

# Peace & Security Council Report



Leverage crises in APSA interventions: design or coordination flaws?

Beyond election observation: the preventive role of the Peace and Security Council

Have AU PSC informal consultations impacted post-coup transitions?

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## Leverage crises in APSA interventions: design or coordination flaws?

Nearly a decade later, the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) is struggling to shape outcomes in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), South Sudan, Mozambique, and the Sahel, as external actors reassert dominance over Africa's security landscape.

The year 2026 marks the tenth anniversary of the African Union (AU) reform proposed in 2016 and launched in 2017 to enhance the effectiveness of African-led interventions. In the peace and security domain, the reform sought to strengthen APSA, including the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) and coordination with regional economic communities (RECs).

APSA decision-makers invoke 'African solutions' but seek external conflict mediation, treating African-led interventions as optional or secondary.

Mounting challenges in AU interventions prompted a call at the February 2025 summit to review its peace and security frameworks. However, a high-level panel in September 2025 concluded that the AU already has one of the most comprehensive normative architectures, despite some lack of clarity in parts of its framework.

Several institutional measures were introduced to address these gaps. The political affairs and peace and security departments were merged in 2021 to improve coordination between political and security initiatives. A mid-year collaboration of the AU, RECs and regional mechanisms (RMs) began in 2019 to improve relations between the AU and subregional bodies on responses to several issues, including peace and security. The AU Peace Fund was revitalised in 2018.

### Acronyms and abbreviations

|               |  |              |  |
|---------------|--|--------------|--|
| <b>ACDEG</b>  | African Charter of Democracy Election and Governance | <b>ICGLR</b> | International Conference on the Great Lakes Region |
| <b>AFI</b>    | African Futures and Innovation                       | <b>PSOs</b>  | Peace support operations                           |
| <b>APSA</b>   | African Peace and Security Architecture              | <b>PSC</b>   | Peace and Security Council                         |
| <b>AU</b>     | African Union  | <b>RECs</b>  | Regional economic communities                      |
| <b>AUC</b>    | AU Commission  | <b>RMs</b>   | Regional mechanisms                                |
| <b>DRC</b>    | Democratic Republic of the Congo                     | <b>SADC</b>  | Southern African Development Community             |
| <b>GDP</b>    | Gross domestic product                               | <b>UCGs</b>  | Unconstitutional changes of government             |
| <b>ECOWAS</b> | Economic Community of West African States            | <b>UN</b>    | United Nations                                     |
|               |  | <b>WaSH</b>  | Water, sanitation and hygiene                      |

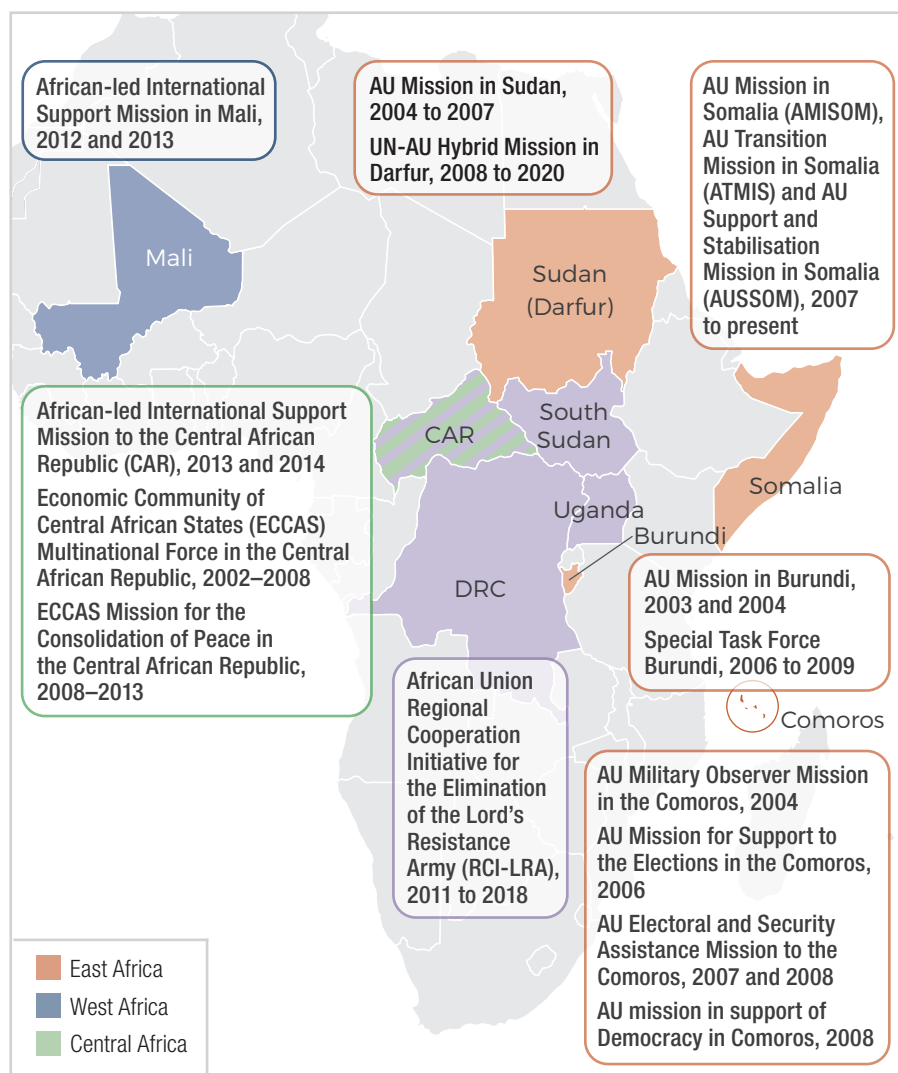
Despite APSA's robust frameworks and institutional realignment, APSA decision-makers who routinely invoke 'African solutions' undermine regional initiatives and seek external conflict mediation, treating African-led interventions as optional or secondary. This hollows out the influence of African actors.

This decline in Africa's influence and centrality in its security landscape raises questions about whether AU leaders are missing a point. Has the reform agenda – with its focus on structures, modalities and financing – sidelined the more urgent task of sustaining collective African conflict responses grounded in member states' unity of purpose?

### Decline and fragmentation in collective response

When the reform was proposed in 2016, the AU was already facing a weakening role in major crises in Africa, compared to its first decade. Then it drove mediation and peace support operations (PSOs) across regions backed by member states' common interest in pan-African solutions.

