TANA FORUM

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A Collection of Policy Briefs

PATHWAYS TO PEACE IN AFRICA:
ECONOMIC SOVEREIGNTY AND GEOPOLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

IPSS | Institute for Peace & Security Studies
Addis Ababa University

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TANA FORUM

FRANK, RELEVANT, AND CANDID DIALOGUE.

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PREFACE

The Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS) of the Addis Ababa University (AAU) serves as the Secretariat of the Tana High-Level Forum on Security in Africa (Tana Forum) that has been organised since 2012. In line with our mandate and commitment, we are delighted to present a set of Tana policy papers on the theme of "Pathways to Peace in Africa: Economic Sovereignty and Geopolitical Transformation." We hope this collection of policy briefs ignites imagination, sparks insights and stimulates animated discussions on strengthening Africa's transformative ideas in resources, trade, energy, integration, value multiplication and retention at the peace-economics intersection.

We are confident that this publication will contribute to knowledge generation on the theme and serve as a useful reference for researchers, policymakers and other relevant stakeholders on the continent and beyond.

Finally, I would like to thank the authors of these policy briefs for their insightful contributions. I would also like to express my deepest gratitude and appreciation to our partners and friends for enabling IPSS to continue serving as the Secretariat of the Tana Forum with greater vitality and vigour.

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INTRODUCTION

The Tana High-Level Forum on Security in Africa is an open forum for fruitful exchanges and cross-cutting discussions, enabling interdisciplinary, intergenerational, and cross-regional discussions. This 12th edition is scheduled for 23 – 25 October 2026. It foregrounds two interrelated pathways it deems timely and urgent: economic sovereignty and geopolitical transformation, hence the theme *Pathways to Peace in Africa: Economic Sovereignty and Geopolitical Transformation*. Within this framework, the selected Tana Policy Papers in this publication emphasise African integration, cognisant that Africa's search for peace is inseparable from the question of who governs the continent's economic systems, resources and regional connections.

These papers move beyond familiar diagnoses of fragility and dependence to identify practical levers for economic sovereignty: govern the networks that already sustain livelihoods; digitise weak points where value leaks away; treat shared infrastructure as a strategic asset; insulate resource policy from discretionary capture; and build continental authority over the terms on which African wealth enters the global economy. The papers differ in scale and method but converge on a clear proposition: sovereignty is not achieved by closing borders or asserting ownership alone. It is built through capable institutions, predictable rules and forms of deliberate interdependence that expand Africa's room to act.

Dr Joana Osei-Tutu, in *From borders to networks: governing informal economies and regional integration in West Africa,* reframes West Africa's informal cross-border economies as engines of regional integration rather than as evidence of its failure. Dr Osei-Tutu contends that the unit of governance should shift from the border to the network: traders, pastoralists, transporters, and women's market associations already connect ECOWAS and the Alliance of Sahel States more durably than formal politics suggests. The policy task is therefore to distinguish livelihood-based informality from criminal enterprise, protect the resilience these networks provide, and prevent armed groups from capturing them through community-led, gender-responsive oversight.

Akakpo (Dodo) Ayebiogbon furthers the conversation on illicit economies in *Regional integration and illicit financial flows in the ECOWAS region: trade mis-invoicing, tariff pressure and border governance*. It follows the money moving through some of those corridors Dr Osei-Tutu alluded to, showing that trade misinvoicing is structurally persistent and adaptive, making episodic enforcement and tariff reform inadequate. Practical solutions put forward include a smart regulatory architecture: interconnected customs data, PAPSS-linked payments and automated clearance, to reduce information asymmetry and opportunities for corruption.

Dr Dagnachew Ayenew Yeshiwas' intervention on regional integration is through a hydro-energy lens, offering insights that all five regions in Africa need to learn from regarding the energy sector. The paper *Powering sovereignty: energy integration as Africa's strategic pathway to industrial transformation and geopolitical agency* places energy integration at the centre of Africa's industrial and geopolitical strategy. Its central innovation is the idea of collective networked energy sovereignty: states gain greater control not by isolating national grids, but by jointly governing the rules, risks and benefits of interconnection. Regional power pools can lower costs, support mineral processing, strengthen the AfCFTA and create everyday habits of cooperation across political divides. Yet interdependence must be designed, not romanticised. Dr Ayenew argues for intra- and inter-regional energy integration as a peace asset and an economic foundation Africa must reckon with in its quest for economic sovereignty and geopolitical transformation.

Beyond water as a critical energy source for Africa's industrialisation, Dr Tariro Kamuti and Dr Emma Mandishona poke into the extractive industry in *Partisan extractivism and the limits of resource sovereignty: Zimbabwe's lithium export regime as a lesson for African industrial policy,* focussing on the limits of resource nationalism through Zimbabwe's lithium regime. By introducing the concept of "partisan extractivism", they explain why export bans can generate political theatre without shifting control of the value chain: rules are repeatedly renegotiated around elite interests, foreign-capital alliances and short-term revenue needs. They demonstrate that nationalistic approaches do not answer the questions we need answered to achieve economic sovereignty. The lesson, however, is not to abandon beneficiation, but to replace discretionary interventions with transparent thresholds, realistic sequencing, independent readiness assessments, and regional coordination.

Humphrey Mrema's piece, *Beyond extraction: reorienting Africa's resource governance frameworks for structural transformation*, rounds off the conversation with a focus on the concept of resource governance authority: the enforceable capacity to decide where value is added, how output is priced, how contracts and revenues are disclosed, and how proceeds are allocated. Mrema contends that common governance gaps are too often treated separately rather than as a system requiring a systematic, integrated approach. The proposed response is correspondingly integrated: a continental minerals negotiating mechanism, completed AfCFTA rules of origin for strategic value chains, protected adaptation revenues, formal links between basin institutions and the African Peace and Security Architecture, and joint resource–climate–security planning.

Aggregately, these submissions offer a solution-oriented agenda for converting interdependence from a source of vulnerability into a source of power. They call for governance that is network-aware rather than territorially rigid, digital rather than discretionary, regional rather than fragmented, and preventive rather than reactive. Their shared message is both analytical and practical: Africa's transformative ideas already exist in its trade routes, power pools, mineral endowments, policy frameworks and community institutions. The decisive next step is to connect them through rules and institutions strong enough to retain value, distribute benefits fairly and make peace economically sustainable.

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1

From Borders to Networks: Governing Informal Economies and Regional Integration in West Africa

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About the Author

Dr Joana Ama Osei-Tutu is a peace and security practitioner specialising in gender, peace and security, gender mainstreaming, project management, stakeholder engagement, research, curriculum development and facilitation. She has experience designing context-specific programmes and translating research and needs into initiatives and knowledge resources. De Gruyter published her recent co-authored book, *The Dynamics of Conflict-Related Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: Comparing Impact Across Global Regions*. She is currently the Deputy Director of the Women, Youth, Peace and Security Institute at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC) in Accra, Ghana. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in English and Psychology from the University of Ghana, a master's in international studies from Ewha Womans University in South Korea, and a PhD in International Relations from Monash University in Australia.

Executive Summary

Regional integration in West Africa is commonly understood through the ECOWAS framework, which promotes the free movement of people, goods, and services. Yet cross-border integration is also shaped by extensive informal and illicit networks that sustain livelihoods, facilitate trade, and connect communities across borders. Rather than existing outside regional integration, these networks are embedded in West Africa's political economy and everyday governance.

Drawing on secondary literature, regional economic data, policy analysis, and practitioner insights from previous field visits to border regions, the paper argues that informal economies are structural features of regional integration, rooted in longstanding patterns of mobility, borderland livelihoods, and uneven state presence. While informal trade significantly contributes to economic resilience and food security, governance gaps enable organised criminal groups and violent extremist organisations to exploit commercial networks and trade corridors to generate revenue and exert influence. Security-focused responses, including border closures and intensified enforcement, have often failed to address these underlying dynamics and have pushed economic activity further underground. Security-focused responses also risk conflating informal economies with illicit ones: they are different.

Building on existing debates about informality and regional integration, the paper argues that informal economic networks are not merely by-products of incomplete integration but are important mechanisms through which regional integration is produced and governed in practice. It further shows that, despite the emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), economic interdependence remains resilient. Therefore, decision-makers must distinguish informal livelihoods from criminal activity and govern cross-border networks without undermining economic resilience. Advancing peace, economic sovereignty, and regional stability therefore requires adaptive, network-centred governance approaches that strengthen community participation and promote gender-responsive regional governance.

Key Points

Informal economies are integral to regional integration, sustaining livelihoods, mobility, and cross-border trade networks that predate colonial borders and formal regional institutions. For example, the networks along the Ghana-Burkina Faso border are not merely by-products of incomplete integration but are key mechanisms through which regional integration is enacted, governed, and contested across West Africa.

Governance gaps enable criminal and extremist exploitation, allowing armed groups and organised crime networks to generate revenue through informal taxation, protection rackets, and control of trade routes.

Security-first responses, such as the Nigerian border closure, often conflate informality with criminality, pushing economic activity into less-regulated spaces where illicit actors can gain greater influence.

Despite political fragmentation between ECOWAS and the AES, cross-border economic interdependence remains resilient and demands collaborative, network-centred, and gender-responsive governance.

Effective governance should distinguish livelihood-based informal activities from criminal economies and prioritise community participation, regional cooperation, and economic resilience as foundations for peace and economic sovereignty.

Introduction

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), established in 1975, promotes regional integration through frameworks that support the free movement of people, goods, and services (Augustine et al., 2026). Key instruments, including the 1979 Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment and the 1998 Transhumance Protocol, aim to facilitate mobility and economic exchange across national borders while fostering regional stability and cooperation (ECOWAS Commission, 1979; 1998). Central to these frameworks is the recognition that economic integration depends on the movement of people and resources across borders (Asongo et al., 2026).

Regional integration in West Africa did not begin with ECOWAS. Long before the creation of modern states and colonial borders, mobility underpinned economic, social, and political life across the region. Trade routes linked the Sahel to coastal markets, while pastoralists, farmers, traders, labour migrants, and religious communities moved across vast territories in search of livelihoods and opportunities (Sherry, n.d.). Colonial partition divided numerous ethnic communities, including the Ewe, Yoruba, Hausa, Soninké, and Kanuri, across newly created states (Aniche et al., 2023). However, these borders did little to disrupt longstanding networks of kinship, commerce, and social exchange. As a result, borders have often functioned less as barriers than as administrative markers within a broader regional space.

ECOWAS mobility frameworks were designed to accommodate these realities. However, although the Community promotes visa-free movement, passports, residence provisions, transhumance certificates, customs procedures, and national immigration systems still regulate mobility. Lamptey (2013) argues that implementation remains uneven due to limited state capacity, the challenges of monitoring extensive borderlands, and border communities' dependence on cross-border exchange (Lamptey, 2013). Consequently, mobility is often governed as much by local networks and economic necessity as by formal regulation.

In this context, informal and illicit economies have become significant features of regional integration in practice. Cross-border livestock trade, artisanal and small-scale mining, fuel smuggling, informal taxation systems, arms trafficking, and other transnational networks often operate through the same corridors and border spaces that facilitate legal trade and mobility (Alebiosu, 2026). While informal economic activities are typically livelihood-based and socially embedded, illicit economies involve activities prohibited by law. Nevertheless, both frequently overlap in practice, sharing actors, routes, markets, and governance structures.

Existing policy responses often frame these activities primarily as governance failures or security threats operating outside the formal economy (Aniche et al., 2021). While they pose significant governance and security challenges, such perspectives risk overlooking their role in shaping economic life in many border regions. In these areas, informal economic systems provide livelihoods, structure local markets, and influence patterns of authority, while often intersecting with formal institutions and legal economic activity. The result is a complex landscape in which the boundaries between legality and illegality, state and non-state authority, and formal and informal exchange remain blurred.

This policy paper argues that informal and illicit economies are not peripheral distortions of West African regional integration but integral components of the region's political economy. Rather than existing outside the integration process, these economies shape how borders are experienced, how economic exchange is organised, and how authority is exercised across the region. Existing regional approaches often treat these economies as challenges to regional integration (Noutchie & Goufo, 2025); this paper instead examines them as constitutive elements of integration itself. Understanding how these networks are governed is therefore

essential to developing realistic and effective approaches to regional integration, border management, and security. The analysis draws on secondary literature, regional economic data, policy analysis, and practitioner insights from prior field visits to border regions.

The governance of informal and illicit economies also has important implications for economic sovereignty, conflict dynamics, and the prospects for sustainable peace in West Africa. In practice, regional integration is driven not only by formal institutions and official policies but also by the networks, actors, and economic systems that operate across and beyond the state's reach. This paper contributes by reframing informal economic networks not merely as governance challenges or security vulnerabilities, but as mechanisms through which regional integration is actively produced, governed, and contested across West Africa.

Formal integration meets informal reality and why this matters

Despite ECOWAS's integration agenda, a significant gap remains between formal frameworks and the realities of borderland governance. Regional protocols, customs systems, immigration controls, and transhumance arrangements regulate mobility and trade, yet implementation remains uneven across member states. Limited infrastructure, weak inter-agency coordination, competing national priorities, and constrained state capacity continue to hinder enforcement, particularly in peripheral border regions where government presence is often limited (Suleiman, 2025).

The persistence of informal economic activity, however, is not simply a consequence of weak governance. Informal cross-border trade (ICBT) is rooted in longstanding systems of exchange that predate colonial borders and modern states (Price, 2026). These networks continue to sustain livelihoods, support food security, and strengthen economic resilience across West Africa. Women constitute a substantial proportion of traders in these systems and frequently face extortion, bribery, harassment, and confiscation of goods at official and unofficial crossing points (Dzawanda, 2025).

Efforts to formalise cross-border trade have produced mixed results. Larsen et al. (2026) note that while governments often view informal trade as a source of lost revenue, traders often see formal procedures as costly, unpredictable, and poorly adapted to local realities. Consequently, they rely on systems built around trust, kinship ties, ethnic affiliations, and longstanding commercial relationships. In many border communities, these informal institutions provide greater predictability than formal state structures. Informal economies should therefore be understood not as operating outside governance systems, but as integral components of how borderlands are governed in practice.

It is therefore important to distinguish informal but lawful livelihood activities from illicit commerce. Livelihood-based informal activities include small-scale trade, transport services, artisanal production, and seasonal mobility that operate outside formal regulation but are socially legitimate. Illicit commerce, by contrast, involves activities such as trafficking, smuggling prohibited goods, extortion, and armed group taxation that deliberately evade regulation and undermine public safety.

This has significant governance implications. Ani (2025) reveals how the same networks that facilitate legitimate informal trade can also be exploited by organised criminal groups and violent extremist organisations (VEOs) (Ani, 2025). In contexts where state authority is weak or contested, these actors often embed themselves in existing economic systems rather than creating new ones. Groups such as Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State-Sahel Province generate revenue through informal taxation, protection payments, and control of commercial routes. In doing so, they strengthen their influence over local populations and become part of hybrid systems of authority that involve state actors, traditional leaders, traders, and community networks.

The Liptako-Gourma region, spanning parts of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, illustrates these dynamics. OECD estimates suggest that artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) in the region produces approximately 50 tonnes of gold annually and supports around 1.5 million people (OECD, 2018). Beyond mining, major trade and pastoral corridors traverse the region and have become important revenue sources for armed groups (OECD & SWAC, 2025). These actors tax mining activities, regulate movement along trade routes, and levy fees on pastoralists and traders. In southern Mali, for example, JNIM[1] has expanded its influence by controlling access to forest resources and charging informal fees to loggers (Ani, 2024), showing how extremist groups can integrate into existing economic systems rather than establish entirely new revenue streams. Such arrangements create governance environments in which economic activity, security dynamics, and overlapping forms of authority are deeply intertwined.

