example by providing employment and recognition.[48]

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45 In order to balance the influence of so-called big power houses in Africa (mostly Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Africa). See J. Cilliers, J. Schünemann, and J. D. Moyer, "Power and Influence in Africa: Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa", *African Futures* 14, Pretoria, Denver, 2015, https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/AfricanFuturesNo14-V2.pdf. For a long time the unwritten rule prevailed that candidates for the position of AU Commission chairperson would be from other member states, see N. Tikum, "Prejudice Disguised as Critique: The Legacy of AU Commission Chair Dlamini-Zuma", https://www.pambazuka.org/pan-africanism/prejudice-disguised-critique-legacy-au-commission-chair-dlamini-zuma. Subsequently, the nomination and election of the South African Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma in 2012 diverged from this convention. Since 2017, the Chadian Moussa Faki Mahamat holds this influential position, as a compromise following disagreements over a Nigerian candidate, see L. Louw-Vaudran, "Who Is Moussa Faki (And His President)?", https://issafrica.org/iss-today/who-is-moussa-faki-and-his-president (accessed 1 July 2019).
46 The post of commissioner for peace and security, for example, has been held since the establishment of the AU Commission in the early 2000s by an Algerian national, symbolizing the country's influence in the commission, particularly concerning matters of peace and security. Since 2021, Bankole Adeoye, a Nigerian, has been the first non-Algerian to occupy that position.
47 Döring and Herpolsheimer, "The Spaces of Intervention for Mali and Guinea-Bissau"; building on J. Allen, *Topologies of Power: Beyond Territory and Networks*, London: Routledge, 2016.
48 The AU research institutes include the Algiers-based African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT), Centre d'Etudes Linguistiques et Historiques par Tradition Orale (CELHTO) in Niamey, and the Semi-Arid Food Grain Research and Development (SAFGRAD) in Ouagadougou. These institutes may receive attention far beyond their day-to-day work, when a conflict in the region makes them the closest entry point for the AU and facility to hold meetings

Heads of state, ministers, diplomats, and representatives (as opposed to just "states") play an important role in pursuing the interests articulated in their own national institutions to the continental RO. In practice, national governments can exercise influence over policy development and decision-making via their representatives in the meetings of the organs described above or through one of their citizens holding a political position at the commissions. Heads of state or their representatives can exercise considerable influence during meetings by holding the position of chair or by influencing the drafting of particular documents and lobbying for their adoption (also outside formal meetings).[49] Outside the decision-making organs, the powerful position heads of state hold also allows them to shape matters of peace and security on the continent in decisive ways. For example, the practice of mediation – while having undergone significant transformations in recent years to be more inclusive and professional,[50] mainly through involving civil society organizations and community spokespersons (often labelled "Track II diplomacy") – still heavily depends on the engagement of (former) heads of state as "eminent peacemakers".[51] Current and former heads of state are often prominently appointed as lead mediators, and their position as well as personality greatly affect mediation process.

The "donor/partner" organizations that work closely with the AU and ECOWAS have representatives and staff that cooperates on various levels with the ROs. These organizations may have offices in Addis Ababa and Abuja or cooperate through visits or jointly organized events, in which they send a delegation to the commissions. Some organizations cover the cost of seconded staff working at the commissions, and some have staff members of theirs embedded in specific departments either to liaise with AU and ECOWAS staff or to collaborate on specific matters. The funding for this embedment (and thus the duration of staff involvement) is often project based. This is in particular the case for the various national cooperation agencies, such as the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), the Spanish Agency for

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etc. This was, for example, the case for SAFGRAD before MISAHEL was established (Döring, "Making Room for War", p. 66). Similarly, the CELHTO was considered as providing institutional support for the Nouakchott Process when it was still considered to maintain this initiative with a lean secretariat (Döring, "Making Room for War", p. 132).