Chart 1: AU and RECs PSOs from 2003 to 2014



Source: PSC Report

### Current PSC Chairperson

**Dr Obaida Eldandarawy,**  
Permanent Representative to the AU and PSC Chairperson for February 2026

### PSC members

Algeria, Angola, Botswana, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Uganda

While establishing PSOs is not the major pathway to peace, Chart 1 shows how willing the AU was to support political processes between 2003 and 2014, with the backing of its members and external financial support. Its activities began even before it had key intervention frameworks. This changed from 2013 due to less funding and increasing subregional interest in assuming PSOs without deferring to the AU.

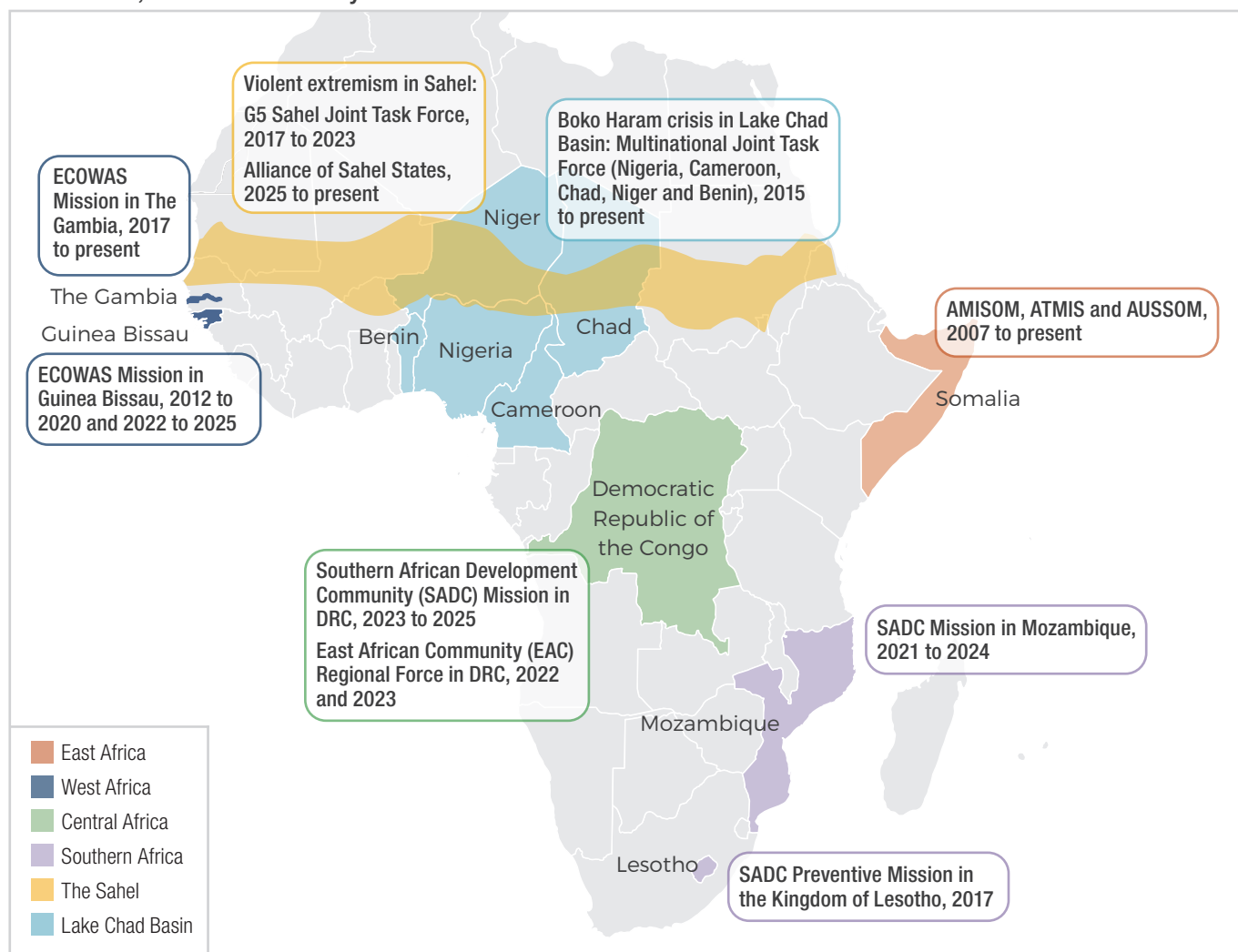
Notably, the United Nations (UN) took over the Mali and Central Africa Republic missions in 2013 and 2014. In 2016, the PSC reversed a decision to deploy a mission in Burundi, inadvertently creating a risk aversion in the Council for approving future missions. The joint AU-UN mission in Darfur was closed in 2020. This left the AU with Somalia as its only active PSO, albeit donor-dependent.

While the number of AU-led interventions declined, there was a rebound in major REC-led peace initiatives from 2013 to 2023, particularly PSOs, signalling REC preference to address their challenges rather than wait for AU-level consensus. This is seen in Lake Chad Basin, The Gambia, Lesotho, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and DRC.

### The eastern DRC situation illustrates the pitfalls of APSA's weak cohesion

As subregional interventions became common, cleavages deepened in the extent to which regions could independently lead peace initiatives, considering the AU's primacy in African peace and security. Tensions such as

**Chart 2: AU, RECs/RMs military interventions from 2015 to 2025**



Source: PSC Report

those between the AU and ECOWAS in Mali prompted ongoing efforts to clarify the division of labour between the AU and RECs as part of AU reform.

Among RECs, limited cross-regional dynamics became a worrying dynamic, leading to ad hoc subregional mechanisms. The lack of cohesion means that the AU and subregions are currently underperforming in today's conflicts, thereby fostering external intervention.

### **Coordinating mediators instead of warring parties**

The eastern DRC illustrates the pitfalls of weak cohesion. When the M23 rebellion resurfaced in 2021, different AU institutions intervened with limited coordination, as the DRC, like many African countries, is a member of multiple RECs. The EAC deployed a force from 2022 to 2023, followed by a SADC mission from 2023 to 2025. Both withdrew without collaborating or achieving security gains.

In June 2023, the AU brought together the EAC, SADC, International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) and UN under an AU-led roadmap. Yet during this period, Qatar (July 2025) and the United States (November 2025) brokered temporary arrangements with conflict parties. While fragile, these deals underscored that influence over belligerents matters more than jurisdictional claims. Recent dynamics mark a departure from earlier episodes when the ICGLR helped end the M23 rebellion in 2013.