These realities highlight a broader point: informal economies are not incidental by-products of weak states or incomplete integration. They are structural features of West Africa's political economy, sustained by historical mobility patterns, livelihood dependence, and uneven state presence (Benjamin et al., 2015). Therefore, challenges such as smuggling, illicit taxation, trafficking, and violent extremism cannot be addressed solely through tighter border controls or increased law enforcement. Effective governance requires recognising how formal integration interacts with the informal networks that continue to shape mobility, trade, and authority across the region.

Misdiagnosing the problem: the limits of security-first responses

A security-first approach has largely shaped regional and national responses to informal and illicit economies in West Africa. Between 2019 and 2021, Nigeria partially closed its borders to curb smuggling and stimulate domestic production (Famadewa, 2026). Yet the informal sector contributes more than 60 per cent of the country's GDP and employs over three-quarters of its workforce (Famadewa, 2026). Although the closure reduced some illicit activity and strengthened security in certain areas, traders adapted by sourcing locally, using community-based networks, and engaging in informal arrangements with border officials (Omale et al., 2023). Economic activity therefore shifted rather than disappeared, highlighting the limitations of enforcement-based approaches when underlying economic incentives remain unchanged.

A similar logic has informed broader regional security initiatives. Efforts such as the Accra Initiative, the Multinational Joint Task Force, the G5 Sahel, and the ECOWAS Counterterrorism Strategy have sought to improve cross-border security cooperation (Yakohene, 2026). However, Kwarkye (2021) notes that implementation has often been constrained by differing national priorities, uneven capacities, and coordination challenges (Kwarkye, 2021). While such initiatives remain important, evidence suggests that military and enforcement measures alone are insufficient to address the economic drivers that sustain informal and illicit networks.

The underlying problem is that informal economic activity is often treated as inherently illicit. This assumption overlooks how extensively informal economies sustain livelihoods across the region. OECD and SWAC (2025) estimate that intra-regional food trade within ECOWAS is worth approximately USD 10 billion annually, with around 85 per cent of that trade unrecorded (OECD & SWAC, 2025). This unrecorded trade is estimated to generate enough food energy to meet the annual needs of roughly 80 million people, or one-quarter of the region's population. Women account for around 70 per cent of informal cross-border traders in sub-Saharan Africa, yet many border-management and security initiatives continue to overlook the distinct challenges they face (Chiukira, 2024). The problem, therefore, is not only that security-first responses produce

1 JNIM is the Sahel's most prominent extremist network and an alliance of al-Qaeda affiliates: Ansar Dine, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al-Mourabitoun, Macina Liberation Front (Katiba Macina), and Katiba Serma.

unintended consequences; it is that they often misdiagnose informal economies. Informal trade networks are frequently treated as threats to be dismantled rather than as socioeconomic systems that underpin livelihoods and regional connectivity. This conflates informality with criminality and obscures important distinctions between survival-oriented economic activity and organised criminal exploitation.

A more effective approach requires recognising that informal and illicit economies are not synonymous. It requires a gender-responsive border governance approach that operates institutionally by integrating women's organisations, female traders, and local peacebuilders into border management processes. This includes structured consultation mechanisms, representation in cross-border committees, and the incorporation of women's market associations into early-warning systems. It also requires training border officials on gendered risks, ensuring safe reporting channels, and recognising women's knowledge of trade routes, taxation practices, and corridor security as core inputs into decision-making. Such an approach would lead to policies that address the governance conditions enabling criminal actors to capture informal markets, while protecting the livelihoods on which border communities depend. Without this distinction, security interventions risk driving economic activity further underground and expanding opportunities for criminal and extremist actors.

The Alliance of Sahel States (AES) rupture: fragmentation without disconnection

The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS and the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) represent the most significant institutional rupture in West African regionalism since ECOWAS was established in 1975 (Ndiaye, 2026). The emergence of parallel regional frameworks has generated uncertainty about future cooperation on trade, mobility, border management, intelligence sharing, and collective security.

At the political level, the split reflects competing visions of sovereignty and regional order. Economically, however, interdependence remains resilient. ECOWAS preserved key mobility and trade privileges for AES citizens, reflecting the practical importance of maintaining cross-border connectivity despite institutional separation (ECOWAS, 2025).

However, Philip (2026) notes that the formal withdrawal has not dismantled these networks. Livestock corridors continue to link Mali, Burkina Faso, and coastal markets in Ghana. Informal trade in food, fuel, consumer goods, and artisanal minerals continues to move along established commercial routes. At the same time, pastoralists maintain seasonal transhumance patterns and traders rely on longstanding kinship and business networks. At the same time, these activities remain vulnerable to violent extremism, trafficking, and organised crime. In practice, economic interdependence has proven far more resilient than the institutions designed to govern it.

This paper adopts a network-centred understanding of regional integration (Rouillé et al., 2024 & Walther, 2015). Network-centred governance recognises cross-border economic, social, and mobility networks as the primary units through which regional integration is practised. Rather than viewing integration solely through formal institutions such as ECOWAS or AES, it conceptualises integration as the ongoing movement of people, goods, capital, and authority across interconnected social and economic networks. These networks often persist despite political fragmentation, helping explain why economic interdependence remains resilient even when regional cooperation is contested. This creates a growing mismatch between political organisation and economic reality. ECOWAS and AES may evolve into distinct political blocs, while informal and illicit economies operate across both spaces.

Criminal networks and violent extremist organisations are largely indifferent to institutional boundaries, exploiting governance gaps wherever they arise. Fragmentation therefore risks weakening intelligence-

sharing, customs coordination, transhumance management, and the regulation of cross-border markets, particularly in regions where state authority is already contested. The key challenge is not merely how ECOWAS and AES relate institutionally, but how both frameworks engage with a regional economy that remains deeply interconnected. Whether states belong to ECOWAS or AES, the governance question remains the same: how to support the economic systems that sustain livelihoods while limiting opportunities for criminal exploitation and insecurity.

Governing networks, not just borders

Regional integration in West Africa cannot be separated from the varied forms of armed violence that shape mobility, trade, and governance across borderlands. Armed groups, including violent extremist organisations, community-based militias, and organised criminal networks, operate within the same informal economic corridors that sustain everyday livelihoods. These actors embed themselves in commercial flows by imposing informal taxation, regulating market access, and controlling strategic routes, particularly in areas with uneven state presence, such as Liptako-Gourma, northern Nigeria, and the Mali–Burkina Faso–Niger tri-border zone.

These dynamics show that informal networks are not only economic systems but also arenas for the contested exercise of political authority by state actors, armed groups, and community institutions. As governance gaps widen, armed actors exploit informal trade routes to generate revenue, influence mobility, and shape local security conditions. Recognising informal networks as part of regional integration opens pathways for conflict prevention and more adaptive governance. The central challenge is not eliminating informal economies but governing them in ways that reduce vulnerability and limit opportunity. Informality is neither a temporary deviation from a formalised future nor simply evidence of state failure. Rather, it is a structural feature of the region's political economy, rooted in historical mobility patterns, livelihood dependence, uneven state presence, and cross-border social networks. Attempts to suppress these systems through securitisation alone have largely addressed symptoms rather than the underlying causes.

A network-centred, gender-responsive governance approach offers a conflict-responsive, preventive strategy by focusing on the actors, relationships, and flows that structure cross-border economies. Rather than relying solely on territorial control or security-first interventions, it strengthens community-based oversight of trade routes, supports early warning through trader associations and women's market networks, and improves coordination between border agencies and local institutions. This approach helps distinguish livelihood-based informal activities from illicit economies, reduces opportunities for armed actors to embed in commercial flows, and enhances corridor safety through shared monitoring and information exchange.

Such an approach requires a clear distinction between informal economic activity and illicit criminal activity. Conflating the two risks criminalising livelihood strategies that sustain millions of people and diverting attention from organised actors who exploit those networks for profit and territorial control. Policy interventions should therefore focus on reducing opportunities for criminal capture rather than disrupting informal markets. Governance frameworks should also recognise border communities as active partners rather than passive subjects of regulation. Border populations possess detailed knowledge of trading routes, seasonal mobility patterns, security risks, and emerging threats. Incorporating traditional authorities, trader associations, transport unions, pastoralist groups, and civil society organisations into border-governance mechanisms can improve intelligence gathering and policy legitimacy.

Regional governance must also become more network-centred than border-centred. The movement of livestock, minerals, agricultural products, fuel, labour, and finance routinely spans both ECOWAS and AES territories.

Effective governance, therefore, requires continued cooperation on trade facilitation, transhumance management, market regulation, and intelligence sharing, irrespective of evolving political alignments. Economic interdependence is likely to outlast institutional fragmentation.

Finally, any governance strategy must incorporate a gender-sensitive perspective. Women constitute approximately 70 per cent of informal cross-border traders in sub-Saharan Africa and face disproportionate exposure to bribery, harassment, extortion, violence, and confiscation of goods. Yet border-management initiatives rarely reflect these realities. Improving cross-border governance, therefore, requires simplified trade procedures, safer reporting mechanisms, greater representation of women in border institutions, and targeted support for women's trade associations.

An adaptive governance framework does not seek to eradicate informality. Instead, it aims to reduce vulnerability, improve accountability, and prevent criminal exploitation within economic systems that remain fundamental to regional integration. Such an approach recognises a simple reality: West Africa's future integration will be shaped not only by treaties and institutions but also by the networks through which people move, trade, and govern their everyday lives.

Conclusion

The governance of informal and illicit economies has emerged as a defining challenge for regional integration, economic sovereignty, and peacebuilding in West Africa. While ECOWAS has sought to facilitate the free movement of people, goods, and services through formal institutional frameworks, the realities of integration are shaped as much by the informal networks that sustain livelihoods, connect border communities, and facilitate cross-border exchange. These networks are neither peripheral nor temporary; they are deeply embedded in the historical, social, and economic foundations of West African regionalism.

Existing scholarship on African regional integration has long recognised the importance of informal cross-border trade, borderland economies, and transnational networks. Yet policy responses continue to treat informality primarily as a governance deficit or a security threat. This paper departs from that perspective, arguing that informal economic networks are not merely by-products of incomplete integration. Rather, they operate as mechanisms through which regional integration is produced, governed, and contested in practice. Understanding these networks is therefore essential to understanding how authority, mobility, and economic exchange function across the region.

The rise of violent extremist organisations, organised criminal groups, and illicit taxation systems demonstrates how governance gaps within these networks can be exploited for profit and political influence. However, the evidence presented in this paper suggests that security-first approaches, including border closures, intensified enforcement, and militarised responses, have tended to address the symptoms of informality rather than the structural conditions that sustain it. In some cases, they have further marginalised vulnerable communities, increased reliance on informal actors, and pushed economic activity into less regulated spaces where criminal networks thrive. Recognising informal networks as part of the political economy of regional integration therefore opens pathways for conflict prevention and more adaptive governance.

The emergence of the AES has introduced new political complexities into the regional landscape, yet it has not diminished the economic interdependence that continues to bind West African societies together. The persistence of trade corridors, transhumance routes, and cross-border commercial networks suggests that regional integration remains more resilient than the institutions intended to govern it.

Ultimately, the challenge for policymakers is not how to eliminate informality, but how to govern it more effectively. Whether under ECOWAS, AES, or future regional arrangements, sustainable peace and economic sovereignty will depend on governance approaches that distinguish livelihood-based informal activities from criminal economies, strengthen community participation, and address the conditions that enable illicit actors to embed themselves in existing networks. Regional integration in West Africa will continue to be shaped not only by formal institutions and treaties, but also by the economic and social networks through which people move, trade, and exercise authority across borders.

Recommendations

1. Differentiate informal livelihoods from criminal economies by prioritising intelligence-led action against organised trafficking networks, illicit taxation systems, and extremist financing, while simplifying regulatory procedures for small-scale traders, pastoralists, and borderland communities.
2. Institutionalise community-based border governance by formally involving trader associations, traditional authorities, pastoralist organisations, women's groups, and local civil society actors in border management, early warning systems, and conflict prevention mechanisms.
3. Adopt a network-centred governance approach that focuses on the trade, mobility, financial, and social networks through which economic activity and security risks move across borders, rather than relying primarily on territorial control and enforcement measures.
4. Embed gender-responsive measures into regional trade and security governance by reducing harassment and corruption at border crossings, expanding women's representation in border management institutions, and strengthening support for women's trade associations.
5. Maintain functional ECOWAS–AES cooperation on intelligence sharing, transhumance management, customs coordination, trade-corridor governance, and border security, irrespective of broader political disagreements, recognising that economic interdependence transcends institutional divisions.

To coordinate these efforts, a strengthened Joint Border Governance Mechanism, which brings together ECOWAS, AES representatives, national border agencies, and cross-border trader associations, should serve as the central platform for information sharing, early warning, and harmonised regulatory responses.

2

Regional Integration and Illicit Financial Flows in The Ecowas Region: Trade Mis-Invoicing, Tariff Pressure and Border Governance

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About the Author

Ayebiogbon (**Dodo**) **Akakpo** is an economist, econometrician, and data scientist specialising in applied econometrics, quantitative impact evaluation, regional trade, and macro-modelling. He serves as Principal Investigator at Impact Lab TOGO (a research think tank), as an Associate Researcher at Africa Political Outlook, and as an affiliated Research Fellow within the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC) network. He has authored notable works on economic integration, including the AERC-published study Economic Impact Analysis of Morocco's Integration to ECOWAS, which evaluates the implications of Morocco's accession to ECOWAS for trade flows, tariff revenues, and member states' welfare. His research also focuses on the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), digital public infrastructure (DPI), cross-border trade mis-invoicing, and regional payment systems.

Executive Summary

West Africa stands at an economically significant moment where it can either progress or regress. The launch and continued operations of the AfCFTA, together with further development of the ECOWAS single market, are expected to result in a region of common prosperity. However, this optimism runs counter to the physical and institutional barriers of, for instance, border openness being very difficult and that, on top of that, the region still has very persistent informal and illegal economic channels. Among these informal channels are Illicit Financial Flows (IFFs), such as trade misinvoicing, which is one of the top causes of capital outflows.

Drawing on the foundational expected-utility framework of tax evasion and its extension to international trade, this policy paper demonstrates that trade misinvoicing is not a cyclical nuisance but a structurally entrenched phenomenon. More than 61 per cent of the magnitude of illicit flows in any given year automatically carries over to the next, reflecting deeply rooted informal logistics networks. While tariff pressure and trade openness alter the long-run equilibrium of fraud, institutional governance (specifically the control of corruption) emerges as the single most powerful lever for curbing capital flight. The paper argues that traditional physical border controls have reached their limits. Securing economic sovereignty in West Africa requires a decisive shift from rigid barriers to smart, transparent and digitised regulatory mechanisms.

Key Points

Illicit Financial Flows via trade misinvoicing average USD 719 million per annum per ECOWAS member state, with significant cross-country heterogeneity indicating that some states face massive tax evasion while others manage to contain it.

The phenomenon exhibits extreme short-term temporal inertia (persistence coefficient of 0.619): informal fraudulent networks are structurally entrenched and self-sustaining from year to year.

Changes in nominal tariff pressure and trade openness significantly reshape operators' tax arbitrage behaviours in the long run, meaning that tariff harmonisation under the AfCFTA alone will not eliminate fraud without accompanying digital safeguards.

Control of corruption exerts a drastic and highly significant mitigating effect (coefficient of -53.89), confirming that institutional quality is the decisive variable in protecting domestic tax revenues.