49 See Tieku, "Ruling from the Shadows".

50 See J. Gomes Porto, "Mediators *Not* in the Middle: Revisiting the Normative Dimensinos of International Mediation", in *New Mediation Practices in African Conflicts*, ed. by U. Engel, Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2012, pp. 11–41.

51 G. M. Khadiagala, "Eminent Peacemakers in African Conflicts: Contributions, Potential and Limits", in *Minding the Gap: African Conflict Management in a Time of Change*, ed. by P. Aall and C. A. Crocker, Waterloo: Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2016.

International Development Cooperation (AECID), the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), or the British Department for International Development (DFID). Moreover, the AU and ECOWAS maintain bilateral relations with a number of "donor/partner" countries that are in practice facilitated through these nations' embassies in Addis Ababa or Abuja.[52] Maintaining all these relations often falls within the range of tasks of AU and ECOWAS representatives, staffs, and bureaucrats working at the commissions, putting additional strain on their schedules.

A further important aspect in understanding actors across the African ROs and their influence over the forming of attitudes, opinions, and eventually decisions, is the work of a variety of think tanks. To name but a few, institutions like the above-mentioned ISS, with offices in Addis Ababa, Dakar, Nairobi, and Pretoria; the Addis Ababa-based Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS); the Durban-based African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD); and the International Crisis Group (ICG) produce knowledge and assessments on current events and topics relating to matters of peace and security. Their work is in part financed by bilateral "donors/partners", for example in the case of the Institute for Security Studies by the governments of Canada, Denmark, Norway, or Sweden, among others.[53] The researchers working for these institutes form part of a wider network of experts and consultants that also includes scholars based at universities as well as freelancers. Depending on the individual, they work in different roles as consultants for the AU or ECOWAS, conducting assessments or drafting specific programmes. They provide these services based on the requests of African ROs but are mainly paid through "donors/partners", which also influence the decisions on which competences or services are needed.[54]

In addition, other African ROs interact with the AU and ECOWAS. Some of them maintain liaison offices to facilitate these interactions. For example, several African ROs have offices directly within the compound of the AU Commission (e.g. ECOWAS, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development [IGAD], the SADC, the Economic Community of Central African States [ECCAS]). Related, yet still specific

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52 See Y. Akpasom and L. Seffer, "Insights to Complex Relationships: ECOWAS-Donor Relations on Regional Peace and Security", in *Researching the Inner Life of the African Peace and Security Architecture: APSA Inside-Out*, ed. by K. P. Döring et al., Leiden: Brill, 2021, pp. 138–163.

53 Institute for Security Studies, "Development Partners".

54 L. M. Müller, "Guiding Regional Integration from Within? External Partner Support of the ECOWAS Commission and Regional Integration in West Africa", Paper Presented at the Graduate School Global and Area Studies, Leipzig, Germany, 11 June 2018 (unpublished manuscript, 2018); L. Nathan, "Supply and Demand in the Policy Research Market", Paper Presented at the 8th European Conference on African Studies, Edinburgh, United Kingdom, 12 June 2019 (unpublished manuscript, 2019).

are the AU relations towards the UN and the EU.[55] Both the UN and the EU maintain their own delegation to the AU in Addis Ababa (close to but outside the AU compound) that coordinates cooperation with actors at the AU. For the UN, a special representative of the secretary-general heads the United Nations Office to the African Union (UNOAU), and an ambassador heads the Delegation of the European Union to the African Union. Their close relationship, discussed not only as interorganizational cooperation[56] but also as a particular form of interregionalism in the case of the AU-EU relations,[57] impacts practices and decision-making within the AU and its commission. In the case of ECOWAS, the respective EU country delegation in Abuja facilitates cooperation. Regarding relations between ECOWAS and the UN, both the UN country office in Abuja and the regional office in Dakar (the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel [UNOWAS]) facilitate relations.

Across these roughly sketched out groups, different actors have different forms of agency associated with different kinds of power and authority. Some actors have access to material resources, while others may be able to mobilize moral claims for political influence, and others draw on a privileged access to knowledge, technical expertise, or personal connections to steer processes and influence decision-making.