A high-level January 2026 meeting in Togo ended with an agreement on a unified mediation framework to resolve the eastern DRC conflict under AU leadership. This is positive, but it continues the AU trend of coordinating the growing number of regional and international mediators, while its own capacity to influence warring parties remains low. Similarly, in Sudan, the AU leads an expanded mechanism that coordinates the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the UN, the Arab League, the European Union, and others.

Although the AU continues pushing for peace through its high-level panel for Sudan, external players have brokered consequential but temporary deals. While the AU-led mechanism pushed for a political framework in Sudan, a 2023 US-Saudi-mediated process led to temporary ceasefires.

AU coordination is important, ensuring that mediation aligns with African frameworks and goals. But mediator coordination often portrays the AU as seeking relevance through geography and turf politics rather than exerting actual influence on the conflict parties. This perception is reinforced by limited political backing for AU and REC mediators, particularly from regional powers, which undermines their credibility and bargaining power.

### **In search of leverage**

Recent Sahel dynamics further expose the gap between rhetoric and collective action. As Russia consolidates influence regionwide, neither the AU nor ECOWAS has fulfilled longstanding commitments to deploy a specialised African Standby Force unit against violent extremism. Despite its plans, the 2015 AU-led Nouakchott Process has yet to deploy a counter-terrorism force for the Sahel-Saharan region. Because RECs seem to have absolute control over their regional standby forces, the AU cannot deploy these forces to joint missions.

### **States should be persuaded to invest their diplomatic, economic and military capital in AU-led initiatives**

Warring parties and coup states, such as Alliance of Sahel States members are aware of APSA's waning influence due to years of unimplemented decisions and an unwillingness to impose sanctions on spoilers of peace in conflict countries. While institutional reforms are crucial, the AU should persuade member states to invest their diplomatic, economic and military capital in AU-led initiatives. But how to make that happen is a challenge.

Dr Paul-Simon Handy is the Institute of Security Studies representative to the AU. He notes that 'AU effectiveness lies both in getting the institutional reform right – ensuring that states see the AU value for money – and in fostering the political will for states to back collective response via the AU.

Any solution will require individual states to reap the practical value of collective action, not as abstract pan-African idealism, but as a strategic investment in national, regional and continental stability.

## Beyond election observation: the preventive role of the Peace and Security Council

Electoral challenges in Africa often appear procedural. Yet the deeper issue is the gradual hollowing out of political competition through legal, constitutional and administrative instruments. The AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) continues to treat elections as technical exercises rather than crucial political junctures. These reinforce an environment in which procedural compliance substitutes for democratic legitimacy. The distance between the AU Commission (AUC) report on election observer missions and the PSC's decisions documented during the 2025 election suggests this gap is not narrowing.

### Elections short on democratic substance

With 12 member states holding elections observed by the AUC chairperson's elections reports across two semesters, there is a growing divergence between the frequency of elections and the quality of democratic governance. While most polls in 2025 were peaceful and on schedule, others unfolded amid restricted civic space, opposition exclusions and legal manoeuvres consolidating incumbency. Indeed, more than 60% of countries hosting elections in 2025 are classified by Freedom House as 'not free'.

The erosion of political competitiveness was evident. In Côte d'Ivoire's October presidential election, the AU mission noted that some stakeholders raised concerns that certain leading political figures were not able to participate in the elections due to disqualification of candidacy. This was recorded in the AUC report. The communiqué of the 1 327<sup>th</sup> PSC meeting simply congratulated Côte d'Ivoire without qualification. This pattern reveals a Council that has developed language for military coups but not for manifestations electoral lawfare. Language reacting to the former is often more blatant.

In Tanzania, the same report noted election-related violence leading to internet challenges and curfews lasting several days and urged the government to release political detainees. It was recommended that member states be discouraged from shutting down the internet during elections, describing such actions as

both an electoral management risk factor and a violation of citizens' right to freedom of information. While the corresponding PSC decision condemned hate speech and violence, it did not address internet shutdowns. This is significant. Digital access to information is integral to a free, fair and credible election and need not be suspended to address hate speech nor misinformation.

Although Tanzania is not a state party to the African Charter of Democracy Election and Governance (ACDEG), it is to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights. In its 30 October 2025 statement, the African Commission on Human and People's Rights expressed concern over the nationwide 'digital blackout'. It recorded that internet shutdowns violate Article 9 of the charter and that any restriction must be lawful, necessary and proportionate.

Heightened contestation can end in conflict and if elections lack credibility, grievances accumulate

Elections following unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs) are similarly concerning. While Article 30 of the AU Constitutive Act mandates suspension following coups, reinstatement frequently occurs after elections, even where coup leaders contest and win. This is contrary to ACDEG Article 25(4).

In Guinea, an ACDEG state party since 2011, a military transition occurred in 2021, with Mamady Doumbouya emerging the central figure. Four years later, a referendum facilitated a return to constitutional order, leading to Doumbouya's election as president. The 1 327<sup>th</sup> PSC meeting communiqué commended Guinea for 'successful organisation'. While the swift management of the transition was highlighted, the communiqué did not mention the quality of the democratic process or adherence to ACDEG's ratified principles on lifted suspensions.

Such a rapid suspension following a coup and equally quick reintegration after an election are not always

**Chart 3: Patterns in PSC African election decisions**

| Pattern   | What happens in practice  | Why it's a limitation  | Institutional risk   |
|---|---|--|--|
| <b>Uniform diplomatic language</b>                  | The PSC congratulates all member states using largely identical language — regardless of whether elections met high democratic standards (Malawi, Seychelles) or occurred amid restrictions, exclusions or digital shutdowns          | No reputational distinction between high- and low-quality elections. All elections are congratulated equally                                 | Weakens incentives for compliance with AU norms and erodes credibility of continental standards  |
| <b>Reactive engagement</b>                          | Strong action follows coups (Article 30 of the AU Constitutive Act). Pre-election warning signs — candidates' exclusions through lawfare, civic space restrictions, internet shutdowns — rarely trigger visible preventive engagement | The preventive mandate of the PSC under Article 7(a) is underused  | The Council becomes crisis-driven rather than risk-driven, with early-intervention opportunities missed  |
| <b>Procedural emphasis over political substance</b> | Electoral observer mission reports sometimes document political concerns, but PSC communiqués filter these into technical affirmations and congratulatory language. Elections treated as events rather than political processes       | The curtailment of political competitiveness receives limited sustained follow-up  | Gap widens between AUC chairperson's election report and PSC political messaging<br><br>Democratic backsliding becomes normalised if procedural boxes are ticked                   |
| <b>Inconsistent reinstatement benchmarks</b>        | Suspension under Article 30 is automatic. Reinstatement often follows elections — even where broader ACDEG political conditions remain unmet — which is not always in sync with RECs  | Criteria for restoration of constitutional order are insufficiently articulated<br><br>Suspensions are not always in sync with REC reactions | Creates a suspension-election-readmission pipeline that prioritises event completion over democratic substance<br><br>Rapid post-UCG suspension, rapid post-election reintegration |