Three operational levers are recommended: the deployment of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) for real-time customs interconnection; the mandatory operationalisation of the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) for all cross-border transactions; and the full automation of customs procedures to neutralise the corruption factor at border corridors.

Introduction

The The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) represents the most ambitious attempt in contemporary African history to reconfigure the continent's economic geography. By dismantling tariff barriers and harmonising trade regimes, the AfCFTA seeks to convert fragmented national markets into a single economic zone capable of generating economies of scale, industrial diversification and geopolitical leverage (African Union, 2018). Within this continental architecture, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) occupies a pivotal position: it hosts some of Africa's busiest maritime corridors, most dynamic informal trading networks and, paradoxically, some of its most porous borders.

The realisation of regional integration in West Africa faces a fundamental tension. On one hand, member states have committed to deepening trade openness and reducing nominal customs duties to foster cross-border commerce. On the other hand, the physical and institutional reality of border porosity allows economic operators to systematically exploit information asymmetries, tariff differentials and governance deficits through trade misinvoicing; the deliberate manipulation of the declared value, volume or nature of goods to evade taxes or shift capital abroad (Bhagwati, 1974). This practice generates Illicit Financial Flows (IFFs) that drain public coffers, undermine state capacity, and erode the very fiscal foundations upon which sustainable peace and development rest (Ndikumana & Boyce, 2011).

Crucially, this fiscal haemorrhage directly worsens West Africa's complex security landscape. In a sub-region facing violent extremism, transnational armed groups, and borderland instability, illicit financial flows severely deplete the public revenues required to finance national defence, modernise border policing, and deliver essential public services. Moreover, the opaque informal logistics channels established for commercial trade mis-invoicing often overlap with illicit networks that facilitate arms trafficking and contraband smuggling, directly eroding state authority along porous border corridors.

This policy paper addresses a question of immediate relevance to policymakers, peacebuilders, and regional institutions: to what extent do changes in tariff pressure and institutional governance influence the scale, persistence, and security implications of illicit financial flows via commercial trade mis-invoicing within the ECOWAS region? To evaluate this, the study relies on a balanced panel dataset covering all ECOWAS member states over the 2005-2025 period (N = 315 observations), combining trade asymmetry data from Global Financial Integrity (GFI) with macroeconomic and governance indicators from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI) and Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI). The empirical strategy deploys System Generalised Method of Moments[2] (System GMM) to address dynamic persistence and joint endogeneity, alongside Panel Autoregressive Distributed Lag (Panel ARDL)[3] co-integration modelling to isolate long-run equilibrium relationships. Grounded in theoretical frameworks of rational trade arbitrage, the central argument is that regional integration and AfCFTA implementation cannot succeed through physical border controls alone;[1–3] mitigating fiscal leakage and

2 $FFI_{i,t} = \alpha_0 + \beta_1 FFI_{i,t-1} + \beta_2 PT_{i,t} + \sum_{k=1}^{n} \gamma_k X_{k,i,t} + \mu_i + \varepsilon_{i,t}$ where $FFI_{i,t}$ represents the Illicit Financial Flows associated with commercial trade mis-invoicing for country i in year t , $FFI_{i,t-1}$ is the one-period lagged dependent variable, β_1 captures the degree of inertia or persistence inherent in illicit financial flows, $PT_{i,t}$ denotes the Tariff Pressure indicator, measured by collected customs duties or the effective tariff rate, $X_{k,i,t}$ denotes a vector of macroeconomic control variables affecting illicit financial flows, μ_i denotes unobserved country-specific fixed effects, such as time-invariant institutional and geographical characteristics. $\varepsilon_{i,t}$ is the error term.

3 $\Delta FFI_{i,t} = \phi_i \left(FFI_{i,t-1} - \theta_0 - \theta_1 PT_{i,t-1} - \sum_{k=1}^{n} \lambda_k X_{k,i,t-1} \right) + \alpha_{1,i} \Delta PT_{i,t} + \sum_{k=1}^{n} \gamma_{k,i} \Delta X_{k,i,t} + e_{i,t}$ where Δ denotes the first-difference operator applied to the variables, θ_1 et λ_k denotes the vector of long-run coefficients capturing equilibrium relationships $\alpha_{1,i}$ et $\lambda_{k,i}$ denote the dynamic short-run adjustment coefficients, ϕ_i denotes the speed of adjustment parameter, measuring the error-correction restoring force towards long-run equilibrium. To ensure the validity of the estimations, several rigorous specification tests are applied:

- For System GMM: The Arellano-Bond test AR(1) and AR(2) to verify the absence of higher-order serial correlation in the differenced residuals; and the Sargan/Hansen test of overidentifying restrictions to confirm the validity and exogeneity of the internal instrumental variables used.
- For Panel ARDL: Panel unit root tests (Im-Pesaran-Shin and Levin-Lin-Chu) to confirm that all series are integrated of order at most one, I(1); and the Westerlund panel cointegration test to verify the existence of a stable long-run equilibrium relationship.

its associated regional security risks requires replacing rigid barriers with smart, transparent, and digitised regulatory mechanisms (Signé, 2023).

The anatomy of illicit flows: scale, persistence and regional heterogeneity

The Magnitude of the Fiscal Haemorrhage

Illicit Financial Flows arising from trade mispricing were estimated at USD 719.34 million per country per year on average during the observation period, according to the empirical analysis. Given that the standard deviation was USD 90.81 million and the range was USD 437.31 million to USD 958.58 million, these findings indicate significant variation across countries in major factors such as economic sectors and geographic locations. The paper notes that while some countries have succeeded in limiting capital flight, others are losing enormous sums due to chronic tax evasion. It is further stated that this variation is a natural result that reveals, in part, the disparity in customs capacities, different levels of access to international maritime trade, and, more importantly, institutional governance quality, that is, the rule of law and accountability of officials.

These numbers align with data from across the continent, which show that trade misinvoicing is the primary means by which countries in Sub-Saharan Africa lose capital in an undesirable manner while simultaneously reducing the customs revenue that national governments could otherwise collect (Global Financial Integrity, 2021). Similarly, mapping of shadow economy dynamics over two decades confirms that developing economies in the region maintain large informal sectors driven precisely by institutional gaps and enforcement weaknesses (Medina & Schneider, 2018). The customs tariff rate shows a regional average of 12.62 per cent, with a minimum of 9.57 per cent and a maximum of 19.27 per cent. This variability is econometrically crucial: substantial nominal rate differentials among member states create powerful incentives for tax arbitrage, manifesting in practice as under-invoicing or over-invoicing along trade corridors (Bhagwati ed., 1974). Trade openness averages 58.71 per cent of GDP, but with a standard deviation of 18.15 per cent and a range from 21.26 per cent to 117.82 per cent, indicating deep disparities in global economic integration. The Control of Corruption index shows a regional average of -0.3979, with a minimum of -1.0348 indicating severe institutional fragility in much of the sample and a maximum of +0.7695 indicating that pathways toward good governance do exist within the sub-region (Kaufmann et al., 2011).

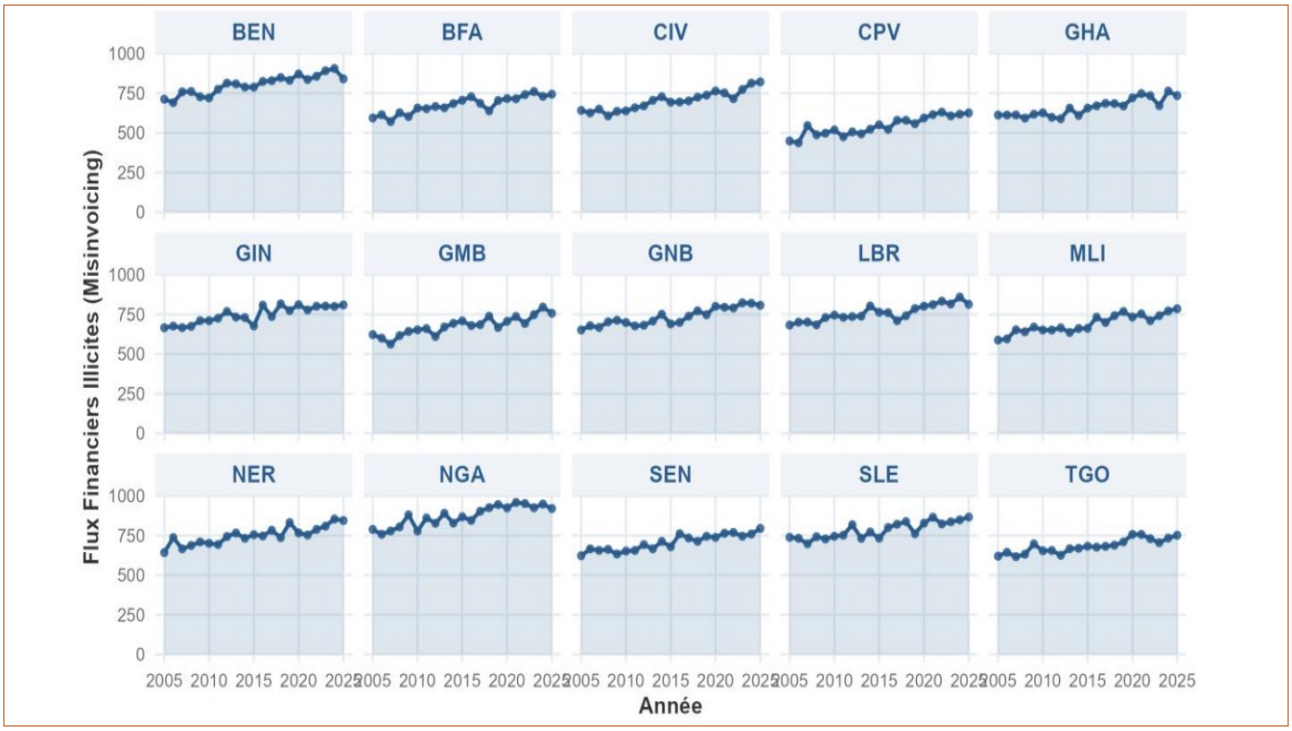
Temporal Inertia and the Hysteresis Effect

Perhaps the most striking empirical finding concerns the temporal dynamics of fraud. The System Generalised Method of Moments (System GMM) estimation yields a persistence coefficient of 0.6189, statistically significant at the 1 per cent level. This implies that more than 61 per cent of the magnitude of informal flows and trade misinvoicing in a given year automatically carries over to the following year. Such high inertia reflects the deep entrenchment of informal logistics networks, which develop self-sustaining mechanisms: traders build expertise in bypassing customs controls, while networks based on trust, informal credit and clandestine logistics become structured along border corridors (Feige, 1990 & Schneider, 2005).

On a macroeconomic level, this structural persistence manifests as economic hysteresis, a phenomenon in which an economic effect persists even after its original cause has been removed. As formalised in the literature on the shadow economy, once high tariff barriers or administrative hurdles incentivise the establishment of informal and fraudulent logistics networks, the fixed sunk costs of entry into the informal sector are amortised. Consequently, subsequent tariff reductions under regional integration schemes do not automatically drive trade flows back into formal channels, as these illicit networks become self-sustaining over time (Feige, 1990 & Schneider, 2005). Figure 1 illustrates this temporal

persistence by depicting the evolution of Illicit Financial Flows for each ECOWAS member state between 2005 and 2025. The smooth, highly autocorrelated trajectories confirm that the magnitude of IFFs in year *t* depends closely on the level reached in year *t-1*, validating the hysteresis effect.

Figure 1. *Temporal Persistence of IFFs via Trade Misinvoicing in ECOWAS, 2005-2025.*



Source: *Author's Estimation*

As shown in Figure 1, the individual country curves reveal smooth, continuous and highly autocorrelated trajectories. For the majority of countries, the level of IFFs in year t depends closely on the level reached in year t-1. Although the overall regional trend points toward persistence, the graph reveals marked disparities in magnitude among states. Some countries display stabilised or slowly growing levels of capital flight, whereas others experience distinct accelerations or structural plateaus. This structural persistence invalidates the assumption that fraud can be eradicated through isolated, short-term enforcement operations.

Tariff pressure, trade openness and the logic of cross-border arbitrage

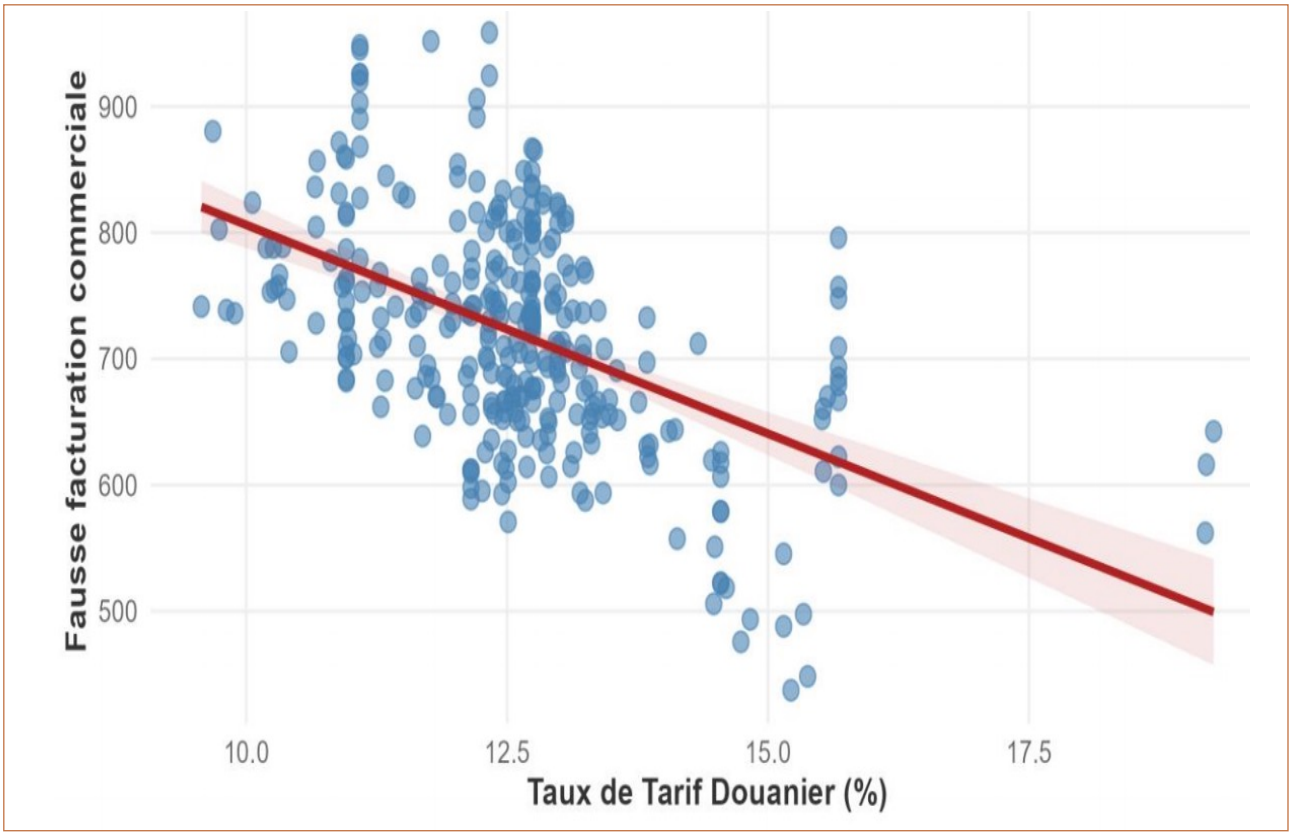
Standard economic theory suggests that dismantling customs barriers and harmonising nominal tariffs should mechanically reduce incentives for fraud. Field observations and empirical evidence from the ECOWAS panel reveal a far more complex picture. The Panel Autoregressive Distributed Lag (Panel ARDL) model validates a long-run equilibrium relationship whereby changes in tariff pressure and trade openness drive operators' arbitrage behaviour at borders.