5 AU and ECOWAS Interventions in The Gambia (2016–2019)

While it is helpful and in fact essential to start discerning these different actors at African ROs, it nevertheless leaves us with the question of how to conceptualize their interrelations. Put in other words, does the plurality and complexity simply mean that there is no such thing as, for example, "the AU" or "ECOWAS", and consequently does it make sense at all to speak of them in that way? Or, do the plural and complex interrelations between different actors nevertheless produce some

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55 Regarding the UN, it should be noted that this includes not only the exchange with the UN Security Council, the various embassies to the UN, and the secretariat but also a close collaboration with different UN agencies, such as the UN Development Program (UNDP), the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), or the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), among others.

56 M. Welz, "Multi-Actor Peace Operations and Inter-Organizational Relations: Insights from the Central African Republic", *International Peacekeeping* 23 (2016) 4, pp. 569–591.

57 U. Engel, "An Emerging Inter-Regional Peace and Security Partnership: The African Union and the European Union", in *Inter-Organizational Relations in International Security*, ed. by S. Aris, A. Snetkov, and A. Wenger, London: Routledge, 2018, pp. 170–187.

sort of directed process and thereby actorness that might be worthwhile to consider more generally as "the AU" or "ECOWAS"? Our argument is that – despite the complexity described above, combined with competing and sometimes particularistic, individual, identity-based, or other interests – these actors and forms of agency interact, resulting in specific practices and policies that contribute to constructing collective actorness. Regional practices and policies (legal and normative frameworks) are drafted by commission staffs in collaboration with member state representatives, think tanks, and consultants, supported by international "donors/partners". These are the result of and subsequently influence emerging practices, becoming central reference points for all of these actors, tying them and their actions together, although not always in a straightforward nor any mechanistic fashion.

Considering once more the example of interventions by "the AU" and "ECOWAS" in The Gambia, scholars have focused on the particularity of the situation, most importantly the country's small size and very limited military strength as well as the strong security interests of the Senegalese government.[58] Since the 1980s, Senegalese heads of state and military leaders have sought to defeat what they called the "rebels" of the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de la Casamance, MFDC). In that endeavour, they have tried building reliable relations with the political and military leadership of The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau, with varying success.[59] The Senegalese troop contribution to the intervention in Guinea-Bissau (under the ECOWAS Mission in Guinea-Bissau [ECOMIB], operating since 2012) needs to be seen in the light of this concern.[60] Furthermore, observers presumed that the Senegalese military involvement in The Gambia (under the ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia [ECOMIG], operating since 2017) would finally bring "peace" to the Casamance region. Indeed, the Senegalese military played a decisive role during the ECOWAS intervention in The Gambia. Senegalese forces were the first to deploy along the Gambian border (followed by Nigerian and Ghanaian troops)[61] and the first to

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58 See Williams, "A New African Model of Coercion? Assessing the ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia"; Hartmann, "ECOWAS and the Restoration of Democracy in The Gambia", pp. 93–94.

59 See V. Foucher, "Senegal: The Resilient Weakness of Casamançais Separatists", in: *African Guerrillas: Raging Against the Machine*, ed. by M. Bøås, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2007, pp. 171–198; V. Foucher, *Wade's Senegal and Its Relations with Guinea-Bissau: Brother, Patron or Regional Hegemon?* (Occasional Paper 132), Johannesburg and Cape Town: South African Institute of International Affairs, 2013; J.-C. Marut, "Après avoir perdu l'est, la Guinée-Bissau perd-elle aussi le nord?", *Lusotopie* (1996) 3, pp. 81–92.