aligned with the practices of regional economic communities. In Guinea, for example, both the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the AU lifted their suspensions within two months of Doumbouya's election. By contrast, in the ongoing Madagascar transition, the AU moved promptly to suspend the country, while it remained a full member of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Should elections proceed as scheduled in 2027, it is likely that the AU will again favour rapid integration, reinforcing a suspension-election-readmission pipeline that is not consistently mirrored across regional bodies.

Together these developments widen the gap between AU normative frameworks and political realities. The AUC chairperson's reports reflected the technical services and at times the democratic deficiencies of observer

missions, whereas the PSC will filter them out due to greater political considerations, thus falling short of mentioning subversive traits.

### Implications for the PSC

A core mandate of the PSC is preventative. Article 3(4) of the PSC Protocol identifies among its objectives the promotion of democratic practices, good governance and the rule of law. This is fortified by Article 7(m), which states the responsibilities as follow-up within the framework of its conflict prevention responsibilities and progress towards the promotion of democratic practices, good governance, the rule of law, protection of human rights. This seeks to ensure promotion of democratic practices. Article 7(a) empowers the Council in conflict prevention, not only in crisis response.

Electoral governance has been treated primarily as a political and governance issue managed by the AUC chairperson. Yet the interlinkages and cascading consequences between governance and security are undeniable. Elections are moments of heightened political contestation that are often the last trigger for conflict. When they lack credibility, grievances accumulate. Even in the absence of immediate violence, unresolved disputes erode institutional trust and increase long-term risks to stability.

Legalised authoritarian practices – facilitated through constitutional design, judicial manoeuvres and managed elections – can produce quieter but deeper instability. When citizens perceive electoral avenues as incapable of producing change, political competition may shift outside institutional channels. Governance and public service delivery deficits are repeatedly identified in AU reporting as structural drivers of UCGs.

Even in the absence of immediate violence, unresolved disputes erode institutional trust and increase long-term risks to stability

The AUC chairperson’s July-to-December 2025 report coup section was notably candid. It acknowledged that ‘existing instruments have not always proven sufficient to deter such actions before their occurrence’ and that the cycle ‘shows no sign of abating in the short- and medium term’. The PSC’s response was to reiterate the AU zero-tolerance policy. The report highlighted limitations in the existing toolkit, yet the PSC merely reaffirmed its standard zero-tolerance stance at its 1 327th Meeting, revealing a disconnect. For the PSC, this raises an institutional question: should electoral issues continue to be addressed primarily through observation and post-election communiqués or be treated more consistently as structural risk factors within the Council’s preventive mandate?

### Strengthening the preventive function

The PSC does not require new authority – its founding instruments already provide scope for deeper preventive engagement. Article 6(b) empowers it to undertake preventive diplomacy. When pre-election assessments reveal structural risks, the Council should request targeted briefing, issue guidance grounded in ACDEG principles or mandate discreet engagements through the Panel of the Wise as per Article 11(1) of the its protocol.

Kenya illustrates the evolution of AU engagement in elections and preventive diplomacy. In 2007 and 2008, post-election violence claimed more than 1 000 lives. The AU’s response was reactive and relied on the Panel of the Wise, while the European Union deployed an observer mission and anticipated conflict in its report. Waiting to intervene post-crisis proved costly. By the 2013 Kenyan election, the AU had adopted the long-term observer methodology, deploying observers six weeks before voting.

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> 1 000

LIVES WERE CLAIMED  
IN KENYAN POST-  
ELECTION VIOLENCE IN  
2007 AND 2008

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Observers mentioned the political environment, engaged parties, assessed constitutional implementation and liaised with the electoral commission. The involvement of Chairperson Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma and the electoral observer mission leadership of former presidents Joachim Chissano (2013) and Thabo Mbeki (2017) reinforced the AU's political weight, reducing the risk of overt violations.

In 2017, expanded consultations, pre-election risk messaging and calibrated engagement through the Supreme Court annulment of presidential results limited tension escalation. Kenya holds three lessons for the PSC: early presence enables early warning, coordinated continental messaging shapes political behaviour and long-time observation combined with high-level preventive diplomacy link accountability with conflict prevention.

However, Kenya is not a universal template. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo's 2018 elections, the AU deployed a mission of 80 long- and short-term observers. But the process was undermined by widespread irregularities, suppression of opposition campaigning, logistical obstacles and violence that observers could not prevent nor resolve. The outcome was contested and the post-election environment tense, demonstrating that while expanded observation strengthens monitoring and signalling, it cannot on its own overcome structural political incentives nor deep-rooted institutional weaknesses.

### Early presence enables timely electoral flashpoint identification and coordinated messaging shapes political behaviour

Building on these lessons, underlying principles remain broadly applicable: early, sustained presence enables timely identification of electoral flashpoints; coordinated messaging through the observer mission reports, the biannual reports and the PSC communiqués shapes political behaviour, and the combination of long-term observation with high-level diplomacy reinforces accountability while mitigating conflict risks.

Embedding these practices systematically within PSC processes would allow the Council to move beyond reactive, event-driven responses and procedural oversight, addressing the deeper structural drivers of destabilising elections evident across 2025 electoral cycles. These include legalised authoritarianism, constrained civic space and manipulated electoral frameworks.

By ultimately institutionalising preventive management more substantially, the PSC can enhance its role from technical observer to a preventive guardian of democratic integrity and political stability. This would send a clear signal to member states that adherence to continental norms is both monitored and consequential.



## Have AU PSC informal consultations impacted post-coup transitions?

During the 2019–2025 coup wave, the AU PSC consistently suspended defaulting member states in line with Article 30 of the AU Constitutive Act. While these suspensions closed official engagement channels, informal consultations continue, grounded in articles 25(3) of the ACDEG and 8(11) of the PSC Protocol.