The theoretical foundation for this behaviour rests on rational arbitrage under risk constraints (Allingham & Sandmo, 1972). Economic operators facing high tax burdens and rigid regulatory environments evaluate the expected gains of non-compliance against the probability of detection and the severity of penalties (Allingham & Sandmo, 1972). When nominal customs tariffs decline (whether through regional integration agreements or AfCFTA tariff dismantling), economic operators do not simply abandon fraudulent practices. Instead, they shift their strategies. Lower tariffs may reduce the incentive for straightforward under-invoicing. Still, they simultaneously create incentives for over-declaration or for the manipulation of other invoice components to maximise profit margins

amid increased trade openness (Bhagwati, 1974). In other words, fraud mutates rather than disappears.

The long-run coefficient associated with the effect of tariff on pressure is 8.3678, which is highly significant, while the short-run coefficient is 6.1023 (significant at the 5 per cent level). The negative sign points here to this subtle yet vital arbitrage effect. The diagram shows the empirical link between official customs rates at the border and IFF volume variation along ECOWAS borders. Based on the graph, we see that the two variables have a strong negative relationship. As indicated by our scatterplot results, the correlation is very high. As one of the major conclusions of our research, we find that simply reducing tariffs does not necessarily eliminate fraud, but it certainly makes arbitrage strategies much more difficult to pursue.

***Figure 2**. Tax Arbitrage across ECOWAS Borders: Tariff Pressure and the Magnitude of IFFs.*



***Source**: Author's Estimation*

As illustrated in Figure 2, the regression line exhibits a clear downward slope, illustrating an inverse relationship between official nominal tariff levels and the volume of IFFs driven by trade misinvoicing. This visual result aligns with the Panel ARDL cointegration model estimates. Contrary to the initial intuition that higher customs tariffs increase tax-evasion fraud, the negative slope indicates a subtler arbitrage effect within the ECOWAS area. When nominal customs tariffs decline, economic operators tend to over-declare or manipulate other invoice components to compensate, or shift their fraudulent channels toward value under-invoicing to maximise profit margins in the face of trade openness. The clustering or spread of data points along the trendline indicates that sensitivity to tariff pressure varies depending on the governance environment. At lower tariff levels, the dispersion of IFFs increases, confirming that lowering customs duties alone is insufficient to eliminate trade fraud. It must be strictly accompanied by automated, interconnected control mechanisms to prevent cross-border traders from displacing illicit optimisation strategies.

Governance as the decisive variable

If tariff pressure shapes the *structure* of arbitrage, institutional governance determines whether arbitrage is possible at all. Table 1 presents the estimation results from the dynamic panel model using the System Generalised Method of Moments (System GMM). The coefficients confirm both the strong temporal inertia of illicit flows and the dominant mitigating effect of institutional governance.

Table 1. *Dynamic Panel Model Estimation Results (System GMM), ECOWAS 2005-2025*

Variable	Coeff	Ecart-Type	Stat-Z	P-Value
lag(ffi_trade_misinvoicing, 1)	0.6189	0.0581	10.6614	0.0000
tariff_rate	-18.8743	10.5188	-1.7943	0.0728
trade_openness	-0.8692	0.4489	-1.9363	0.0528
log_gdp_pc	68.3961	19.6011	3.4894	0.0005
wgi_corruption	-53.8896	23.9310	-2.2519	0.0243

Sargan Test : p-value = 0.0714
Arellano-Bond AR(1) Test : p-value = 0.0262
Arellano-Bond AR(2) Test : p-value = 0.1867

Source: *Author's Estimation*

As reported in Table 1, the persistence coefficient (the lagged dependent variable) is 0.6189 and statistically significant at the 1 per cent level. This high value reflects very strong temporal inertia: more than 61 per cent of the magnitude of informal flows and trade misinvoicing in a given year automatically carries over to the following year. This result validates the hypothesis of an institutionalisation of cross-border fraud networks, which develop self-sustaining mechanisms that are difficult to dismantle through simple ad hoc controls.

The effect of tariff pressure is negative and significant at the 10 per cent level (coefficient of -18.8743). This empirically demonstrates that an increase in customs duties or the maintenance of high tariff barriers acts as a push factor out of the formal circuit, mechanically prompting operators to resort to trade misinvoicing to preserve their economic margins. Trade openness also exerts a negative effect (coefficient of -0.8692, significant at the 10 per cent level), suggesting that deeper integration without accompanying digital safeguards can inadvertently facilitate fraud.

Most critically, the control of corruption exerts a coefficient of -53.8896, statistically significant at the 5 per cent level. This is by far the largest effect in the model. It demonstrates that strengthening institutional governance through anti-corruption measures drastically reduces the scope for commercial trade misinvoicing. This finding resonates with the established governance literature, which identifies control of corruption, rule of law and regulatory quality as prerequisites for constraining opportunistic enforcement and curbing revenue leakage in public administration (Kaufmann et al., 2011). The Control of Corruption index, drawn from the Worldwide Governance Indicators, displays a negative regional average of -0.3979 across ECOWAS (Kaufmann et al., 2011). The minimum value of -1.0348 reflects severe institutional fragility and porous customs controls in a large portion of the sample. Conversely, the maximum observed value of +0.7695 demonstrates that pathways toward good governance and transparency do exist within the sub-region. The massive impact of corruption on the business environment justifies the prioritisation of institutional reforms: no amount of physical border patrolling can substitute for the dismantling of corrupt networks that facilitate misinvoicing.

The validity of the instruments is confirmed by the Arellano-Bond test, which rejects the null of no first-order autocorrelation (AR(1)) but fails to reject the null of no second-order autocorrelation (AR(2)), with a p-value of 0.1867. Furthermore, the Sargan test of overidentifying restrictions displays a p-value of 0.0714, confirming the exogeneity and validity of the instruments utilised in the model.

Table 2 reports the Panel ARDL Error Correction Model estimates, which disentangle short-term adjustments from the long-run equilibrium relationship between tariff pressure, trade openness and illicit financial flows.

***Table 2**. Panel ARDL Error Correction Cointegration Model Estimates, ECOWAS 2005-2025*

Variable	Coeff	Ecart-Type	Stat-T	P-Value
lag_ffi	-0.6166	0.0687	-8.9714	0.0000
lag_tariff	-8.3678	2.3774	-3.5198	0.0005
lag_openness	0.1593	0.1092	1.4596	0.1457
lag_gdp	173.1787	20.7569	8.3432	0.0000
lag_corruption	28.6652	44.1880	0.6487	0.5171
d_tariff	-6.1023	3.0535	-1.9984	0.0468
d_openness	0.1824	0.3986	0.4576	0.6477

***Source**: Author's Estimation*

As shown in Table 2, the error correction coefficient is -0.6166 (highly significant), confirming the existence of a stable long-run relationship among the variables. If a shock hits the macroeconomy or a change occurs in tariff rates, the region returns to its equilibrium level at a speed of 61.66 per cent per year. This relatively rapid adjustment confirms that macroeconomic and institutional reforms can yield tangible results within a reasonable policy horizon, provided they are sustained and coherent.

In the long run, the influence of customs tariffs (lag_tariff) is negative and highly significant, with a coefficient of -8.3678, showing that structural changes in trade misinvoicing occur during economic transition. Variations in short-run tariff pressure (d_tariff) also yield a statistically significant coefficient of -6.1023 (p-value = 0.0468). At the same time, trade openness (lag_openness) and control of corruption (lag_corruption) do not appear as determinants of the long-run relationship in this ARDL specification, suggesting that the dynamic GMM framework more directly captures their effects.

Conclusion

Regional integration in West Africa cannot succeed on tariff policy alone. The empirical evidence presented in this paper demonstrates that Illicit Financial Flows through trade misinvoicing are structurally entrenched, highly persistent and adaptive to changes in the trade environment. The System GMM results confirm that more than 61 per cent of illicit flows persist from one year to the next, driven by informal networks that function with institutional memory. The Panel ARDL model validates a long-run equilibrium in which tariff pressure and trade openness reshape arbitrage behaviours. At the same time, the error-correction mechanism indicates that 61.66 per cent of macroeconomic disequilibria related to fraud are corrected annually, provided the appropriate institutional triggers are activated.

Above all, the analysis reveals that control of corruption is the indispensable linchpin for curbing

capital flight. No tariff reform, however well designed, can outpace the capacity of corrupt networks to adapt. The path toward economic sovereignty and geopolitical transformation in Africa therefore runs through the digitisation of border governance. By deploying Digital Public Infrastructure, mandating PAPSS integration and automating customs procedures, ECOWAS can transform its porous borders from zones of fiscal leakage into smart barriers that protect domestic tax revenues and secure the material foundations of peace and development.

The choice before regional policymakers is clear: continue to rely on physical controls that have demonstrably failed, or invest in the transparent, interconnected and intelligent regulatory mechanisms that the evidence demands. The AfCFTA offers the framework; the empirical evidence offers the roadmap. What is required now is the political will to act.

Policy recommendations

Faced with resilient logistics networks and the demonstrable inefficiency of traditional physical controls, three strategic axes are recommended to guide public policy across ECOWAS. These recommendations are designed to be evidence-based, practicable and aligned with existing continental frameworks, while offering realistic implementation pathways. The AfCFTA treaty creates the enabling environment for these reforms (African Union, 2018), yet strong local measures remain indispensable to prevent trade diversion, customs fraud and money laundering activities that would otherwise undermine the single market (Afrexim Bank, 2022).

1. **Deploy Digital Public Infrastructure to Break the Inertia of Fraud:** To counter the hysteresis effect reflected in the GMM persistence coefficient of 0.619, ECOWAS member states must transition from declarative customs control systems to automated, predictive control frameworks. The integration of Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies and Digital Public Infrastructure offers governments new opportunities to strengthen compliance and transparency across integrated regional markets (Signé, 2023). This requires:

    - Interconnected digital customs registries to analyse real-time invoicing asymmetries between importing and exporting countries. By cross-referencing customs declarations on both sides of a transaction before goods arrive, authorities can flag discrepancies instantly rather than months after the fact.
    - Pre-arrival verification of cargo manifests through regional data-sharing protocols. If a shipment declared in Lomé does not match the export declaration from its port of origin, the system should trigger an alert before physical inspection.
    - Standardisation of digital trade documentation across the ECOWAS corridor network, including the Lomé-Ouagadougou, Accra-Lomé, Lomé-Cotonou and Cotonou-Lagos axes.
    - These measures directly target the information asymmetry that sustains informal networks. By making fraud technically more difficult and operationally more visible, Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) can erode the 61 per cent annual persistence of illicit flows.

2. **Operationalise the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System to Trace Financial Arbitrage:** The ARDL model demonstrates strong responsiveness of trade misinvoicing flows to changes in customs tariffs. Financial integration must therefore serve as a mirror to physical trade flows. The operationalisation of the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) should be accelerated for all cross-border commercial transactions within ECOWAS, with the following

concrete steps:

- Mandate PAPSS-linked digital payment validation as a prerequisite for customs clearance. By directly linking local-currency banking flows to customs declarations, opportunities for over-invoicing or under-invoicing collapse: the payment record provides an independent verification of the transaction value.
- Require commercial banks to flag cross-border transactions that deviate by more than a predetermined threshold from regional price benchmarks for comparable goods.
- Integrate PAPSS data feeds into national revenue authority dashboards to enable real-time reconciliation between financial outflows and trade documentation.

> *This recommendation aligns with the AfCFTA's broader financial integration objectives while providing an immediate operational tool to reduce tax arbitrage.*

3. **Automate Procedures to Neutralise the Corruption Factor**: Given that control of corruption is the most powerful mitigating factor identified in the empirical analysis (coefficient of -53.89), reducing the arbitrary power of border officers must become a central pillar of customs modernisation. Specific measures include:

   - Full digitisation of the customs clearing process, encompassing online tax payments, linked scanner networks at major entry points and algorithmic or random assignment of customs inspectors to specific shipments.
   - Elimination of cash payments at border posts, replacing them with traceable digital transactions to close off conduits for informal payments.
   - Automated risk profiling that directs physical inspections only toward shipments flagged by the digital system, reducing the scope for discretionary decisions that invite bribery. The corridors identified as high-risk (Lomé-Ouagadougou, Accra-Lomé, Lomé-Cotonou and Cotonou-Lagos) should serve as pilot zones for this automation, with the intention of scaling successful models across the community within 36 months. A 36-month implementation horizon is both operationally realistic and achievable because it leverages pre-existing regional digital architecture (specifically national ASYCUDA/GCMS customs platforms and established PAPSS payment rails) rather than requiring new infrastructure from scratch. The strategy is structured into three progressive 12-month phases:

» **Phase I** (**Months 1-12**)**: Protocol Harmonisation and System Interoperability**

The initial twelve months focus on establishing technical, legal, and operational alignment across member states. Key activities include standardising API data-sharing protocols between national customs databases, harmonising legal frameworks for pre-arrival manifest verification, and accelerating the onboarding of commercial banks to PAPSS. This phase is spearheaded by the ECOWAS Commission (Directorate of Trade and Customs), the West African Monetary Agency (WAMA), national revenue authorities, and regional commercial banking associations. Activities are co-financed through technical assistance facilities under the AfCFTA Adjustment Fund and World Bank regional integration grants. Key success indicators include the formal adoption of unified API protocols by all 15 national customs authorities and the operational integration of at least 60 per cent of regional commercial banks into the PAPSS payment network.

» **Phase II** (**Months 13-24**)**: Priority Corridor Piloting and Automated Controls**

Building upon the interoperability frameworks established in Phase I, the second phase deploys real-

time Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) cross-verification, automated algorithmic risk profiling, and mandatory cashless clearance along four high-density corridors: Lomé-Ouagadougou, Accra-Lomé, Lomé-Cotonou, and Cotonou-Lagos. National Customs Administrations of corridor states, Ministries of Finance, and the AfCFTA Secretariat hold primary operational responsibility. Implementation is co-financed through African Development Bank (AfDB) regional trade corridor infrastructure funds alongside national Domestic Resource Mobilisation (DRM) budget lines. Success indicators for Phase II include 100 per cent cashless payment clearance at designated corridor border posts, a 30 per cent reduction in physical customs inspection delays, and full real-time manifest cross-matching between transit ports and inland destinations.

» **Phase III** (**Months 25-36**)**: Regional Rollout and Full Enforcement**

The final phase expands these automated mechanisms across all ECOWAS member states, binding customs clearance strictly to PAPSS digital payment verification and embedding automated price-benchmarking feeds onto national revenue dashboards. Execution is driven by the ECOWAS Council of Ministers, regional central banks (BCEAO, Bank of Ghana, Central Bank of Nigeria), and national anti-corruption commissions. The financial model transitions to self-sustaining national budgetary allocations, underpinned by domestic revenue gains achieved through reduced tax mis-invoicing. Primary success indicators include a 50 per cent reduction in trade asymmetry discrepancies at the sub-regional level and 100 per cent mandatory alignment between commercial cross-border bank payments and declared customs values across the sub-region.