60 See Herpolsheimer, *Spatializing Practices of Regional Organizations during Conflict Intervention*, pp. 124 sq.

61 Some say that the Senegalese military had closed border posts into The Gambia already during the electoral process to prevent Jola (Diola), clients of Jammeh from the Casamance, to enter

enter Gambian territory, even before formally (and partly) integrating the ECO-MIG forces.[62] Meanwhile, Senegalese government representatives used their influence within ECOWAS (through formal and informal channels) to mobilize support.[63] On 19 January 2017, Barrow was inaugurated as the new president of The Gambia at the Gambian embassy in Dakar, Senegal.[64] All this makes it fair to say that Senegalese government officials and the military played a key role, actively pursuing their interests through "ECOWAS".

However, other actors and interests than those associated with the Senegalese state were also at play. Before the military intervention, and even before the elections in The Gambia, AU and ECOWAS actors had already engaged with the developing situation in The Gambia, among other intervention practices including (joint) fact-finding and sensitization missions (comprising member state representatives as well as AU and ECOWAS staffs), as well as public statements by the chairs of the AU Assembly and the AU Commission (e.g. condemning pre-electoral violence).[65] In that context, both the AU Peace and Security Council (at the ambassadorial level) and the ECOWAS Mediation and Security Council (at the presidential level) played lead roles, authorizing actions and putting their weight behind statements presenting regional positions.[66] The AU Commission deployed an election-observation mission. Formally, this action was taken by the AUC chairperson, but was in practice undertaken by the staff of the Democracy and Electoral Assistance Unit at the AU Political Affairs Department. Due to disputes between the ECOWAS Commission (in this case its president) and the Gambian authorities, the ECOWAS Commission (specifically the Electoral Assistance Division of the ECOWAS Political Affairs Directorate) had no accredited election-observation mission in The Gambia but followed the elections through its zonal early warning office in Banjul, staffed with "early warning" and "human rights" experts.[67]

The Gambia (in rented buses) to participate in the elections, a practice that Jammeh had apparently used during previous polls to increase votes in his favour (see Bâ and Foucher, "Une agencéité forte", p. 151).

62 After a stronger initial deployment of about 3,000 troops, Senegal provided 250 troops to ECOMIG (complemented by 200 from Nigeria and 50 from Ghana) but in addition had another 500 troops in The Gambia that were not part of ECOMIG, based on an agreement with the new Gambian president Barrow (see Bâ and Foucher, "Une agencéité forte", p. 153).

63 Ibid., pp. 151–152.

64 See Hartmann, "ECOWAS and the Restoration of Democracy in The Gambia", p. 87.

65 See Odigie, "In Defense of Democracy", pp. 2–3.

66 Cf. AU PSC, "Communiqué (PSC/PR/COMM. [DCXLVII])", 647th Meeting, Addis Ababa, 13 January 2017; AU PSC, "Communiqué (PSC/PR/COMM.[DCLIV])", 654th Meeting, Addis Ababa, 20 January 2017.

67 Odigie, "In Defense of Democracy", p. 3.

Following the elections and in response to the emerging crisis, the ECOWAS Authority (i.e., acting as the ECOWAS Mediation and Security Council at the presidential level) appointed the Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari and the former Ghanaian president John Mahama as co-mediators – providing them with an "ECOWAS" mandate to engage on behalf of the organization. Subsequently, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, president of Liberia (ECOWAS chair at the time); Ernest Bai Koroma, president of Sierra Leone; Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, president of Mauretania; and Alpha Condé, president of Guinea, joined Buhari and Mahama in their efforts to convince Jammeh to step down.[68]

All of these efforts, complemented by the varied activities undertaken by and dynamics of the AU and ECOWAS commissions (i.e. formal meetings on different levels and informal, behind-the-scenes contacts), clearly followed established intervention practices, based on and constantly referring to the foundational, legal, and normative frameworks of the AU and ECOWAS.[69] Despite being subject to continuous interpretation and negotiation, actors at the AU and ECOWAS have developed these practices and policies rather continually since the late 1990s and early 2000s. Staffs at the AU and ECOWAS commissions have played a key role, actively working towards applying and consolidating regional policies, using their agency – their expertise, access to information, and power of initiative – in producing conflict knowledge,[70] drafting agendas and communiqués, and supporting diplomatic and technical field missions.[71]

In that way, the electoral crisis in The Gambia and the ensuing interventions have also become part of more general processes of implementing, enacting, and consolidating regional policies and practices. Even the representatives of the Senegalese government could not have succeeded in mobilizing "ECOWAS" without framing their actions in reference to these central policies and practices and to more general regional concerns about emerging norms (one of them being a particular model of "democracy").[72]

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68 Ibid., pp. 6–7; see also Hartmann, "ECOWAS and the Restoration of Democracy in The Gambia", pp. 88–90.