Held mainly at ambassadorial level in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the consultations allow the PSC to maintain diplomatic ties with coup countries, including Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Gabon, Guinea, Sudan, Madagascar and Guinea-Bissau. The 18<sup>th</sup> round of informal discussions was held on 27 February 2026. The consultations have been used in combination with other instruments, such as the deployment of AU special envoys for good offices and PSC field visits.

Yet, transition authorities continue to show defiance or disregard for roadmaps and AU norms, questioning the effectiveness of PSC informal consultations as a post-coup transition management tool. Mali and Burkina Faso have unilaterally postponed elections scheduled by joint transition roadmaps concluded with the AU. At the same time, coup leaders ran for elections in Gabon and Guinea despite Article 25(4) of ACDEG, which prohibits their participation in elections to restore constitutional order.

The latter have regained full rights to participate in AU activities following the post-election lifting of sanctions. Some coup countries denied AU officials access to their territories, although AU visits to monitor compliance with roadmaps were discussed during meetings.

Informal meetings – initiated by the PSC in April 2023 – have supplemented sanctions with continued diplomatic engagement. This, according to some member states and AU sources, has created space for frank discussion, enhanced collegial adoption of transition roadmaps and enabled monitoring of coup leaders' compliance with AU norms.

### The utility of PSC meetings

After good offices led by Sambo Sidikou (2021 to 2025) were stalled and field visits generated few outcomes, the PSC initiated informal post-coup meetings with Burkina

Faso, Guinea, Mali and Sudan, the only coup countries at the time. Sixteen others followed as of December 2025. From the onset, according to diplomatic sources, the PSC clearly outlined the goals it sought to achieve with transitioning countries.

Its primary objective was to provide a trustworthy platform for exchanges on roadmaps and their challenges. Ultimately, it aimed to ensure that coup leaders comply with continental norms against UCG enshrined in the AU Constitutive Act, the ACDEG, the PSC Protocol, and other instruments.

### The PSC aims to provide a trustworthy platform for exchanges on transition roadmaps

Given the PSC's consistency and countries' attendance, informal consultations have partially met their objectives of providing a platform for dialogue, strengthening diplomatic engagements with defaulting countries and monitoring progress and obstacles. This is significant as most countries in transition have consistently complained about not being admitted to nor heard during PSC formal sessions examining their situations.

Some diplomats confirmed to the Institute for Security Studies that informal meetings have enabled them to air their views and discuss stumbling blocks, which sporadic PSC field visits and discussions with special envoys do not necessarily offer.

Similarly, PSC member state representatives told the *PSC Report* that the approach has helped align the Council's interventions with relevant frameworks and has effectively monitored transition roadmaps. Consultations have provided the PSC with granular data to deepen its understanding of challenges and facilitate tailored interventions.

### Structural limitations

As mentioned, the approach enables monitoring of compliance with AU norms to elicit behavioural

change from transition leaders, thereby making way for the transfer of power to democratically elected civilian governments. In that regard, there was a need to combine dialogue with coordinated coercive measures.

However, in the absence of coercion, the expected behavioural change has not materialised. Three elements could enhance outcomes. The first is coordinated diplomatic pressure jointly by the PSC and RECs. Yet, despite PSC liaison with countries, RECs were barely involved, impeding progress. In addition, AU and REC approaches to managing transitions are misaligned and often competitive, as seen in Niger (August and September 2023) and Sudan (since April 2023).

The second is upholding a collective threat of military intervention against non-compliant countries. Such a firm, unified stance from the AU and RECs would further incentivise transition leaders to roll out roadmaps as agreed and would enhance their appetite to comply with established continental anti-UCG norms. Unfortunately, consensus was not reached on AU and REC responses to military takeovers nor on managing post-coup transitions.

### Without coercion, the expected behavioural change among transition leaders has not materialised

For instance, ECOWAS envisaged a military intervention following Niger's 2023 coup, but the PSC did not support it. This was in addition to the misalignment of ultimatums issued by both institutions to the coup leaders to return to the barracks and restore constitutional order. A direct consequence was the erosion of the continental consensus on the UCG's zero-tolerance policy and a fragmented approach to managing subsequent transitions.

In the absence of a solid combination between consultations and coordinated, coercive means, dialogue alone has had a limited impact on transition leaders' behaviour. However, in Mali (2012), Burkina Faso (2015), The Gambia (2017) and Niger (2010), military threat and dialogue were effectively combined.

The third is about firmly addressing transition leaders' disregard for decisions made in informal meetings. While ambassadors, according to diplomatic sources, consistently report on the outcomes of meetings to their capitals, recommendations for a swift return to constitutional order are not followed. This is demonstrated through repeated slippages in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso and by their leaders' restrictions on civic spaces.

### Sahel transition leaders insist that informal meetings should focus on security concerns rather than constitutional order

The Sahel transition leaders, for example, insist that informal meetings should focus on security concerns rather than the return to constitutional order, which, in their view, will not be sustainable. Therefore, the core challenge is more about an unwillingness to comply than a disconnect with diplomatic representations in Addis Ababa, reinforcing the need for effective coercive mechanisms to back meetings.

### Options for enhancement

Sources from the AU and member states maintain that the PSC could strengthen its informal meetings if accompanied by minimal pressure. This may include, in the short- and mid-term, an effective monitoring body to enforce leaders' compliance with continental norms. The newly established PSC sanction subcommittee – with RECs – could fulfil this role if capacitated and equipped.

In the long run, the AU must rebuild the institutional and political consensus that helped sustain the zero-tolerance policy on UCGs from 2003 to 2019. This should be done within the AU and with RECs, given that the former's struggles with RECs have impeded coordination.

Failing to fulfil the above requirements will lead to continued dilution of diplomatic efforts to manage post-coup transitions and to the normalisation of military takeovers – 'whitewashing'. As underlined by the Angolan president, outgoing chair of the AU Assembly bureau, whitewashing coups through elections and military takeovers should not be normalised. This is a serious threat to Africa's democracy and the sustainability of AU norms.

## Can the African Union reassert authority in the Somaliland debate?

Israel's December 2025 recognition of Somaliland, a secessionist northern part of Somalia, set off a series of political and diplomatic shockwaves in the Horn of Africa and Arabian Peninsula. In a region already facing acute tensions amid global geopolitical reconfigurations, how the AU handles the fallout will be key.

Somalia rejected the move as an infringement on its territorial integrity. Most regional and international organisations, including the AU, Intergovernmental Authority on Development, UN, European Union and Arab League condemned Israel's actions, citing violations of international law, the AU Constitutive Act and UN Charter. Some countries known for their opposition to Somaliland's independence, such as Djibouti, Egypt, Sudan, South Sudan, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, reacted similarly. Others adopted an attitude of 'wait and see'.