3

Powering Sovereignty: Energy Integration as Africa's Strategic Pathway to Industrial Transformation and Geopolitical Agency

Dagnachew Ayenew Yeshiwas, PhD

About the Author

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Executive Summary

Africa's pursuit of economic sovereignty is inseparable from its struggle for energy security. Despite vast renewable endowments, roughly 600 million Africans still lack reliable electricity. Fragmented national grids further sustain uneven access, inflate industrial costs, and deepen external dependence. Energy deficit then remains a structural bottleneck to development; it is not just a technical shortfall. Drawing on evidence from existing Regional Power Pools (RPPs) and major transboundary energy projects, this policy paper argues that cross-border power integration is one of Africa's most important strategic paths toward industrialisation, regional stability, and greater control over its own future. This paper sets out two practical frameworks for getting integration right: economic hydro-diplomacy and collective networked energy sovereignty, and presents six actionable recommendations alongside them. It calls on the African Union Commission (AUC), Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and RPPs to convene a joint energy-diplomacy platform, harmonise the rules under the African Single Electricity Market (AfSEM), and designate shared power infrastructure as a peace asset.

Key Points

Africa's power systems are largely national and disconnected, even though some regional pools and interconnectors already deliver measurable gains, with modelled savings running to tens of billions of dollars.

Fragmented grids lead to chronic power deficits, higher tariffs, and slower industrial growth, undermining the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) before it takes hold.

Beyond driving industry, shared power infrastructure and energy interdependence raise the cost of conflict and can support, though not guarantee, regional stability.

As the shift to clean energy accelerates, Africa's mineral wealth will only bring real strategic autonomy if it also controls the power and processing needed to refine them.

The AUC, RECs, and RPPs should pair the AfSEM with binding benefit-sharing, dispute-resolution, and mineral-beneficiation provisions-the difference between exporting raw power and building geopolitical agency.

Introduction

Global policy conversations tend to treat Africa's energy deficit as simply a lack of household access. That misses the point: energy is the foundation of state capability and industrial competitiveness. The paradox appears stark. Africa holds an estimated 11 terawatts of solar potential, 350 gigawatts of hydropower, 110 gigawatts of wind, and 15 gigawatts of geothermal capacity (AfDB, 2024); yet 600 million people still lack access to electricity (IEA, 2024).

The problem is a matter of conversion, connectivity, and governance rather than of resource scarcity. Africa's energy endowments are not only undeveloped but unevenly distributed, and fragmented national grids leave most of that potential unused. Weak transmission links, minimal cross-border interconnection, and inconsistent regulation prevent states from sharing generation or balancing demand. Unintegrated grids typically lose more than 20% of the power they generate in transmission, over double the loss rate in mature systems (AU, 2026).

Such a fragmentation carries far-reaching consequences, hurting both industrial growth and political stability. Power stays costly and unreliable. Manufacturers facing frequent outages turn to diesel generators, which cost US$0.20–US$0.60 per kilowatt-hour, two to three times the price of grid power (IFC, 2019). That erodes the very competitiveness the AfCFTA is meant to unlock. Unilateral development of shared water-energy resources, meanwhile, often triggers nationalist backlash. Infrastructure built to generate power becomes a geopolitical flashpoint (Ayenew et al., 2023). Africa cannot build a modern industrial base, let alone real economic sovereignty, on a patchwork of disconnected national grids built for a different era. Notably, and as a potential step towards redress, the African Union (AU) has already laid the institutional groundwork. The AfSEM, launched in June 2021 under Agenda 2063, aims to link power markets across all 55 AU member states and 1.3 billion people (AU, 2021).

This policy paper asks a practical question: how should that integration be governed to deliver collective industrial growth, durable peace, and stronger geopolitical standing—rather than simply displacing existing problems across borders? Drawing on evidence from existing RPPs, policy frameworks, and major transboundary energy projects, the paper offers African policymakers' practical insights into securing that integration and the benefits it can bring. Its goal is twofold: first, to map the imperatives, opportunities, and barriers shaping Africa's power systems; second, to propose realistic frameworks and paths forward. This builds on Africa's long-standing ambition for self-reliant development, now renewed for an era defined by the global energy transition and rising competition for critical minerals.

Energy integration as industrial policy

No region or country has transformed its economy without a robust industrial base. A systematic review of Asia's economic "miracles" and earlier advanced powers finds one thing in common: industrial policy was central to their rise (Cherif & Hasanov, 2019). Industry, in turn, runs on cheap, reliable, large-scale power (Moore & Tesfaye, 2025). That is Africa's real constraint. Frequent outages, thin transmission capacity, and high tariffs raise business costs, discourage investment, and lock firms in low-value production. The fix is not merely more national generation, but linking its differently endowed areas into integrated regional and, eventually, continental electricity markets.

Acting alone, each country must maintain reserve capacity for its own peaks, even when neighbours have surplus or cheaper power. Interconnection fixes this: countries with power deficits import it, and countries with surplus sell it. The savings are large. The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (2019) projects US$32 billion in savings for ECOWAS over a decade under an optimally integrated West African Power Pool (WAPP). Remy & Chattopadhyay (2020) likewise estimate US$18.6 billion in benefits from a "tightly" integrated EAPP, alongside a 30% cut in CO2 emissions. Pooled power trade

beats autarkic self-sufficiency on cost alone. Integration must then be pursued as a strategic fiscal strategy, not merely an infrastructural one.

These gains are already showing up. The WAPP now links 14 countries through over 4,000 kilometres of new transmission lines; and the WB (2026) estimates that fully integrated trade could save members US$5–8 billion annually, with this benefit accelerated by a regional day-ahead market rolling out through 2026. The Southern African Power Pool (SAPP) shows the same logic at a larger scale: full integration could save its members an estimated US$42 billion (Energy for Growth Hub, 2023). Interconnected SAPP countries have also outpaced the SADC industrial growth average since 2000 (ACF, 2024: 4). This suggests a correlation between power pooling and industrialisation worth testing further.

Grid reliability is itself a productive capability. Unreliable power pushes firms toward diesel self-generation, absorbing a "reliability tax" that erodes competitiveness. African firms incur an estimated 5% of annual sales (Energy for Growth Hub, 2019). This only surges as Africa moves into pharmaceuticals, mineral processing, data infrastructure, and other high-value sectors that demand stable power. Pooling demand and supply across wider areas spreads such a risk. Africa's endowments are also complementary in time and space: hydropower and geothermal in the east, strong solar across the Sahel and north, solar, wind, and coal-hydro mix in the south. Linked together, these can offset each other's shortfalls rather than each country absorbing its own. Hence, integration, not scale alone, delivers the energy security investors seek—and advances Africa's ambition toward high-value production.

Sequencing matters as much as scale. Development partners now prioritise household access before industrial power (Moore & Tesfaye, 2025). Yet, no region has industrialised that way. The choice need not be binary. Integration can let Africa pursue both: pooling demand across borders builds markets large enough for industrial projects, while the same grids extend household access. Planned separately, the two compete for capital. Planned together, they reinforce each other. Integration is not a trade-off between industrial growth and basic access; it is what reconciles them.

Perhaps the strongest industrial rationale concerns Africa's mineral reserves. These reserves are critical to the global energy transition (Nforngwa & Njamnshi, 2025), but exporting raw ore alone will not deliver industrial transformation. Moving into refining, battery-grade processing, and electric-vehicle supply chains, all far more power-intensive than mining itself, requires reliable power at scale. Mineral sovereignty and energy sovereignty are, in this sense, inseparable. An integrated power market would help Africa build both together by allowing extraction, processing, and manufacturing to locate where it makes the most economic sense. This gives the AfCFTA real infrastructural and industrial foundation, not just a bigger trading area. The AfSEM and the AfCFTA are accordingly two halves of the same project: one cannot transform Africa without the other. Africa's minerals advantage will become industrial advantage only with power markets built to match it.

The geopolitical stakes of the energy transition are also apparent (Nforngwa & Njamnshi, 2025), and exporting raw materials only accumulates dependence, not leverage. Such is a pattern traced systematically across Africa's extractive economies. The critical minerals race further sharpens its dynamic. In 2025, the DRC alone supplies 73 of global cobalt (Cobalt Institute, 2026) yet captures little of the value from battery and EV supply chains dominated by processors abroad. A shared power system that feeds regional value chains offers Africa a direct counterstrategy to this unfair order. With reliable power, it can convert abundance into structural power: the capacity to set the terms of exchange, not merely to supply inputs. Ultimately, energy integration can drive African industrialisation and strategic autonomy in tandem. It would enable Africa to turn natural endowment into productive complementarity, distributed regional value

chains, and greater control over its own future. To get there, countries need to see the value in broader cross-border markets and harmonise their energy and industrial policies. Energy integration is not just about keeping lights on. It is about building the material foundation for industrial transformation and genuine geopolitical agency.

Shared power infrastructure, energy interdependence, and peacebuilding

Africa's energy gap is intricately linked to conflict and instability (Kinkoh, 2026). Integration can help here too. When neighbouring states depend on the same power lines and plants, conflict does not just hurt each economy on its own—it damages the shared system both sides need to keep running. The logic is simple: when countries depend on each other, breaking that link costs more than it is worth. The evidence for this comes from a rigorous study by Gökçe et al. (2021), who find that countries more dependent on an energy exporter tend to treat it more peacefully. It follows that energy interdependence would also support regional peace and stability.

Electricity has features that strengthen its pacifying role (Gökçe et al., 2021:2). Unlike oil or coal, electrons cannot be stored or shipped elsewhere. Supply and demand must also match instantly. Trading power therefore requires steady investment in transmission lines, matching regulations, and constant, practical coordination among engineers, regulators, and system operators. This day-to-day teamwork, a form of functional diplomacy, keeps communication channels open even when high-level politics sours. RECs in Africa may turn such working relationships into standing channels for dialogue, and continental early-warning systems should track power dependence as a factor to watch, not an afterthought.

Energy interdependence should not yet be romanticised as an automatic guarantor of peace. A shared infrastructure can be weaponised, and an uneven dependency can itself breed resentment. Whether shared power builds peace or breeds resentment depends on how fairly it is run. The Rusumo Falls Hydroelectric Project, run jointly by Burundi, Rwanda, and Tanzania with World Bank support, has supplied its full 80 MW to all three national grids since 2023–24 (NBI, 2024). The project is a showcase of how transboundary resources can be jointly managed as a shared productive asset rather than a site to be fought over.

The Senegal River Basin Authority (OMVS) is a longer-running case, and a useful warning against overselling the idea. Since 1972, Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal, later joined by Guinea, have shared the river's infrastructure by formula, and any change requires unanimous consent (Langrand, 2021). The case is not proof that shared infrastructure stops wars outright: a border war between Mauritania and Senegal halted construction from 1989 to 1991. What the OMVS actually proves is that shared systems can survive conflict and pick back up afterwards. New interconnectors may copy its consent-by-agreement model for exactly that reason.

Where power projects are run well, the payoff is also felt at home. As to Kinkoh (2026:1), two-thirds of the 600 million Africans without electricity live in fragile or conflict-affected areas. In those areas, having no power often feels like the state has abandoned them: clinics cannot function properly, schools lose hours of daylight, and families pay more than they should for energy. Reliable regional power can then help restore basic services and rebuild trust between citizens and the state. For instance, Guinea-Bissau's 2025 connection to the OMVG regional grid ended chronic blackouts in one of West Africa's most coup-prone countries—hospitals and schools had power again within weeks, in a country where unreliable electricity has long gone hand in hand with weak government and illegal trade (Bramston & Associates, 2025).

Reliable renewable energy can also weaken informal fuel economies, smuggling, and diesel rents that often finance armed groups. In eastern DRC, the Virunga Alliance's hydropower

programme has pushed out the charcoal trade that used to fund the FDLR militia, creating more than 21,000 jobs—roughly one in nine new workers is a former fighter (Kinkoh, 2026). In Sudan, UNDP-installed solar water pumps serve 200,000 people, replacing the diesel supply routes that had fuelled local conflict (Kinkoh, 2026). The cases in point suggest that reliable power weakens the informal, often violent, economies that energy poverty leaves behind. Integration plans should therefore prioritise fragile areas as well, not just the routes that are easiest to profit from.

The gains from interdependence also add up to real negotiating power. When countries formally link their systems, they do not just gain stability; they gain weight at the table. The European Union shows both edges. Its single energy market enabled members to respond together to the 2022 gas crisis. Yet, years of relying too heavily on a single supplier had already left member states exposed to coercion. Here Africa's own collective weight is already gaining recognition, shown by the African Union's permanent seat at the G20 since 2023. As competition over critical minerals and climate finance intensifies, a truly continental power market would carry that same weight into energy and industrial negotiations—letting the AU bargain over technology transfer and mineral partnerships as one bloc rather than as fifty-five separate counterparties. The AfSEM is accordingly more than market reform. It is the groundwork for industrialisation, peacebuilding, and collective autonomy. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is the clearest live test of whether such framing holds.

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD): a test case for economic hydro-diplomacy

Since construction began in 2011, the GERD has sat at the centre of Nile politics. Ethiopia frames the dam as its sovereign right to development; Egypt sees it as a threat to water security; Sudan weighs the hydrological risk against the promise of cheaper power (Ayenew et al., 2023). This zero-sum framing obscures something important: water rights remain contested even where the dams can be shared. With 5,150 MW of installed capacity and 74 billion cubic metres of storage, the GERD is Africa's largest hydropower scheme and a potential anchor for the EAPP.

To show what shared benefit can look like, the 1,045-kilometre 500-kV Ethiopia–Kenya interconnector already delivers reliable, clean power to East Africa's largest economy (Zekarias, 2026). Kenya saved about US$10 million in its first year of importing. A proposed 580-kilometre GERD-Khartoum line would extend this further, building on the Ethiopia–Sudan interconnector that already reaches an estimated 1.4 million households. Properly managed, such shared connectors can turn a contested dam into a functioning regional asset. It gives neighbouring states a growing stake in cooperation. This is the practical core of what this paper calls economic hydro-diplomacy: using shared energy infrastructure to build cooperative interests around a contested resource, without claiming the underlying dispute is solved, a missing fit for the current trajectory of engagement among the Nile riparian states.

For Ethiopia, this means export revenue and a better return on its generation investment. For power-poor neighbours, it means cheaper, cleaner imports instead of costly diesel or thermal generation. For the wider Nile basin, it means stronger incentives for the routine data-sharing and coordination that water disputes alone have struggled to produce. Additionally, shared energy interests serve as a point of convergence for peacebuilding and trust among the Nile riparian states and the East Africa region at large.

Climate change raises the stakes. The Nile basin supports hundreds of millions of people in a region facing more erratic rainfall and prolonged drought. Real-time data-sharing and early-warning systems could allow the GERD's large reservoir to buffer downstream flows during climate shocks, while anchoring a wider clean-energy and industrial corridor.

This is still a proposal, not a proven result. The GERD only opened on 9 September 2025. African institutions could, therefore, treat it as a live test, not a finished success—and start building the monitoring systems now that will let them judge it fairly in a few years. The wider lesson holds either way. Africa's shared rivers and power grids are common assets. Treating them only as national property was often going to produce zero-sum fights. Treating them as shared infrastructure, run jointly, is what turns a contested resource into real collective strength.