69 See, e.g., the AU Constitutive Act of 2000; the ECOWAS Revised Treaty of 1993; the AU Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of 2002; and the ECOWAS Protocol Relating to the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace-Keeping and Security of 1999; the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance of 2007; and the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework of 2008.

70 See U. Engel, "Knowledge Production on Conflict Early Warning at the African Union", *South African Journal of International Affairs* 25 (2018) 1, pp. 117–132.

71 See Herpolsheimer, *Spatializing Practices of Regional Organizations during Conflict Intervention*, pp. 65–66.

72 See Hartmann, "ECOWAS and the Restoration of Democracy in The Gambia".

The interests and dynamics at work within the AU Commission are exemplified in a new AU initiative towards post-conflict reconstruction and development (PCRD). Initiated and prepared by the staff of the Conflict Management and PCRD Division and afterwards requested by the AU Peace and Security Council (at the ambassadorial level) in June 2017,[73] "the AU" for the first time deployed an AU technical support mission, the African Union Technical Support Team to The Gambia (AUTSTG), in September 2018.[74] The mission comprises ten technical experts, seconded by AU member states (three for "human rights", one for the "rule of law", five military officers, and one defence reform adviser), to provide assistance to Gambian government agencies.[75] That mission was the outcome of a longer process within the AU Commission, in addition to commission staff also involving member state representatives, think tanks, and donors. It developed out of renewed efforts to implement the AU's PCRD policy framework, originally adopted in 2006. These efforts also included the establishment of the AU Commission Inter-Departmental Task Force on PCRD in May 2016, which first deployed to the Central African Republic in August 2016. Subsequently, it was supposed to go to Guinea-Bissau but, since the situation there did not allow for it, chose The Gambia as its next staging ground.[76]

Lastly, the praise that the coordination and cooperation among actors at the AU, ECOWAS, and the UN received points to the complex interrelations between actors at different ROs and IOs, in particular with regard to peace and security.[77] In effect, things may not have worked out as smoothly as news coverage and the very few academic contributions suggest (more detailed research in that regard is still required).[78] However, the fact that this particular aspect has been emphasized already indicates, first, that such coordination and cooperation has not always been the case. Second, it demonstrates the need to work together (to some degree), as none of these organizations are able (nor willing) to act in isolation.

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73 See AU PSC, "Communiqué (PSC/PR/COMM.[DCXCIV])", 694th Meeting, Addis Ababa, 18 June 2017.

74 AU Technical Support to The Gambia. Mutangadura calls it a potential "turning point for AU peace efforts", see Mutangadura, "Will The Gambia be a Turning Point for AU Peace Efforts?".

75 See ibid.

76 See Herpolsheimer, *Spatializing Practices of Regional Organizations during Conflict Intervention*, p. 155.

77 Also working out well was the quick financial support provided through the EU-funded African Peace Facility. This stood in stark contrast, for example, to the drawn-out negotiations on EU support to the ECOWAS Mission in Guinea-Bissau (ECOMIB) between 2012 and 2015 (see Herpolsheimer, *Spatializing Practices of Regional Organizations during Conflict Intervention*, pp. 128–129).

78 Careful examination would likely point to ongoing negotiations (and sometimes contestation) not only among member states of the political organs of IOs and ROs but also among these organizations more generally, although in The Gambia in 2016/17, this was less pronounced than in earlier intervention settings (see, e.g., Côte d'Ivoire in 2010/11 and Mali and Guinea-Bissau in 2012).