For the AU, any unilateral claim of sovereignty is an irritant. Its highest decision-making body on security issues, the Peace and Security Council, strongly condemned Israel's position, saying: 'No actor has the authority or standing to alter the territorial configuration of an AU member state.' However, this strong wording froze the discussion without providing a solution.

### Quest for independence

Somaliland's quest for international recognition symbolises various dimensions of African post-colonial statehood. It raises questions around the criteria for sovereignty and has legal, political, geopolitical and regional implications. Somaliland gained independence from Great Britain on 26 June 1960. After Somalia secured independence from the Italian-administered UN trusteeship on 1 July 1960, the Republic of Somalia was formed as a union of former British Somaliland and Somalia Italiana. However, following the outbreak of civil war in 1969 and the collapse of Somalia's central government, Somaliland declared independence in 1991.

From a strict legal perspective, the AU often invokes the commitment of its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity, to the intangibility of borders inherited from colonisation. The principle of *uti possidetis juris* was

established in 1964 in Cairo to avoid the multiplication of irredentist claims that could have destabilised newly established states. The Cairo Declaration has since been a cornerstone of the AU's normative framework.

However, advocates of Somaliland's independence use the same principle to justify its quest for sovereignty. The entity's independence was achieved within the borders of British Somaliland. The decision to form a union with Somalia was its own, and, supporters say, Somaliland has the right to reverse it. The relative stability and regular alternation of power in Somaliland's elections are also cited by advocates of the country's independence.

### The threat of secession

Rather than making a legal case, the AU would be better served by advancing a political argument for the territorial integrity of its member states. That paves the way for political solutions as the preferred means of resolving internal tensions. The AU is also wary of setting a precedent that could have far-reaching consequences in the Horn of Africa, the only region where secession has led to the creation of new states.

Eritrea and South Sudan seceded from Ethiopia and Sudan in 1993 and 2011 respectively. The severe post-liberation challenges these two newly established countries face, characterised by authoritarian repression and intense internal conflict, do not serve Somaliland's cause.

### Somalia rejected Israel's recognition of Somaliland as an infringement on its territorial integrity

New states in the region tend to inherit similar problems as pre-existing states. Their structural foundations were compromised long before the clamour for independence. As a result, new states fail to realise their envisioned objectives, owing to numerous factors, including the act of separation itself.

Israel's recognition of Somaliland has generated unusual cohesion among regional actors and AU member states against Somaliland. This is because it stems from the

actions of an external actor and violates a sacrosanct AU principle: respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.

## Complex regional dynamics

For the AU, the Somaliland question represents a particularly acute challenge: it has reiterated a normative principle in the face of a crisis, but lacks the operational means to enforce it. At a time when the AU's peace and security framework is under review, member states should propose innovative ways to empower the AU Commission to enforce its principles.

### 'No actor has the authority or standing to alter the territorial configuration of an AU state'

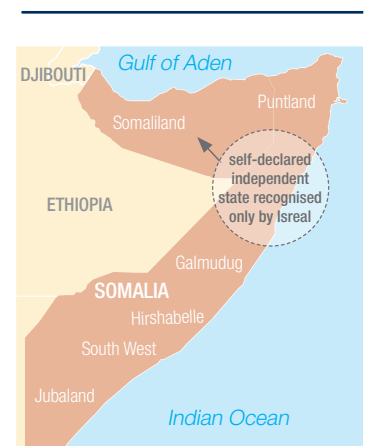
The Somaliland question is also a reminder that, despite being deployed in Somalia since 2007, the AU allowed this issue to fester until it became vulnerable to instrumentalisation by external actors. For Somalia, Somaliland's pursuit of international recognition, combined with the strong internal support it enjoys, directly undermines pan-Somalian, the country's implicit state ideology. Somali nationalism is grounded in the irredentist idea that all Somalis should be united in a single nation, as they share a common identity, culture and language.

The pursuit of that political project led to wars in East Africa such as the Ogaden War/Ethio-Somali War with Ethiopia in the late 1970s. Over the years, Somalia has gradually abandoned its ambition of unifying Somali-inhabited territories in Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti.

In this context, Somaliland's entrenched secessionist project not only questions the viability of Somalia within its current borders, but challenges the foundations of pan-Somalism, an ideology grounded on contested assumptions. This failure of pan-Somalism challenges a more widespread assumption in Africa's public debate that instability is primarily the result of arbitrarily drawn colonial borders that created artificial states with high ethnic diversity. The de facto secession of Somaliland since 1991 provides a rebuttal to this thinking, which correlates ethnic homogeneity with stability.

Empirical evidence from other parts of Africa also reveals that ethnically homogeneous societies are no less prone to violent conflict than their more heterogeneous peers. This shows that national cohesion is not just a product of demographic uniformity, but the result of state-building strategies, effective diversity management and political legitimacy.

The AU Peace and Security Council's communiqué has frozen the discussion about Somaliland's quest for independence. Longstanding AU efforts to stabilise Somalia must include dialogue with Somaliland. This will increase legitimacy and prevent additional external actors from following Israel's precedent.



FOR SOMALIA,  
SOMALILAND'S PURSUIT  
OF INTERNATIONAL  
RECOGNITION  
UNDERMINES PAN-  
SOMALIAN IDEOLOGY

## Africa cannot whiteWaSH water and sanitation crisis

The AU 39<sup>th</sup> summit, held in Addis Ababa in February, placed water and sanitation at the centre of the continental agenda. The theme was ‘Assuring sustainable water availability and sanitation systems to achieve the goals of Agenda 2063’. This emphasis reflects growing recognition that water security underpins Africa’s economic, health and development trajectory.

Water stress could cost some African regions up to 6% of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2050, according to FP Analytics, due to reduced agricultural output and impacts on health. Foresight studies reinforce that water, sanitation and hygiene (WaSH) is central to Africa’s long-term development. In the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) demographics and health high-investment scenario, accelerated access to health services and WaSH infrastructure reduces the burden of communicable and non-communicable diseases.