From going it alone to collective networked energy sovereignty

The challenge confronting Africa's energy sector is not just physical; it is also institutional and political. Connection can still drive industrial growth, support stability, and expand Africa's geopolitical standing, but only if fragmented national systems are rebuilt into an effectively functioning continental energy governance system. Five structural barriers stand in the way. First, different grid codes, licensing rules, and wheeling arrangements across countries raise transaction costs and discourage cross-border investment. The AfDB's (2025) Electricity Regulatory Index, now covering 43 countries, shows regulatory capacity is improving but remains uneven. This is compounded by utilities that cannot pay their way. National utilities routinely under-recover costs and operate on weak balance sheets, with the AfDB (2025) estimating the power-sector financing gap in Africa at roughly US$25 billion a year. The third barrier is expensive, risky infrastructure. Transmission lines are costly, long-lived, and exposed to currency and political risk, costs that fall on individual national budgets even when the benefits are regional. The joint AfDB–World Bank Mission 300 initiative has mobilised close to US$19.5 billion for electricity access (AfDB & World Bank Group, 2026), underscoring the scale of de-risked finance such projects require.

The fourth is uneven progress across Africa's five RPPs, summarised in Table 1. The SAPP is deeply interconnected and has the most advanced market. The WAPP is expanding fast: Guinea-Bissau's April 2025 connection to the Gambia River basin grid ended years of chronic blackouts almost overnight, replacing an unreliable mix of ageing diesel plant and a leased floating power ship with hydropower from Guinea's Kaleta Dam (Bramston & Associates, 2025). The EAPP continues to advance despite political tensions and insecurity. The CAPP remains the least developed. North Africa's grid is technically the most advanced but trades little with other African grids. As such, continental integration cannot follow a single timetable. It must accommodate these different speeds without letting the least-connected pool hold back the rest.

***Table 2**. Comparative status of Africa's five regional power pools*

Power Pool	Status	Strength	Main challenge
SAPP (Southern Africa)	Most advanced	Deepest interconnection; functioning competitive market	Ageing infrastructure; slow new investment
WAPP (West Africa)	Advancing	4,000+ km of new transmission; day-ahead market from 2026	Utility payment arrears; incomplete links
EAPP (Eastern Africa)	Advancing	GERD-anchored growth; Ethiopia–Kenya interconnector	Political tensions among members
CAPP (Central Africa)	Least developed	Large, untapped hydropower potential	Minimal interconnection; weak institutions
North Africa (COMELEC)	Technically advanced	Strong national grids	Limited intra-African trade; Europe-oriented

***Source**: Author*

A fifth barrier decides whether the other four get fixed: political reluctance to pool sovereign functions. National utilities and regulators are understandably wary of ceding planning authority, tariff control or dispatch priority while domestic supply is strained. This reveals another paradox at the heart of Africa's energy sovereignty debate. Going it alone, in a continent where resources and demand cross borders, sustains energy insecurity. Isolated systems lose economies of scale and complementary renewables. Yet, pooling control without proper safeguards can also create a different risk. It exposes countries to a neighbour's policy failure, payment default, or political instability.

The right framing, then, is not sovereignty versus interdependence. It is pursuing sovereignty through properly governed interdependence. This is the idea behind a framework that this paper calls collective networked energy sovereignty: sovereignty built not by insulating states from each other, but by governing their connections together. Collective networked energy sovereignty entails a state's power to shape the rules of its own energy relationships—the regulations, contracts, dispute mechanisms, and joint institutions governing shared infrastructure—rather than its ability to go it alone. It is the ability of African states, acting together through transnational institutions, to manage shared energy risks and turn shared resource and infrastructure into collective benefit, without any state losing control over its own resources.

Three principles make this work. First, selective pooling: states keep authority over their own resources but hand specific technical functions, such as grid codes and corridor management, to regional bodies where joint action clearly works better. Second, reciprocal value creation: cross-border power deals should be linked to industrial policy, so that connectivity builds local processing and manufacturing, not just raw electricity exports. Third, enforceable fairness: binding dispute-resolution mechanisms, transparent payment terms, and shared real-time data, so that interdependence builds trust rather than resentment. The OMVS regime on the Senegal River already shows what the third principle, in particular, may look like (Langrand, 2021).

The same three principles would extend the usefulness of economic hydro-diplomacy beyond any single project. When water, power, industrial policy, and infrastructure are planned across borders rather than nation by nation, shared assets stop being sources of rivalry and start building real incentives for cooperation. This is consistent with Agenda 2063's aim for the AfSEM (AU, 2021): not simply a bigger market, but a tool for governing shared dependencies so that they strengthen, rather than weaken, African states. Indeed, a continent that coordinates its power markets, industrial demand, and mineral resources negotiates from a stronger position than 55 states competing separately for the same capital and technology.

Conclusion

Africa's energy systems cannot remain national and fragmented if the continent is to build competitive industries, diversify its economies, and exercise real political agency. Staying fragmented, country by country, locks the continent into high tariffs, low-value production, and endless raw-material exports, leaving its resource abundance underused and its industrial ambitions unmet. Pooled power trade cuts costs, and reliable supply is what industrial growth depends on. Run well, shared infrastructure also builds the everyday cooperation that can support regional stability. The stakes are concrete. As the global shift to clean energy accelerates, Africa's mineral wealth becomes real independence only if it also controls the power and processing that refine it. Against this backdrop, energy integration is not a technical fix for power shortages; rather, it is an integral, irreplaceable foundation for real economic sovereignty.

The policy takeaway is that the AUC, RECs, and RPPs should treat energy integration as core industrial and geopolitical strategy, not a side issue. This requires weighing short-term

national interests against the bigger returns only cross-border markets deliver—a trade-off national planning alone is not designed to make. Every new transboundary project also needs binding benefit-sharing and dispute-resolution rules built in from the start. The task is no longer to prove that integration can work. It is to build the institutions that ensure it does. Done right, pooled energy becomes the connective tissue linking industrialisation, regional stability, and a stronger African voice on the world stage. That is the essence of powering sovereignty.

Policy recommendations

1. Convene a Ministerial Energy Diplomacy Platform. The AUC should lead it, with the AfCFTA Secretariat, RECs, and RPPs. The purpose of the Platform will be to align power expansion with industrial corridors and keep infrastructure out of political disputes. The first session may be within 12 months, measured by a joint statement and REC–RPP corridor alignments.
2. Harmonise the rules under the AfSEM. The AfSEM Secretariat and national regulators, through the AfCFTA Secretariat, should fast-track the development of common grid codes, tariffs, and settlement rules to enable producers to trade freely across borders. The target will be to harmonise the rules by 2028, measured by power pools trading without extra national approval.
3. Make benefit-sharing a condition, not an afterthought. The AU Peace and Security Council should endorse interconnectors only if they meet clear standards for fair ownership, data sharing, local power access, and binding dispute resolution. Checked annually, measured by the share of projects meeting the standard.
4. Capitalise an African Energy Integration Financing Facility. Building on Mission 300, the AfDB and Afreximbank should use blended finance and risk insurance to shift transmission risk off national budgets—targeting US$5 billion within three years, with progress tracked by projects reaching financial close.
5. Link power corridors to mineral beneficiation. The AUC, AfCFTA Secretariat and African Minerals Development Centre should require every AfSEM corridor serving a mining region to offer priced power for local processing. This turns extraction into real value chains and gives resource sovereignty a material base. Reported annually as processing capacity connected.
6. Designate shared power infrastructure as part of Africa's peace and security Architecture (APSA). The AU Peace and Security Council should formally designate interconnectors, dispatch centres, and shared dams as critical peace assets for continental early warning systems and peacebuilding. Complete within 18 months, reviewed annually, and measured by assets designated.

4

Partisan Extractivism and the Limits of Resource Sovereignty: Zimbabwe's Lithium Export Regime as a Lesson for African Industrial Policy

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Executive Summary

Africa's endowment of critical minerals has positioned the continent as a strategic frontier in the global clean energy transition. Yet, African states continue to capture disproportionately little value from extraction, exporting raw commodities while processing and manufacturing margins accrue elsewhere. Resource sovereignty, expressed through export bans, beneficiation mandates, and state equity requirements, has become the dominant policy response. Zimbabwe, home to Africa's largest lithium reserves, offers the most analytically revealing case of this trend. Since 2022, Harare has moved from a partial ban on raw ore exports to an abrupt, retroactive suspension of all raw mineral and lithium concentrate exports on 25 February 2026, followed within weeks by a discretionary quota and tax regime, and now, as of August 2026, by continuing industry pressure to extend the January 2027 deadline for a full concentrate export ban.

This paper argues that export bans and related instruments of resource nationalism are necessary but insufficient for African industrial development. The decisive variable is the political economy of who governs the extraction-to-processing value chain and under what conditions the ruling elite's interests align with or subvert industrialisation objectives. Drawing on the concept of "partisan extractivism," which the authors are developing, the paper theorises resource governance in peripheral African states as a politically structured outcome rather than a purely technical challenge, with direct consequences for peace and security as well as industrial policy. It finds that Zimbabwe's 2022 ban created discursive space for sovereignty claims without restructuring the underlying political economy of extraction, a limitation exposed by the improvised character of the 2026 escalation and its rapid retreat into a case-by-case quota system. Credible resource sovereignty requires institutional decisiveness, policy predictability, and governance insulated from elite capture, rather than discretionary interventions that generate short-term rents and long-term uncertainty.

Key Points

Conceptual finding: "partisan extractivism" captures three dynamics visible in Zimbabwe's case – (i) ruling elite interests shaping who is granted market access; (ii) entrenched foreign capital alliances, particularly with vertically integrated Chinese processors; and (iii) short-term rent capture through taxes that substitute for structural reform.

Empirical finding: Zimbabwe's lithium export regime escalated from a 2022 raw-ore ban, to a 2025 announcement of a January 2027 concentrate export ban, to an immediate, retroactive suspension of all raw mineral and concentrate exports on 25 February 2026, and then to a discretionary quota and 10 per cent export tax system introduced in April 2026.

Empirical finding: the February 2026 suspension was justified by the government as a response to under-declaration, illicit stockpiling, and a producer rush to export ahead of the original 2027 deadline, but its retroactive application to shipments already in transit signalled policy unpredictability rather than institutional strength.

Empirical finding: the rapid reversion to a discretionary, producer-by-producer quota regime by April 2026, and the still-unresolved industry request for an extension beyond January 2027, demonstrate that sovereign declarations without insulated institutions do not, by themselves, produce beneficiation or industrial transformation.

Policy implication: African states pursuing resource sovereignty need coherent, rules-based governance frameworks, regional coordination to prevent competitive undercutting, and predictable timelines, so that strategic resource governance translates into industrial capacity rather than geopolitical signalling.

Introduction

The global clean energy transition has repositioned Africa's mineral endowments, particularly lithium, at the centre of debates on economic sovereignty and industrial development. African states holding reserves of lithium, cobalt, and platinum group metals have historically captured a disproportionately small share of the value generated across these commodity chains, exporting raw ore. At the same time, downstream processing and manufacturing profits accrue in Asia, Europe, and North America (Bridge, 2008). In response, resource nationalism has re-emerged as a defining policy instrument across the continent, manifest in export bans, local beneficiation mandates, and demands for state equity in extractive ventures (Ovadia, 2016).

Zimbabwe, which hosts the largest known lithium reserves in Africa and was Africa's top lithium producer in 2025 (USGS, 2026; Shaba, 2026), provides the most instructive and analytically consequential case of this trend. The country's lithium export policy has evolved through several distinct phases: a 2022 ban on raw, unprocessed lithium ore; a 2025 announcement setting January 2027 as the deadline for a full ban on lithium concentrate exports; an abrupt escalation on 25 February 2026, when government suspended, with immediate effect, all exports of raw minerals and lithium concentrates, including shipments already in transit; and, within six weeks, a retreat into a discretionary, producer-specific quota and tax framework (Tétrault, 2026). As of August 2026, the Zimbabwe Lithium Producers' Association has formally petitioned the government for an extension of the January 2027 deadline, a request that remains unanswered (Mining Weekly, 2026).

This paper asks what the 2022–2026 trajectory of Zimbabwe's lithium governance reveals about the limits of resource sovereignty as a policy instrument for African industrial development. It argues that export restrictions, however politically popular, are necessary but insufficient conditions for beneficiation and industrialisation. The decisive variable is not whether a state asserts sovereignty over its resources, but the underlying political economy of who governs the extraction-to-processing value chain, and under what conditions ruling elite interests align with, or actively undermine, long-term developmental objectives. The paper develops this argument through the concept of "partisan extractivism," which the authors are developing. It situates the Zimbabwean case within two established bodies of thought on how value moves through global commodity chains and who ultimately controls it (Coe et al., 2008; Harvey, 2003; Kamuti & Mandishona, 2026).

Zimbabwe is a useful case because it combines, in one jurisdiction, Africa's largest lithium reserves, a policy record of escalating then reversing extraction rules within a single presidential term, and documented links between mining access and both ruling-party and security-sector interests – conditions that make the politics of resource governance unusually visible. The 2022–2026 period is chosen because it captures one complete policy cycle, from the initial ban through the 2027 deadline to the 2026 suspension and quota reversal, allowing cause and consequence to be traced across successive interventions rather than a single snapshot. The paper draws on three cross-checked source types: government announcements and ministerial correspondence; financial and mining-industry reporting (Fastmarkets, Mining Weekly, Mining.com, and international law-firm briefings) chosen for producer-level detail; and investigative and civil-society reporting, including the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime's Global Organised Crime Index, used to establish the sector's illicit-economy and security dimensions. This single-case design gives analytical depth rather than statistical generalisability, a limitation discussed further below.

From ban to suspension: the escalating trajectory of Zimbabwe's lithium governance, 2022-2026

Zimbabwe's regulation of lithium exports has proceeded in stages rather than through a single coherent policy design. The foundation was laid in late 2022, when the government banned the export of raw, unprocessed lithium ore amid concerns that illegal mining and smuggling were causing substantial revenue losses; however, mining companies were permitted to continue exporting processed concentrate (Tétrault, 2026). In 2025, the government formalised a further step, setting January 2027 as the deadline for a full ban on lithium concentrate exports, a timeline intended to give producers roughly eighteen months to construct domestic processing facilities (Sinha, Pinkoski and Quinn, 2026).

On 25 February 2026, however, Mines and Mining Development Minister Polite Kambamura announced the immediate suspension of all exports of raw minerals and lithium concentrates, effective without notice and applying to consignments already in transit (Al Jazeera, 2026; Bloomberg, 2026). The government cited the "national interest" and the need to curb "malpractices," under-declaration, and illicit stockpiling ahead of the original 2027 cut-off, a practice authorities characterised as producers engaging in an "unacceptable scramble" to export before restrictions tightened (Al Jazeera, 2026). Zimbabwe had exported 1.128 million tonnes of spodumene concentrate in 2025, up 11 per cent on the previous year, and was forecast to supply roughly 7 per cent of global lithium carbonate equivalent output in 2026, underscoring the scale of the disruption that would be threatened (Fastmarkets, 2026). The intervention produced a short-run market signal, a sharp rise in the most traded lithium-carbonate futures contract on 26 February, and an investor-risk signal, with China's embassy advising Chinese firms on 19 March to assess Zimbabwe's policy risk (Reuters 2026a, 2026b).

The suspension proved short-lived in its most stringent form. On 2 April 2026, the Ministry of Mines wrote to the Chamber of Mines setting out conditions for the resumption of exports under a discretionary, producer-specific quota system: individually communicated export allocations, written commitments to construct lithium sulphate processing plants before January 2027, mandatory publication of annual financial statements, compliance with labour, safety and environmental standards, and the establishment of on-site assay laboratories, alongside a ten per cent export tax on lithium concentrate shipments pending the 2027 ban (Fastmarkets, 2026; Al Jazeera, 2026). By mid-April 2026, six major producers, including Sinomine's Bikita mine and Prospect Lithium Zimbabwe (Huayou Cobalt), had been granted quotas; as recently as 25 August 2026, Sinomine secured a further allocation of 300,000 tonnes (Mining.com, 2026). Meanwhile, the Zimbabwe Lithium Producers' Association formally requested, from June 2026, an extension of the January 2027 deadline to June 2027, with the Minister stating publicly that the deadline is not open to negotiation (Mining Weekly, 2026; Mining Zimbabwe, 2026). This sequence- ban, deferred deadline, sudden retroactive suspension, and rapid retreat into a discretionary quota regime- is not evidence of a coherent strategic resource governance framework. It is evidence of an improvised, reactive policy process in which the state retains ultimate discretion over market access while offering producers no stable, rules-based pathway to compliance.