In practice, lines between different organizations are not always as clear cut as one would expect them to be. In that regard, it is once more important to disaggregate actors. For example, the special representative of the UN secretary-general for West Africa and the Sahel (and head of the respective UN office UNOWAS), who accompanied ECOWAS mediators on several occasions and spoke out about the situation in The Gambia on behalf of the UN, was Mohammed Ibn Chambas, a Ghanaian diplomat and former president of the ECOWAS Commission.[79] Moreover, at the UN Security Council it was once more the Senegalese representative who, as a non-permanent member, took the lead through the Senegalese diplomatic mission in New York (becoming the proponent of the Gambian issue). Apparently not able to impose its position completely, however, reservations among some members of the UN Security Council persisted,[80] Senegalese diplomats played an important role in securing the support of that institution.[81] In addition, ECOWAS agency "within" the AU (e.g. through member state representatives and the liaison office in Addis Ababa), notably in the AU Peace and Security Council (at the ambassadorial level), managed to bring the "continental" organization to align itself with ECOWAS, after some initial hesitation.[82]

6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we reflected upon the complex, collective actors at work in African ROs. In doing so, we reacted to an empirical gap and a conceptual problem that limit the understanding of the inner working of these organizations – IOs and ROs in general and African ones in particular – and their interaction with others. As (African) ROs play a central role in contemporary (and historical) processes of (re)spatialization – the constructing, formatting, and ordering of space by different actors – we argued that it is essential to study their complex, collective actorness in more detail. Since it was beyond the scope of this chapter to answer all open questions (or even to identify and pose all of them), we highlighted some of the main aspects and dynamics, drawing on our own research on the AU and ECOWAS, as well as on the example of their interventions in the conflict in The Gambia in 2016/17.

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79 See Odigie, "In Defense of Democracy"; Hartmann, "ECOWAS and the Restoration of Democracy in The Gambia", p. 89.
80 See Hartmann, "ECOWAS and the Restoration of Democracy in The Gambia", p. 90.
81 See Bâ and Foucher, "Une agencéité forte", pp. 151–152.
82 Ibid., pp. 152–153.

In the first section, we reviewed the existing literature, still dominated by conventional IR approaches and largely focusing on "states" as the main (if not only) actors. However, several scholars have started to improve our empirical understanding (e.g., studying the role of secretary-generals, diplomats, and bureaucratic staffs) and to begin theorizing about actors "within" IOs and ROs (e.g., in terms of more nuanced principal-agent approaches, as well as sociological institutionalism). Still, that research is only emerging and, so far, largely omits African organizations. Consequently, sections two and three analysed common (re)presentations of AU and ECOWAS actorness in media reports and academic literature before starting to disaggregate them (i.e. unpack black boxes). To that end, we identified multiple important actors within these organizations, some of them more collective in nature, such as the AU and ECOWAS commissions (including their respective heads and staffs), liaison offices, and "technical" and "political organs", which complement member state representatives as well as donor agencies and think tanks. All of them are interrelated, partly overlapping and/or interacting both formally and informally. The fourth section drew on the intervention experiences of AU and ECOWAS actors in The Gambia to begin considering how these complex, collective actors interrelate as condensation points – that is to say, common reference points for all involved actors – through regional practices and policies.

What should become clear from this example is that "the AU" and "ECOWAS" (as well as other ROs, African or otherwise) are the results of continuously negotiated and often contested interactions among a variety of actors and different forms of agency (both state and non-state, "internal" and "external"). While all these different actors may pursue specific interests through their exchanges and interactions with institutional practices and policies, they nevertheless embody the particular actorness of these ROs – not as anthropomorphized monoliths, but rather as complex, collective actors. Through that process, they contribute to the constructing, formatting, and ordering of regional spaces. How this plays out in detail and across different ROs will have to be the subject of further empirical studies as well as of more systematic conceptual and theoretical work.