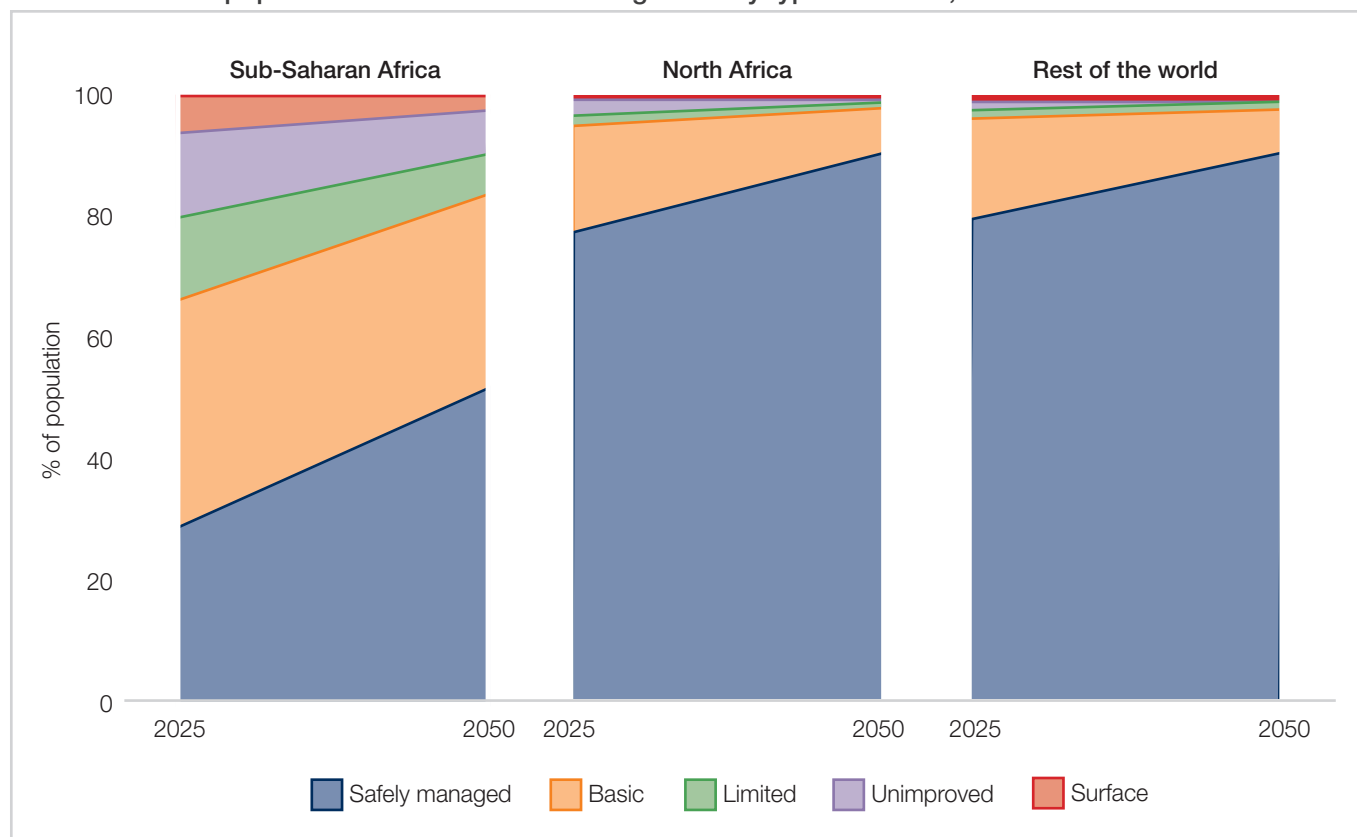
The investments could raise GDP per capita by US\$207 in the current path (business-as-usual scenario) by 2043.

Extreme poverty would fall by two percentage points, lifting an additional 41 million people out of poverty. In economic terms, 70% to 80% of jobs in low-income African countries depend on water: water security is ultimately job security.

### Access to water and sanitation

Current access levels remain far from sufficient. In 2023, only 29.5% of Africa’s population had access to safely managed WaSH facilities, while 14.1% still resorted to open defecation. Change is likely to be slow, with safely managed access rising to 39.5% by 2043 in the current path. By comparison, the rest of the world had a safely managed access rate of 64.2% in 2023, rising to 75% by 2043. African access to safely managed water stood at 35.2% in 2023, compared to 78.6% in the rest of the world. By 2043, average access will still be below 50% in Africa, while the rest of the world will reach nearly 90%.

Chart 4: Share of population with access to drinking water by type of access, 2025–2050



Source: International Futures initialised from JMP WHO/UNICEF

Beneath the surface of poor water and sanitation access lies the hidden cost of an economic crisis. AFI research shows that Africa loses annually 5% of its GDP, about US\$200 billion, through inadequate WaSH access. The impact is a loss of productivity, especially for women and girls, with an estimated 40 billion hours spent collecting water in sub-Saharan Africa, reducing the hours available for work, school or income-generating activities.

Poor sanitation and hygiene also contributes to preventable diseases such as cholera and diarrhoea, increasing healthcare costs, weakening workforce participation and undermining educational outcomes and future earnings. In countries such as Malawi and the Central African Republic, the time women spend fetching water can equal 10% of their monthly earnings. Hence, improving WaSH yields stronger economic returns: studies have shown that for every US\$1 invested, the return on investment is about US\$4 to US\$7. In other words, WaSH investment could regain its GDP loss – closing this gap is not just a social imperative but an economic strategy.

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Against this backdrop, the AU summit discussions signal a high-level commitment to WaSH as a driver of development and tie its theme directly to Agenda 2063: clean water and sanitation are prerequisites for achieving the 'Africa we want'. The theme calls on AU member states to develop an African water policy that enables inclusive, climate-resilient water security.

Through the African Ministers' Council on Water, African leaders have adopted a long-term strategy, the Africa Water Vision 2063, positioning water as the continent's most strategic asset for prosperity and peace. Water, as a result, should be viewed as an enabler of inclusive growth, a bridge of cooperation and a foundation of resilience against climate change.

## Perennial constraints

These structural challenges are rooted in history. Africa's current WaSH infrastructure issues stem largely from a past in which colonisers prioritised Europeans when spending on health. They expanded healthcare services to indigenous populations haphazardly, influenced by local perceptions of colonial healthcare measures, individual administrators' priorities and unique political and economic contexts across colonies. In addition, colonial administrations turned to imported biomedical solutions, such as vaccines and antibiotics, to control outbreaks of disease, forgoing investment in infrastructure to provide clean water and safe sanitation services.