Partisan extractivism: a political, not just technical, story

The recurring pattern in Zimbabwe's lithium governance – firm public assertions of sovereignty, followed by quiet, case-by-case accommodation of specific foreign investors – is best explained not as a technical design failure but as a political one. "Partisan extractivism" is the authors' term for this: resource governance outcomes in peripheral African states are shaped less by the formal wording of any single instrument than by the interests of ruling elites,

their alliances with foreign capital, and bargains that trade long-term industrial transformation for short-term rent.

Three dynamics illustrate this in Zimbabwe's case. (i) Ruling elite interests: the April 2026 quota system vests ministries with power to decide, producer by producer, who may export and how much, so access becomes a function of standing with government rather than transparent, universal criteria. (ii) Foreign capital alliances: the principal beneficiaries – Sinomine, Prospect Lithium Zimbabwe (Huayou Cobalt), Yahua, and Chengxin – are vertically integrated Chinese producers whose concentrate feeds Chinese conversion capacity; their continued, if constrained, access shows established foreign capital absorbing the shock more readily than smaller operators. (iii) Short-term rent capture: the government's own justification for the suspension, curbing under-declaration and stockpiling, concedes that the 2022 ban had not secured the transparency it was designed to produce; the ten per cent tax introduced weeks later converted continued raw exports into a revenue stream rather than a bridge to processing.

Partisan extractivism is a distinct claim, not simply a new label for resource curse, elite capture, clientelism, or rentier-state theory, though it draws on all four. The resource curse explains why mineral wealth correlates with weak national development outcomes, but not which actors capture the value or why they do so. Elite capture and clientelism describe rents flowing to loyal networks, but usually treat bans, quotas, and taxes as fixed rules that elites bend around. Rentier-state theory explains weak accountability under resource dependence, but not how that dependence shapes the instruments themselves. Partisan extractivism's narrower claim is that the instruments of resource governance are themselves renegotiated in real time to accommodate particular elite-aligned and foreign-capital relationships, producing the escalate-then-reverse pattern documented above, and is more likely where ministries retain wide discretion over market access, security-linked actors have documented access to mining areas, and compliance requirements are newly introduced and unverified – conditions Zimbabwe's April 2026 quota framework meets at once. Because this analysis rests on a single country, the extent to which the pattern generalises elsewhere cannot be established here; it is best read as a hypothesis to be tested in other cases, such as cobalt governance in the Democratic Republic of Congo, rather than as an established rule.

Why national bans are not enough on their own

A complementary reading starts with a simple observation: where lithium is turned into a valuable, finished product matters more than where it is mined. Global Production Networks (GPN) analysis shows that value capture in extractive industries depends less on national policy than on a country's position within networks of lead firms and processing capacity that typically sit beyond its borders (Coe et al., 2008). Zimbabwe's spodumene has moved almost entirely into Chinese-controlled conversion capacity; Huayou Cobalt commissioned a 50,000-tonne-per-year lithium sulphate plant in October 2025, and Sinomine and Yahua have announced further plants, but most value addition still occurs outside the country. A national export ban can shift where the first stage of processing occurs, but cannot, alone, relocate the technology, capital, and market relationships that decide where most value is captured.

Harvey's concept of accumulation by dispossession adds a related point: the state's own regulatory tools, bans, quotas, and taxes can themselves redistribute value among capital interests rather than keep it at home (Harvey, 2003). The ten per cent export tax on quota-holders, pending the 2027 ban, functions less as a beneficiation incentive than as a revenue mechanism layered onto continued raw exports, deferring the shift toward domestic processing that the policy is meant to compel. Together, these frameworks suggest Zimbabwe's instruments operate

mainly at the level of national announcement. At the same time, the technology, capital, and infrastructure that decide who captures value remain largely outside their reach – exactly the gap partisan extractivism identifies as the space where elite bargaining, not institutional design, decides outcomes.

What the 2026 quota reversal reveals

The trajectory from the 25 February 2026 suspension to the 2 April 2026 quota framework, and the subsequent, unresolved industry request for a further extension beyond January 2027, together demonstrate three limits of resource sovereignty as currently practised in Zimbabwe. First, the retroactive application of the February suspension to shipments already in transit imposed costs on investors that had complied with the pre-existing regulatory timeline, damaging the predictability on which sustained beneficiation investment depends. Second, the speed of the reversal into a discretionary quota system, within six weeks of the initial suspension, suggests that the fiscal and diplomatic costs of a blanket ban proved higher than government anticipated. Third, the unresolved status of the industry's extension request as at August 2026 leaves the sector facing continued uncertainty over the terms on which the January 2027 deadline will ultimately be enforced, reproducing exactly the kind of unpredictability that undermines investor confidence in domestic processing capacity.

These findings carry a broader lesson for African resource governance beyond Zimbabwe. Sovereign declarations, export bans, beneficiation mandates, and equity requirements generate short-term political returns and international visibility. Still, they translate into industrial transformation only when embedded in institutions capable of enforcing consistent rules over the multi-year horizons that processing investment requires. Where such institutions are absent, or where implementation remains a matter of ministerial discretion, resource sovereignty risks becoming a recurring cycle of assertion, disruption, and negotiated retreat, precisely the pattern documented here.

Implications for peace, security, and state-society relations

Zimbabwe's lithium governance is not only an industrial policy question; it also carries direct implications for peace and security, the Tana Forum's central concern. First, the same regulatory gaps that partisan extractivism describes have coincided with organised, armed violence in mining areas. Gangs known locally as Mashurugwi, long associated with violent turf wars over gold claims, machete attacks, and killings, have extended their activity into lithium-producing districts (African Arguments, 2020; The East African, n.d.). A 2025 assessment by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime found criminal syndicates, state-embedded actors, and private interests jointly implicated in lithium theft, with corrupt officials granting unauthorised access (The Zimbabwe Independent, 2026).

Second, this entanglement breeds friction at the community level: where illicit mining and gang violence are unevenly policed, host communities bear the costs, insecurity, and environmental damage, lost livelihoods, while connected elites retain the benefits of continued market access, a recognised driver of local grievance that early-warning frameworks such as the African Union's Continental Early Warning System are designed to flag. Third, the unpredictability of the export regime- sudden suspension, retroactive application, case-by-case quotas- gives informal and illicit actors a comparative advantage over compliant producers since formal channels can close without notice while informal networks adapt faster. Policy unpredictability, therefore, not only deters legitimate investment; it can also strengthen the illicit economy that resource sovereignty measures are meant to curb, with knock-on risks for community safety and state legitimacy in mining regions.

Conclusion

Zimbabwe's lithium export trajectory between 2022 and 2026 illustrates both the appeal and the limits of resource nationalism as an instrument of African industrial policy. The escalating sequence of bans, deadlines, an abrupt retroactive suspension, and a rapid retreat into a discretionary quota-and-tax regime has generated significant disruption and investor uncertainty, without yet producing the intended scale of domestic beneficiation. Partisan extractivism helps explain why outcomes are shaped less by the technical design of any instrument than by the shifting alignment of ruling-elite interests, foreign-capital alliances, and short-term developmental bargains. Bans and quotas are necessary for asserting resource sovereignty but not sufficient alone to restructure who governs the value chain. For a Forum concerned with security as much as sovereignty, this is also a reminder that unpredictable resource governance is a peace and security risk, not only a fiscal one, since it creates space for illicit and, at times, armed actors to fill gaps left by inconsistent enforcement. Success will depend less on the stringency of any single measure than on whether government converts episodic sovereignty into stable, rules-based governance: sequencing restrictions against verified readiness, auditing investment bargains, enforcing community and environmental rights, and building specialised regional value chains, so that policy becomes predictable, legitimate, and resilient, while illicit opportunity around strategic resources narrows.

Policy Recommendations

For African governments and regional institutions, the Zimbabwean case suggests the following, each with a responsible institution, financing, an indicator, and a compliance mechanism.

1. Replace discretionary quotas with published, rules-based thresholds, applied without retroactive effect. Ministry of Mines, with Parliament's Mines Committee and the Attorney-General's office. Indicator: a public quota registry, updated within 30 days, and a minimum 90-day notice period for new restrictions. Compliance: annual Auditor-General audit and a legal-challenge mechanism for producers.
2. Sequence deadlines to match verified processing-capacity readiness. An independent technical panel with the Chamber of Mines. Indicator: a published readiness assessment 12 months out. Compliance: automatic, graduated consequences rather than ministerial discretion.
3. Strengthen fiscal transparency and ring-fence tax revenue for processing. Minerals Marketing Corporation of Zimbabwe and Zimbabwe Revenue Authority; tax revenue to a jointly run Beneficiation Fund. Indicator: quarterly export-versus-production and annual disbursement reports—compliance: cross-checking against independent estimates, plus audit.
4. Coordinate regionally on beneficiation standards and insulate oversight from security-sector interests. AU/SADC (standards, pooled financing, peer review); Parliament/Anti-Corruption Commission (disclosure, investigation).

5

Beyond Extraction: Reorienting Africa's Resource Governance Frameworks for Structural Transformation

Humphrey Mrema

About the Author

Humphrey Mrema is the Chairman of the Youth Survival Organisation, an urban planner, and a sustainability advocate renowned for his dedication to climate action, the energy transition, and empowering youth and communities in Tanzania. Humphrey brings more than six years of experience working with youth-led not-for-profit initiatives. He has made a profound impact on urban planning, policy advocacy, and climate education in Tanzania and beyond. Humphrey's expertise in advocacy, policy negotiations, and capacity development has resulted in influential global policies, like the Doha Program of Action for Least Developed Countries (DPoA) and the Kampala Declaration for Migration, Environment, and Climate Change. His adept leadership, public speaking, writing, event, and project management skills have mobilised diverse groups to join the sustainable future movement. Internationally, he has engaged in initiatives such as the Youth4Climate Initiative and the Climate Vulnerable Forum, ensuring youth voices are heard in global climate discussions. Humphrey's story is a testament to the impact of passion and commitment in shaping the relentless pursuit of a sustainable future.

Executive Summary

Africa enters the second half of the Agenda 2063 implementation period holding a larger share of the world's strategically consequential resources, while exercising considerably less authority over how those resources are priced, processed and accounted for than the scale of the endowment would suggest. For example, the Democratic Republic of Congo supplies roughly seven in every ten tonnes of the world's mined cobalt; Africa holds close to thirty per cent of the minerals on which the global energy transition depends and around sixty per cent of the world's uncultivated arable land. This paper argues that weak governance authority over the terms on which resources enter the world economy, rather than a shortage of resources or of policy frameworks, is a principal constraint on the continent's structural transformation, and that it links shortfalls in energy, agriculture, water, and security, which are usually treated as separate problems. Its distinct contribution is to treat resource governance as an instrument of peace and security as well as of economic policy.

The paper proposes five measures: a continental minerals negotiating mechanism with incentives for participation; completion of the rules of origin of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) for mineral and clean energy value chains; legislated revenue reserves for adaptation; a formal link between transboundary basin bodies and the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC); and joint resource, climate and security planning.

Key Points

Africa's mineral wealth largely serves other economies' industrial strategies. The continent holds 57% of global cobalt reserves and roughly 3% of world refining capacity. That processing gap, not the endowment, determines the development outcome.

Energy poverty on a continent of energy abundance is a governance outcome, not a geological one. Universal electricity access is estimated to require about 15 billion United States dollars a year, well below the 88 billion that leaves the continent annually through capital flight.

Contested resource access is a documented driver of armed conflict across the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, the Great Lakes and the Horn. Resource governance therefore belongs within the African Peace and Security Architecture as a preventive instrument, not solely within ministries of mines and finance.

Climate justice is unattainable without fiscal autonomy. Africa contributes under 4% of global emissions, loses up to 5% of gross domestic product annually to climate impacts, and receives under 3% of global climate finance.

The required policy architecture already exists. The African Mining Vision, Agenda 2063, the Africa Green Minerals Strategy, the Kampala CAADP Declaration and the African Continental Free Trade Area set the right direction, but carry design gaps, notably the absence of compliance benchmarks and sanctions, and suffer from weak enforcement. What is required is a standing continental mechanism that sets minimum conditions on processing, disclosure and revenue, which member states commit to through a politically binding AU Assembly decision. It would be achieved by conditioning access to AfDB and Africa Finance Corporation financing on compliance, with annual reviews and publications.

Introduction

Africa's economic sovereignty and geopolitical transformation are not parallel concerns; the second is setting the limits of the first. Africa is being courted, simultaneously and competitively, by partners who want the same things: minerals for battery chains, land for food and biofuel security, gas for transitional energy portfolios, and diplomatic alignment in multilateral fora. What is largely not on offer is the one thing that would alter African development trajectories: processing capacity located on African soil under African regulatory authority.

The Tripoli Declaration on the Elimination of Conflicts in Africa and the Promotion of Sustainable Peace, adopted in August 2009, has framed African peace and security as an intellectual challenge requiring African-led solutions (African Union, 2009). That framing is worth recovering, because the resource question is usually treated as a technical matter of contract negotiation and fiscal design. It is not. It is a question about who holds decision authority, and decision authority is a political and institutional variable before it is an economic one.

This paper therefore uses the term "resource governance authority" rather than "ownership," since constitutional vesting clauses already confer legal ownership of subsoil resources on most African states. Resource governance authority is defined here as the practical and enforceable capacity of a state, alone or with other states, to decide where a resource is processed, at what price and on what terms output is sold, under what disclosure regime contracts and revenue are recorded, and how that revenue is allocated across competing priorities. It rests on three supports: legal mandate; technical and administrative capability, including geological data, contract negotiation and tax audit; and bargaining power, which grows when producers act together. Ownership without these capacities reproduces the pattern of the past 60 years. The evidence is drawn from continental policy instruments, from data of the AU, the African Development Bank (AfDB), the International Energy Agency (IEA), the Global Centre on Adaptation (GCA) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), and from peer-reviewed research on resources and conflict.

The endowment paradox and what explains it

The standard account of African resource underperformance invokes the resource curse. Early studies associated resource abundance with slower growth (Sachs & Warner, 2001), while later work showed that the curse is conditional on institutions that reward production rather than rent seeking (Mehlum et al., 2006), and reviews confirm that its strongest effects operate through institutions, conflict and revenue management (Ross, 2015). This literature says little about a prior question: who decides the terms of extraction, processing, and sale? This paper extends the institutional view by treating that decision authority as the variable policy must govern.

The structure of the cobalt value chain shows how this works, and four stages of reservation, production, processing/refining capacity and value addition work in separable trajectories. Africa holds about 57% of known reserves; the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) produces about 70-75% of mined output; Africa accounts for about 3% of refining capacity, mainly in Madagascar and Morocco, compared with close to 79% in China (AfDB, 2015). African participation in cathode and battery manufacturing is negligible. The DRC exports mostly cobalt hydroxide, an intermediate product sold at a fraction of the price of refined metal,6 so the value added between Katanga and a battery factory, with its employment, skills, tax base and industrial learning, is captured elsewhere.