As a result, Africa's cities grew rapidly without a concurrent increase in infrastructure. The trend, which manifested through the 1950s and 1960s,

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AFRICA LOSES ANNUALLY

5%

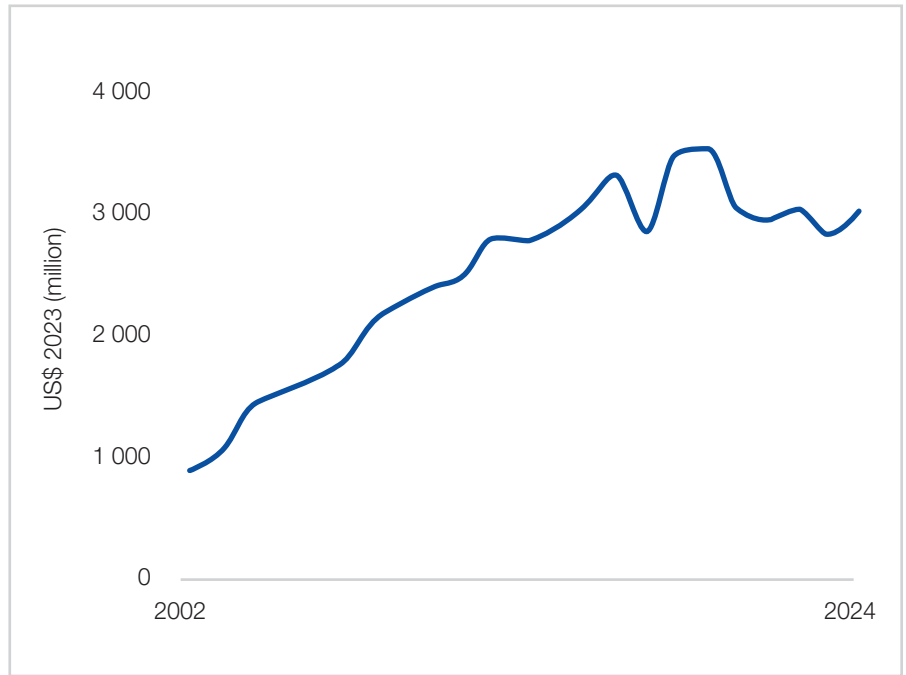
OF ITS GDP,

±US\$200  
billion

THROUGH INADEQUATE  
WaSH ACCESS

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**Chart 5: Foreign aid to Africa for the water supply sanitation sector, 2002–2024**



Source: OECD Credit Report System

when governments of newly independent states faced myriad challenges and depended heavily on international aid to finance their health systems, persists to this day. African governments have failed to scale up investment adequately over the past 25 years to meet the growing demands for safe WaSH infrastructure caused by rapid urbanisation and population growth.

In 2001, the AU – as part of its Abuja Declaration on HIV-Aids, tuberculosis and other infectious diseases – set a target of 15% for domestic general government health expenditure as a share of general government expenditure. By 2023, no African government had reached 7% and the continental average had risen only from 1.4% in 2000 to 1.9%. On a per capita basis, the average spend increased US\$51.6 over the period to US\$142.9, but progress has largely stalled since 2013.

To achieve the ambitious Sustainable Development Goals targets of universal and equitable access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation, African governments would need to increase per capita spending to between US\$249 and US\$270. In 2023, only 10 countries met that threshold. Importantly, not all this spending has been expended on water and sanitation supply. To fill the gap, governments have continued to rely heavily on international donors for investment in infrastructure and systems.

**Gaps in donor funding**

Official development assistance earmarked for WaSH peaked in 2019 at US\$3.6 billion, falling to US\$3 billion by 2024. This downward trend is being

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driven by key Development Assistance Committee countries, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany and the Netherlands, which have scaled down their contributions. France and Japan have increased their contributions, but the rest of the committee's countries have decreased their investment by nearly 16% over the past five years. This shortfall for critical WaSH infrastructure, education and training, administrative systems and waste disposal will exacerbate the already precarious situation facing Africa's populations.

### Clean water and sanitation are prerequisites for achieving the 'Africa we want'

Several countries are already adapting to the changing financing landscape. Nigeria, for instance, has been heavily aid-dependent, with more than US\$1 billion in United States aid received in 2023. Yet, the sudden 90-day freeze on this aid in 2025 prompted a transition plan, with Nigeria committing US\$1 billion of its own funds to health sector reforms, plus an extra US\$3.2 million to procure HIV medications. Ghana also faced a sharp withdrawal – US\$78 million – after which its government prolonged a domestic finance strategy that asserts financial sovereignty over its development.

### Way forward

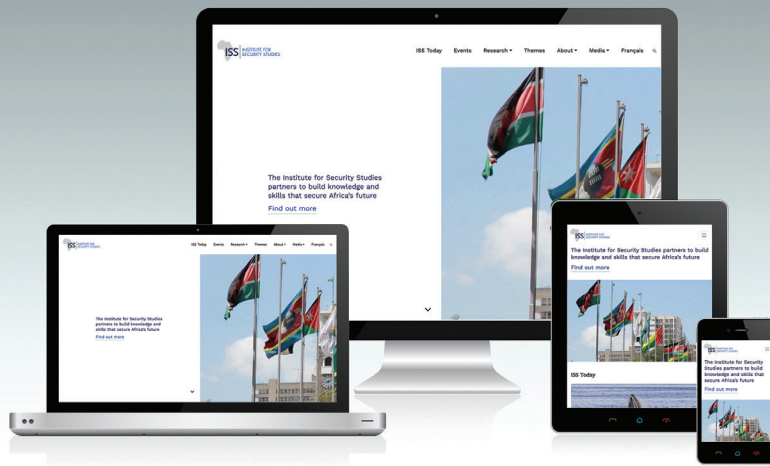
African institutions such as the Africa Centres for Disease and Control and Prevention and the AU have operationalised an African Epidemic Fund to provide rapid, flexible financing for health crises. Pan-African financial institutions are also backing the shift to self-reliance: in 2025, the African Development Bank unveiled a US\$6 billion investment plan to transform Africa's health sector.

All these shifts contribute to a post-donor paradigm, centred on building a sovereign health and WaSH system that African countries themselves finance, govern and sustain, with external partners playing a supporting rather than primary role. Africa is not seeking charity but solidarity and co-investment, strong African health systems being a global public good.

The goal is not fewer partnerships but better ones, with new partnerships geared to capacity building rather than substitution. With the foundations shifting, the challenge now is to turn this momentum into durable systems that can outlast political cycles and donor trends. The AU's 2026 focus creates a political window to translate ambition into sustained domestic investment and institutional reform. Whether this moment becomes a turning point will depend less on declarations than on financing and implementation in the years ahead.

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