This is not simply comparative advantage. Refining is capital-intensive but not technologically exotic; the main obstacles are power supply, transport corridors, regulatory predictability, secure offtake, and long-tenor capital, most of which are shaped by public policy. The DRC showed in 2025 that producer

authority can move markets. Its regulator suspended cobalt exports on 22 February 2025, extended the suspension in June, and replaced it with quotas from 16 October 2025, capping exports at 18,125 tonnes for the rest of 2025 and 96,600 tonnes per year for 2026 and 2027. Hydroxide prices more than doubled (BMI, 2025). The episode shows that producer authority is real where exercised, and that a single country acting alone carries risks that coordinated action would share (Cobalt Institute, 2026).

The AU recognised this by adopting the Africa Green Minerals Strategy in February 2025, built on four pillars covering mineral development, human and technological capability, strategic value chains, and mineral stewardship, and by locating value chains within the African Continental Free Trade Area (African Union, 2025). It is the right instrument, but it inherits the enforcement problem of the African Mining Vision, adopted 16 years earlier, which was similarly sound in design and similarly weak in implementation.

Energy: producing without powering

Around 600 million Africans live without electricity, about 47% of the population south of the Sahara, and more than one billion lack clean cooking. Progress has stalled: fewer than 19 million people gained access in each of 2023 and 2024, against 23 million in 2019. Universal access is estimated to require about USD 15 billion a year (IEA, 2025a).

Set that figure against another. UNCTAD estimates that USD 88.6 billion leaves Africa each year as illicit capital flight, about 3.7% of the continent's GDP and nearly equal to the combined annual inflows of official development assistance (USD 48 billion) and foreign direct investment (USD 54 billion). From 2000 to 2015, these outflows totalled about USD 836 billion, more than Africa's external debt of USD 770 billion in 2018, and export under-invoicing of extractive commodities alone reached about USD 40 billion in 2015, 77% of it in gold (UNCTAD, 2020a).

These outflows do not, by themselves, explain the energy financing gap, which also reflects the high cost of capital, weak utility finances, and fragmented markets (IEA, 2025a). They do, however, substantially aggravate it, because revenue that could service energy investment or underwrite guarantees for private investors leaves before it can be taxed. Better revenue retention is therefore part of the answer to energy finance, alongside concessional and private capital.

The internal distribution compounds this. South Africa and North Africa hold under 20% of the population but attract more than 45% of energy investment and over 65% of installed capacity (IEA, 2025b). Investment follows creditworthiness and regulatory predictability, both products of governance. A further consequence is often overlooked: a state that cannot supply reliable industrial power cannot host mineral processing, one of the most electricity-intensive activities. Energy poverty and the processing gap reinforce each other, which argues for planning power corridors and mineral corridors together.

Agriculture: land, food systems and the Kampala reset

Agriculture presents the governance deficit in its most socially direct form. Africa holds close to 60% of the world's uncultivated arable land (African Union, 2024), yet 20.4% of its population experiences hunger, 58% faces moderate or severe food insecurity, and 924.8 million people cannot afford a healthy diet (FAO et al., 2024). The fourth CAADP Biennial Review found no member state on track to meet the 2014 Malabo commitments by 2025, with persistent failure to allocate 10% of public expenditure to agriculture a principal constraint (AUC, 2024).

The Kampala CAADP Declaration and its Strategy and Action Plan for 2026 to 2035, adopted in January 2025, set 22 measurable targets, among them a 45% increase in agrifood output, a tripling of agrifood trade among African countries, local processing raised to 35% of agrifood GDP, and USD 100

billion in mobilised investment (African Union, 2025). The shift to an agrifood systems framing matters because it moves attention from how much is grown to how much value is captured.

What the framework does not resolve is land governance. Opaque acquisition agreements, weak registration, and the absence of enforceable community consent have displaced smallholders, eroded customary tenure, and transferred water rights along with land rights without adequate valuation. The AU Declaration on Land Issues and Challenges in Africa, adopted in July 2009, remains among the least implemented continental instruments (African Union, 2009).

The security consequence is direct. Where commercial acquisition encloses transhumance corridors and climate variability shortens the season in which they are usable, competition has produced sustained violence between herders and farmers across the Sahel and Nigeria's Middle Belt, where the International Crisis Group estimated some 2,500 deaths in 2016 alone (International Crisis Group, 2017). Land governance is therefore a conflict prevention issue that ministries of Agriculture cannot address alone.

Water: the governance gap in a shared-commons

Water is where the sovereignty question is hardest, because the resource does not respect national borders. Africa's 63 transboundary river basins cover about 64% of its land area and 93% of its surface water. However, reporting on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicator 6.5.2 shows that only 29% of these basins, and fewer than 10% of transboundary aquifers, have operational arrangements. Only 19% of those cover the whole basin (AfDB, 2022).

Lake Chad demonstrates the cost. The lake has lost about 90% of its surface area since the 1960s due to reduced rainfall, expanded irrigation, and population growth (ESA, 2019), and around 30 million people depend on the basin. The collapse of fisheries and grazing has created a documented recruitment environment for armed groups across the frontier of Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon (Vivekananda, 2019). Basin bodies such as the Lake Chad Basin Commission and the Niger Basin Authority lack supranational authority, so they remain consultative rather than allocative. Allocation disputes also lack a formal channel to the PSC, even though the Council recognised at its 864th meeting that natural disasters and climate change exacerbate tensions among communities (AUPSC, 2019).

A common pattern across the four sectors

Read together, the four sectors show one pattern operating through different mechanisms (Table 1). In each, the state holds formal ownership or jurisdiction but lacks control over a decisive stage. The differences matter for policy: minerals and energy are governed through contracts and fiscal terms and respond to collective bargaining among producers; land responds to national legislation and community consent; shared water responds only to regional allocation rules. A shared diagnosis therefore does not imply a single remedy.

Table 1: *Resource governance authority across four sectors*

Sector	Where authority is weakest	Pathway to insecurity	Main continental instrument	Principal gap
Minerals	Processing, pricing and contract terms	Rents from unregulated sites finance armed groups	AMV (2009); AGMS (2025)	No compliance benchmarks or sanctions
Energy	Investment and revenue retention	Unequal access deepens exclusion and blocks processing	Agenda 2063; AfCFTA	Revenue lost to illicit outflows; fragmented markets
Agriculture and land	Tenure, consent and valuation of land	Enclosure of grazing corridors fuels violence between herders and farmers	Kampala CAADP Declaration (2025); AU Land Declaration (2009)	Land governance sits outside CAADP targets
Water	Allocation among riparian states	Collapse of livelihoods aids armed recruitment	Basin commissions; PSC	No allocative authority; no channel to the PSC

Source: *Compiled by the author.*

Security: resource governance and armed violence

An earlier Tana Forum contribution argued that climate insecurity in Africa had become a chronic condition requiring a sociopolitical framework that operates across political and social variables, in which threat reduction, stakeholder dialogue, regional cooperation over shared resources, conflict-sensitive adaptation, and predictable climate finance operate as one system (Mrema, 2022). That framework is inseparable from the resource governance framework the continent now requires, because the same governance vacuum produces both outcomes.

The mechanism is observable. Where the state cannot regulate access to a valuable resource, another authority does. Artisanal gold sites in the central Sahel have become sources of finance and recruitment for armed groups (OECD, 2018), and charcoal exports from southern Somalia have been taxed by Al Shabaab (UNSC, 2018). In the eastern DRC, the United Nations (UN) Group of Experts found that after M23 seized the Rubaya coltan mines in April 2024, it earned an estimated USD 800,000 per month by taxing coltan, while more than 120 tonnes per month were moved into Rwanda (UNSC, 2024). In each case, an unregulated resource generates rents, rents finance coercive capacity, and coercive capacity further displaces the state. The resource does not cause the conflict; the governance vacuum around it turns the resource into conflict finance.

The evidence that governance can break this chain is substantial. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) found that at least 40% of intrastate conflicts over the preceding 60 years were linked to natural resources, and that such conflicts were twice as likely to relapse within five years (UNEP, 2009). A study of African mining areas from 1997 to 2010 found that rising mineral prices accounted for up to a quarter of average violence at the country level, which captured that a mining area tripled an armed group's subsequent fighting, and that the effect was weaker where companies adhered to transparency standards (Berman et al., 2017). Conflicts driven by disputes over the distribution of resource wealth are also the most likely to resume (Rustad & Binningsbø, 2012). Transparency and fair distribution therefore reduce both the incentive and the means to fight.

The APSA is built around early warning, mediation, and deployment, and lacks a systematic instrument for anticipating disputes over resource access. However, such disputes feature in situations before the PSC from the eastern DRC to the Lake Chad Basin and the central Sahel. Geopolitics intensifies

the problem. In the Central African Republic, a company linked to the Wagner Group obtained a long-term permit for the Ndassima gold mine while Wagner provided security to the government; the company was placed under United States sanctions in June 2023 (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2023). In the DRC, a 2023 state audit of the 2008 Sicomines minerals-for-infrastructure agreement found that about USD 822 million of a promised USD 3 billion had been delivered, and the deal was renegotiated in 2024, with the commitment raised to USD 7 billion (Geopolitical Monitor, 2024). Where security or infrastructure is bundled with resource access under limited public scrutiny, the state's capacity to renegotiate resource terms is constrained by its dependence on the other side of the bargain, and economic and security sovereignty become closely intertwined.

Climate justice, the just transition and the fiscal question

Africa accounts for less than 4% of global emissions, yet loses an estimated 5% of GDP per year to climate impacts and up to 15% of per capita growth in the most affected economies, while receiving under 3% of global climate finance (AfDB, 2025b).

Adaptation finance rose from USD 6.3 billion in 2017 to USD 14.8 billion in 2023, far below the roughly USD 70 billion a year identified in African nationally determined contributions, a figure that may itself be understated by up to 100% (Global Centre on Adaptation & Climate Policy Initiative, 2025a). About 90% of tracked adaptation finance comes from international public sources while official development assistance is contracting (Global Centre on Adaptation & Climate Policy Initiative, 2025a). On present trends, Africa would accumulate about USD 195 billion for adaptation by 2035 against requirements exceeding USD 1.6 trillion, and climate damages could reach 20% of continental GDP by 2050 (Global Centre on Adaptation & Climate Policy Initiative, 2025b).

Here the resource governance argument becomes a climate justice argument. A continent that cannot retain revenue from its resource base cannot finance its own adaptation and therefore negotiates in global climate governance as a claimant rather than a principal. Curbing illicit outflows and improving tax collection could raise African revenue by an estimated 3.9% of GDP, about USD 110 billion a year (UNCTAD, 2020b), more than the annual adaptation requirement in the continent's own climate plans. The just transition presents the same structure in prospect: if African participation in rising demand for cobalt, lithium, manganese, graphite and rare earth elements remains confined to extraction, the transition will shift the environmental and social costs of decarbonisation onto the continent while locating the industrial benefits elsewhere.

Why the existing architecture has underdelivered

Precision about the failure matters because an incorrect diagnosis yields the wrong remedy. Africa does not lack frameworks, from the AMV of 2009 and Agenda 2063, now in its Second Ten-Year Implementation Plan for 2024 to 2033, to the AfCFTA and the instruments adopted in 2025. Their direction is broadly sound, but several carry design gaps: most contain no compliance benchmarks, no sanctions for non-performance and no dedicated financing. Three structural weaknesses explain the underperformance; Table 2 sets out, for each, the present position and its cause, the position required, and a pathway.

Absence of binding enforcement. Continental instruments are adopted by consensus and implemented at national discretion. Four CAADP review cycles established that no member state was on track. However, the process had no instrument to change that trajectory (AUC, 2024), and the AMV has relied on voluntary domestication without a binding review of compliance. The underlying cause is that each producer competes individually for investment and, under fiscal pressure, accepts weaker terms than they could obtain if acting together.

Institutional separation of resource, climate and security policy. Ministries of mines, agriculture, water, environment, and defence plan on separate cycles with distinct data and partners, and at the continental level, the APSA, the African Governance Architecture, and the economic instruments interact little.

Incomplete market integration. Trade among African countries reached USD 220.3 billion in 2024 but remains only 15-18% of Africa's total trade, compared with more than 60% in Asia (Afrexim Bank, 2025). The AfCFTA could give processing viable market scale, yet its rules of origin for vehicles, clean energy components and mining inputs are not finalised.

***Table 2**: Present position, required position and pathway*

Weakness	Present position and cause	Required position	Pathway
Enforcement	Instruments applied at national discretion; reviews record noncompliance without consequence; producers compete individually for investment	Minimum continental standards on processing, disclosure and revenue, with compliance linked to incentives	Continental minerals mechanism; finance conditioned on compliance; published annual review (Recommendations 1 and 3)
Institutional separation	Resource, climate and security policy planned separately at national and continental levels	Shared data and joint planning	Joint planning framework; basin reporting to continental early warning (Recommendations 4 and 5)
Market integration	Rules of origin for strategic value chains unfinished; small national markets deter processing investment	An assured continental market for regional processing	Finalise rules of origin and coordinate tariff treatment (Recommendation 2)

***Source:** Compiled by the author.*

Conclusion

Africa's deficits in energy, agriculture, water and security are usually addressed through separate sectoral strategies. This paper has argued that they share an important common cause in weak resource governance authority, and that sectoral strategies will underperform while it remains unaddressed. Governance is not the only explanatory factor: technology, infrastructure, demography, colonial and postcolonial history, the cost of capital, and geopolitical competition also shape outcomes, and no governance reform can substitute for investment in them. Governance authority does, however, determine how far the continent can convert its endowment into the revenue, industry and stability needed to address those other constraints.

Economic sovereignty is achieved neither by asserting ownership, which African states already hold in law, nor by attracting investment alone, which arrives on terms set by whoever holds processing capacity and market access. It is achieved by exercising authority over where value is added, at what price output is sold, how revenue is disclosed, and how it is divided between present consumption and the adaptation the continent will need.

Policy and strategic recommendations

1. Establish a continental mineral negotiating mechanism with incentives for participation. The AU Commission, through the African Minerals Development Centre, should convene a standing mechanism that sets minimum conditions for mineral agreements on domestic processing,

contract disclosure, local content and revenue transparency. Participation should rest on an AU Assembly decision that is politically binding rather than on a treaty obligation, so that each state retains final decision-making authority over its agreements while committing to the agreed minimum. The AfDB and the Africa Finance Corporation should provide incentives through preferential infrastructure, processing, and guarantee financing for compliant projects, with compliance reviewed and published annually, on the model of the African Peer Review Mechanism.

2. Finalise the AfCFTA rules of origin for vehicles, clean energy components and mining inputs within 12 months. This is the most specific unmet requirement of the AGMS. The AfCFTA Secretariat and Council of Ministers should report progress to each ordinary session of the AU Assembly, since without agreed rules of origin and coordinated tariff treatment, regional processing has no assured market and no investment case.
3. Reserve by law a defined share of resource revenue for adaptation. Member states should legislate a minimum allocation of extractive revenue to adaptation and resilience, protected from annual reallocation, led by ministries of finance, overseen by parliaments and verified by supreme audit institutions. Since curbing illicit outflows could exceed the continent's stated adaptation requirement, this turns adaptation finance from an external claim into a domestic instrument.
4. Create a formal channel between transboundary basin institutions and the PSC. Basin commissions should report regularly to the Continental Early Warning System, and the PSC should be empowered to take up allocation disputes before they turn violent, through memoranda that leave the commissions' mandates unchanged.
5. Institutionalise joint resource, climate and security planning at continental and national levels. The APSA and the continental economic instruments should share a common data and planning framework covering resource disputes, climate exposure and sectoral investment, mirrored nationally by an interministerial committee under the head of government.

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